



# KOSOVO

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May 9, 2008

## Kosovo's divide is similar to Holy Land

By Harry de Quetteville, Daily Telegraph

<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/foreign/harrydequetteville/may-2008/kosovodivide.htm>

I have spent the day in what is so often referred to as Kosovo's "divided flashpoint town of Mitrovica". Divided by the Ibar river, that is. Flashpoint because Kosovo's biggest Serb community lives on the north bank, opposite Albanians on the south.

This weekend, Serbia is playing its biggest card so far in its battle to retain sovereignty over its former province, now independent republic, of Kosovo. It is holding local and parliamentary elections there, in defiance of the UN.

These elections are being organised out of the Serbian ministry for Kosovo in northern Mitrovica, which is being spruced up for the event.

A big new poster has been unveiled which reads 'Kosovo is Serbia' and pristine Serbian flags hang from newly erected flagpoles. Even the building's façade is being rapidly replastered and repainted by a dedicated team of workmen. A prime example of Serbian defiance you might think. Except that these workmen are all Albanian.

This apparently extraordinary revelation hit me as I was walking out of the ministry after interviewing the head of the Serb electoral committee, to hear Albanian from the scaffolding above my head.

The team was led by a 24 year-old guy named Kemaj Ljuca, for whom there was absolutely no shame, not even any hint of irony, about his work on the Serbian ministry.

"We are paid," he said. "It's quite normal for us. I am not interested in politics, I just need a job. That's what is important."

Everywhere you go in Kosovo, the complaint is the same. There is no work. The last fulltime job many people had was carrying a gun in the war.

Almost a decade of international supervision has failed to kickstart the economy. Sadly, many Kosovars have pinned their hopes on the idea that independence will magically sort everything out.

The resolution of Kosovo's status was supposed to be the precursor to massive foreign investment and donations.



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But a donor conference scheduled for July is unlikely to bring in huge sums. And where such high hopes are dashed, the disappointment will only be all the greater, perhaps dangerously so.

It is sometimes easy to compare the situation in Kosovo with that in the Holy Land - two peoples with a disputed claim to a small patch of land, which both treasure, slugging it out.

But while the headline issues are always about status and holy sites, most people on the ground are just trying to make a living.

I can remember driving by as teams of builders put up huge sections of Israel's 'separation barrier' around - and in - the West Bank. In one of those frequent moments that makes your jaw hit the floor when reporting, I noticed that some of the workers were Palestinians.

Why? They needed the cash.

Just down the street from Serbia's ministry for Kosovo, is a market known as the Bosniaka Mahala. There young Serb girls browse for new shoes while older men and women eye fresh grown vegetables. Once again, here in the heart of Serb Mitrovica, the stalls are owned and run by Albanians. An Albanian flag even flies from a rooftop.

But there is something more than just a mercantile transaction underway. Customer and trader chat, sit down and banter about the warm spring weather, pass the time of day.

"I have a good business here, sell a lot of shoes," Zeno Hassani told me. He wanted to explain. "I have very good relations with the Serbs, everyone knows me and there's no problems. I think ordinary Serb and Albanian citizens understand each other."

I have often heard this cry too: that the average people just want to get along, and if it wasn't for their stupid leaders, genuine peace would break out in no time flat.

I remember making the 10 minute drive from Jerusalem to Ramallah - that tiny distance that is an often unbridgeable gulf between so many Israelis and Palestinians.

There I was visiting a new radio station called RAM FM had opened up which wanted to get promote a balanced news agenda to a common Israeli/Palestinian audience, in English.

It was following in the footsteps of All for Peace FM, which had one phone in show called Shalom/Salaam, which allowed Israelis and Palestinians to chat to each other



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casually: the point being that the two people, despite living cheek by jowl, hardly knew the other or its concerns.

In Kosovo now, a similar divide is emerging in a land where Serbs and Albanians did once live side by side.

The hope once was that Kosovo's status would be settled little mixed markets liked Bosniaka Mahala would become the norm again.

But this weekend's elections are a sign that, even after independence, Kosovo's status is far from being resolved, and the splits amongst its population are only likely to get wider.