



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

April 16, 2008

### Apocalypse now

By Christopher Deliso, Balkan Analysis

<http://www.balkananalysis.com/2008/04/15/apocalypse-now/>

“When they attack, what should I do first?” a young Serbian KPS police commander says. “Should I try to evacuate my children, or fight back? We are twenty, thirty thousand. They are two million.”

The likelihood or not of such an imagined massive assault from Albanians doesn't matter here in Mitrovica, the city divided between ethnicities by the River Ibar, up in Kosovo's uncompromising north.

What matters is that Serbs fear it could happen and the siege mentality that has set in – as seen in the nationalist graffiti, the stern billboard warning that ‘those who live by the sword shall die by the sword,’ the muscular young men watching warily from cafés – is as real and as thick as the tension in this grand old dilapidated post-Communist city that refuses to recognize, as with the vast majority of the world's countries thus far, that a living country has been hacked out of the Serbian body. That the phrase *Kosovo je Srbija* (Kosovo is Serbia) has been consigned to the history books by Pristina's unilateral declaration of independence on February 17 is bitterly resisted here in the north.

Indeed, ever since the ‘UDI’ (wary critics refer to the independence declaration only by the acronym now, one in the same category as the ICBM, to save their breath), the Serbs of several contiguous municipalities that border on Serbia proper have broken off cooperation with the Pristina government. The Serbs in the central and southern enclaves, though they have also protested regularly, have talked less tough, knowing that they are extremely vulnerable to an attack from all sides, should the Albanians wish to eliminate them.

One thing the Serbs have protested against vociferously was the April 4 return of Ramush Haradinaj from the Hague Tribunal. The former KLA leader and briefly, prime minister, Haradinaj was acquitted of all charges- at about the same time that former Hague prosecutor Carla Del Ponte disclosed in her memoir that the KLA had (possibly) been involved with trafficking the organs of kidnapped Serbs in 1999. Del Ponte had spent the lion's share of her time prosecuting Serbs; as she could hardly be considered partial to them, the thinking went, the story must be true.

Of course, the Albanians have objected strenuously, while the Serbian and now Russian governments have called for a further investigation. For her part, Del Ponte was banned from promoting her book in Italy by a squeamish Swiss government, which has banished her to Argentina, to the position of ambassador. The secret to the



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

mystery, Del Ponte intones, may lie in open graves in a small village in northern Albania.

Whether or not the story is true, for Kosovo Serbs, Haradinaj's acquittal "sends a strong signal," in the words of one experienced UN official in Kosovo. "They take it to mean that the KLA's war has won legitimacy- and that they can act with impunity against Serbs, without fear of punishment."

At the same time, Haradinaj aspires to an ever greater diplomatic reputation and for this reason, the official believes, the key Serbian monastery of Decani – deep in Haradinaj's home turf in the west – is safe. "He wants to show that the international community can count on him to guarantee safety for minorities by solving their problems and protecting them... though sometimes he does seem to create local problems to offer himself as the one who can solve them." Haradinaj's sometimes caring, sometimes cruel behavior in his personal fiefdom is remarkably similar to the way medieval Albanian feudal lords operated there.

Indeed, Haradinaj's return to Kosovo was greeted by celebrations in the Dukagjin area of western Kosovo, and was anticipated by billboards saying things (in English) like *Welcome home!* and *Ramush, we need you now!* Some Albanians in Pristina love him, some are more circumspect: "he doesn't have a lot of support," says one Albanian OSCE officer, claiming he will not make as tough an opposition to the government of Hashim Thaci as some among the international corps are hoping.

It is true. Some Western diplomats in Pristina have long been enraptured by Ramush. They gush about his "charisma" and "forthright attitude." His closeness with former UNMIK chief Soren Jessen-Petersen was legendary. The now fired American deputy chief Steven Schook, a scathing German report later claimed, perceived his duties as "to get drunk once a week with Ramush Haradinaj."

The welcoming committee apparently wanted to dress him for the role: in suit, glasses, backed by a shelf of books. In the grand images, the newly academic renaissance man of Kosovo looks not unlike Nicholas Cage. He could play him in the movie someday.

But forget about Ramush- back to Mitrovica. There are a lot of opinions, and a lot of questions, on the minds of Serbs and internationals alike. Still, life is fairly normal. You can buy burek at 6:30 AM, or a purple toy turtle, or do your banking on the river at the improbable Kosovsko Metohiska Banka AD Zvechan, almost 50 years old, a creation and a survivor of old Yugoslavia. In between the old apartment blocks rising from the north side, children play badminton, with some determination, on an asphalt court.

Some Serbs follow the time-honored national pressure release mechanism of taking recourse to black humor, as well as other things. A man drinking beer in a small shop



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

with his old friend, the proprietor, declares that “there are no Macedonians, only Serbs, Greeks and Bulgarians, they were the ones fighting the Balkan Wars!” The proprietor looks at his friend ruefully, with the long-suffering glance of someone who has been hearing it for years, when the former continues that there are no Montenegrins, either: “but he is from Montenegro!” he declares fiercely, pointing at the proprietor. “And he is a Serb!”

