# Kosovo: The Fragile Nature of Civility

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The current scenes of killing and the burning of houses and places of worship, starting in Mitrovica and spreading throughout Kosovo, from Pristina to Serb enclaves in Caglavica, Lipljan, and Belo Polje, and then across the border with the retaliatory burnings of mosques in Belgrade and Nis, are scenes reminiscent of Kosovo and Serbia proper in the 1990s.

It now appears that the talk of progress in institution building and infrastructure repair glossed over something much more formidable - the fragile nature of civility. The rioting that was triggered by last week's bombings, the drive-by shooting of a Serb teenager in Caglavica, and the tragic deaths of a group of Albanian children have shown what some have said all along: that the dismantling of the barrier on the bridge over the River Ibar in Mitrovica, the repairing of schools, and the many reforms and other projects that have been carried out "successfully" by the international community have been instances of top-down management of a society without the requisite bottom-up development of political culture through civil-society building. The idea of moving towards some semblance of normalcy and a decision on the final status of Kosovo seem to have lost their vitality in the face of angry mobs who utter slogans like "Slaughter the Serbs" and "Death to the Shiptars." Election reform, economic management, infrastructure repair, and institutional development are all useless if civility is not accepted by the people of Kosovo as a part of democratic citizenship.

Since the 1999 expulsion of Serb authorities from Kosovo, the United Nations has attempted to administer this once autonomous region of Serbia in ways that would help both ethnic Albanian and Serb communities to live in conditions of increasing peace and prosperity. The final status of Kosovo would be decided by the UN only after leaders of that world body were satisfied that both Albanian and Serb communities had met certain standards, thereby showing their readiness to engage in serious dialogue about the future of the province. Kosovo's administrators have been clear about their reluctance to depart from this well-crafted script, knowing that it would be labeled paternalistic.

However, no matter how well intentioned the international community has been in Kosovo, the UN is partly to blame for the current unrest. On the one hand, the Albanian population is frustrated with how the UN has handled privatization, the handing over of power to local institutions, and the Mitrovica issue. Moreover, there is the "standards before status" approach, requiring that certain economic, political, and security benchmarks or standards be met before any decision can be made on the future status of Kosovo. In the eyes of many Albanians, however, there is one thing they desire over all else: an independent and sovereign Kosova. On the other hand, the Serb population in Kosovo is concerned about its future in such a political entity and how that future might affect its relationship with Serbia. According to many Serbs, the UN has been ambiguous about how the interests of the Serb minority will be safeguarded. Yet no matter how many of these issues are dealt with to the liking of both Albanian and Serb, there will remain the makings of intercommunal strife. Deep-rooted and long-standing animosities that are reinforced by the use of violence and the perpetration of atrocities are indicative of the "eye-for-an-eye" approach to life often found in divided societies. Although the UN and other international organizations are clearly able to bring about diplomatic settlements between warring factions, they have a much more difficult time dealing with intercommunal conflicts between different ethnic or religious groups. What is needed is a more concerted effort to support those organizations that have developed the mechanisms for nonviolent conflict transformation.

***Pristina***

The development and expansion of the Balkan Dialogue Project into a network of Nansen Dialogue Centres (NDCs) throughout the Balkans is one resource that has been under utilized and under supported by the international community. Of the centres within the Nansen Dialogue Network, the Kosovo Initiative for Democratic Society (KIDS) located in Pristina, the Nansen Group in Mitrovica, and the NDC in Belgrade could be the most instrumental in dealing with the current unrest in Kosovo and Serbia. But even the centres in Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, and Montenegro could offer invaluable assistance, since they are part of the Nansen nexus. The mission of the network is simple: use the power of dialogue to empower people who live in conflict situations to contribute to nonviolent conflict transformation, democratic development, and the promotion of human rights. It is through dialogue that NDC facilitators and lecturers help to reconfigure peoples' views and attitudes towards "the other."

Yet even the Nansen Network could do more by adding a more activist component to its repertoire of activities. Perhaps the promotion of peaceful demonstrations made up of students, clergy, and others might be a valuable tool for more immediate results. Sometimes results are needed in the short as well as the long term.

Nonetheless, although the NDCs are not a panacea for the unrest in this part of the world, they do offer an avenue that the international community would be well advised to exploit to its advantage in bringing peace and prosperity to the Balkans. The fact that there is an upturn in violence in Kosovo and Serbia should be taken as evidence for the need of training and teaching of principles and techniques that will combat the xenophobia and chauvinism of ethnic nationalism.

The people associated with this dialogue process are right about one thing: to the extent that organizations like the NDCs operate in conflict situations, the young people who pass through the various seminars and other activities transform not only their lives but also the society in which they live.

Perhaps what is going on to the south should be seen as a call to action for Bosnians to support their local NDCs and other NGOs that work towards transforming divided societies like their own. Perhaps offering these groups the needed resources would help prevent what is happening in Mitrovica from happening in Mostar and elsewhere in Bosnia. Reawakening the civility within people could be an important step in promoting civil societies within the Balkans.