The humor is better. There are boys who are less than 20 and in the faculty of history there. They love America and love to make fun of Bush. But the (Bill) Clinton impersonations really have them roaring. They laugh when I joke thank you for not killing me and they go somewhere to enjoy themselves for another night that is still peaceful. Cafés and bars advertise visiting singers and, but for the palpable tension, you could be anywhere in dignified but decaying post-Communist Europe.

It could always be peaceful here. It depends on the decisions of individuals. Will they be rational ones? Will they be seen as fair? Many, and not only Serbs, are unnerved by the news reports speculating an attack is just around the corner. The nationalist political parties have them revved up too, ahead of elections. And Easter is soon. No one wants to believe in a conspiracy, but at the same time they know the Albanians are well-disciplined and, as officials noted four years ago, in the March riots, “nothing happens spontaneously in Kosovo.” If something “happens,” it will really happen.

A miniature earthquake came with the special police operation of March 17 – the anniversary of those riots – in which armed UN police from Pristina launched an assault on a courthouse that was being peacefully occupied by former court workers—most of them women. The workers had only been sitting in the hall and had stated they would be happy to come out. But someone in Pristina wanted to show the Serbs a lesson because, as another veteran UN official says, “they believe that the Serbs only respect force.”

The mission was a disaster. They arrested the court workers and paraded them, as a victorious Roman legion would have done with its prisoners of war, through the streets of South Mitrovica before bringing them to Pristina. They were later released.

The provocation was designed to infuriate the Serbs. The police could have simply opened the door, released the occupants, and gone home, a witness says, and everything might have been fine. The locals could have forgiven even that heavy-handed and outrageous show of force. “Yet the problems started when it became clear that they were going to be sent to Pristina.”

It didn't help either that a local TV cameraman was on scene to stream the whole thing live. Crowds gathered. They threw rocks at first, before stronger weapons appeared. They released some of the prisoners before the terrified troops could escape. One of them was killed and many others wounded.



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

Damage control immediately set in, as it so often does in Kosovo. UNMIK in Pristina darkly disclosed that nefarious Serbian police elements from Belgrade had been involved. The foreign media ate it up, completely overlooking the leaked document out of UNMIK Mitrovica, which roundly ridiculed “Shock and Awe Two.” That report brought pressure that is still far from abating, and it looks like there will be a final standoff. The situation is grim, the future is brief. And so it goes...

Nevertheless everything could still work out. The KPS officer reminds that mixed-ethnic police units are working together and only a few days ago were able to break up a rock and gun fight between Serbs and Albanians in a nearby village. In the north there are Albanians, in one neighborhood of Mitrovica, and in outlying areas. There are not Serbs living the south of the city, though they seem free to quietly come and go. Meanwhile, the EU blindly and desperately moves to placate Serbia and influence its elections of May 11, offering sped-up agreements to keep the Radicals out. This is to the displeasure of EU officials in the Balkans, who believe Brussels is overlooking other areas of tension, such as Bosnia and Macedonia, with its “Serbia obsession.”

A problem here is that the EU is looking for agreements where agreements won't matter. They believe controlling Serbia's policy on Kosovo will help to lead to a final resolution of Kosovo's status, or at least its ability to plod on, and that the new, hands-off EU mission will be able to start at the time the Kosovo constitution takes effect on June 15- “when pigs fly!” one European ambassador in Pristina cracks, on hearing that.

Actually, what the EU forgets is that Belgrade is not as important here as are the inhabitants themselves. The Kosovo Serbs are the crucial actors, and especially in the north. These people know that the Belgrade politicians cynically use them; they also don't realistically expect that Russia will help them in a military emergency, despite the occasional poster of Putin on the streets of North Mitrovica. They have only themselves to rely on, though they have kept good relations with the UN in Mitrovica, which they perceive as being more fair and objective than the UN elsewhere in Kosovo.

They also know that life in Serbia proper, in a collective center or impoverished anonymity, would be even worse. And there would be a cut-off in the extra financial aid from Belgrade that some get for staying. The small pocket of Krajina Serbs – already once dislocated from their former homes in Croatia by the horrors of war – are among the most adamant.

Hashim Thaci has declared the intent to “assimilate” the Serbs and (here is the pot calling the kettle black) to punish the insolent behavior of this allegedly uncontrolled region based on organized crime. Like hell. The Serbs are not prepared to lose the one last place in Kosovo where they feel a measure of safety and normalcy. If they go, it will be after a massive attack such as the one they fear is coming at any time. If they



# KOSOVO

## COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

---

stay, it will be because diplomacy will keep things cool, or because Pristina (and/or the internationals) cannot accept the body bags that would result.

The UN police guarding the famous Mitrovica bridge in the dark tonight in their vehicle are from Zimbabwe. “It’s all peaceful here,” they say, listening to reggae music and smiling. It’s probably a lot better than living in Zimbabwe right now.

Yet on the other side of the bridge, in the much calmer south of the city, international forces show more concern. Heavily-armed French soldiers, most just out of high school, bump into one another with their overburdened uniforms and machine guns. They eye everything warily, on the quiet street where a few people are having a drink. They seem to be guarding their pizza.

An American policeman, in ‘Mitro’ for almost four years now, laughs when asked what the situation will be like in the north. “Hell, it could end up like another Palestine up there,” he says. “We’ll have to wait and see.”