

A Forgotten World.- the Serb enclaves in Kosovo

Author: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

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A report on the first in a series of missions to Serb enclaves in Kosovo, 21-23 March 2008

In early 2008, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia launched the project 'Serb-Serb Dialogue in Serb Enclaves in Kosovo'. The project aims at encouraging Serbs in the enclaves south of the Ibar River (who make up 70 per cent of the total Serb population in Kosovo) to fully exercise their human, minority, socio-economic and political rights through Kosovo institutions, instead of remaining on the margins of Kosovo society and serving as window-dressing for official Belgrade's territorial claims. The project simultaneously sensitizes the general public in Serbia proper, as well as Serbs in the solidly Serb north of Kosovo, of the realistic needs, anxieties and interests of their (self-) isolated compatriots.¹

The objectives of the first visit in a series of four were as follows:

To monitor the overall situation and living conditions in the enclaves;

To gain a deeper insight into the inhabitants' perception of their position;

To assess the impact of Belgrade's, Prishtina's and the international community's policies on the lives of those people;

To explore the avenues for a more active engagement of NGOs in solving the problems that plague the people 'imprisoned' in their enclaves, and in fostering multi-ethnic life on the territory of Kosovo;

To lay the foundations for a continuous cooperation between the NGO sector and both Serb and Albanian communities in Kosovo that may bring about more creative and/or alternative solutions vis- -vis those coming from official sources – whether in Belgrade, Prishtina or the international community;

To extend effective cooperation with representatives of the Albanian community (officials and civil players) to the domain of the Serb enclaves.

Political context

The first visit under the project took place after the proclamation of Kosovo's independence, itself resulting in the fall of the Kostunica cabinet. Premier Kostunica and Serbian President Tadic had perceived the state priorities differently. While the former kept insisting that Kosovo should top the list, the latter seemed to prefer Serbia's European course. All in all, the slogan 'Kosovo is Serbia' became the Alpha and Omega of the Serbian political arena and a precondition for signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. The attempt to declare Tomislav Nikolic the moral winner at the 21 February Belgrade rally failed, as did the endeavour to mobilize citizens for spreading violence to other towns in Serbia.

The abortive rally clearly indicated the state of mind in Serbia, where citizens are still kept in the dark about the sum and substance of the government's so-called action plan. Citizens can only guess – by following some governmental moves - what the plan is actually all about. Despite the intensive 'Kosovo is Serbia' media campaign, the public response to Premier Kostunica's plan to turn Kosovo into national issue No. 1 was somewhat lukewarm.

The torching of the American Embassy, fierce assaults on other diplomatic missions and foreign company premises, as well as the 'siege' of the Kosovska Mitrovica municipal court, merely added to the Kostunica cabinet's negative image. The premier himself crossed the red line and finally unveiled his intentions. Simultaneously with the government-orchestrated actions, academic circles started debating the revision of Kosovo's independence. This produced a new partition proposal, now according to the formula 12:12 (i.e. Kosovo got 12% of Serbia's territory, so Serbia would now get 12% of Kosovo's territory). Hereticus (subtitled 'a journal for reconsideration of the past'), Vol. V /2007/, No. 3-4, was almost entirely focused on the Kosovo issue. According to its authors, this novel partition plan would optimally safeguard peace and stability in the region. Dobrica Cosic, the first advocate of Kosovo's partition in the 1970s, also contributed to the deliberations. The centuries-long Serb-Albanian enmity could be solved through a compromise between historic and ethnic right, argues Cosic. In his view, the said compromise implies the Kosovo Albanians' right to unite the territories where they are in a majority with Albania. 'Territorial partition of Kosovo and Metohija and a demarcation between Serbs and Albanians should not aspire to establish ethnically clean territories, but rather to provide reciprocal guarantees for the national and civil rights of minorities,' says Cosic. Should Kosovo remain a part of Serbia, Serbia, 'biologically dried up and demographically depressed,' would in two decades from now become a federation of two 'permanently contested nations.'² However, such a partition implies Serbia's moving closer to Republika Srpska. In this context, Dobrica Cosic argues for a dignified acceptance of the Kosovo defeat, Serbia's commitment to its own renewal, the development of close economic and cultural cooperation with Republika Srpska, and safeguarding the entirety of the Serb nation through a policy of democracy and enlightenment.³ Slobodan Samardzic, the Serbian minister for Kosovo and Metohija, submitted to UNMIK a draft agreement on 'functional demarcation' between Serbs and Albanians. In fact, he requested a Serbian entity in Kosovo.

The Serbian political and intellectual elite has not given up its goals. Its current engagement in Kosovo is nothing but an attempt to confront the international community with a fait accompli. Serbia is banking on Russian support and a change in the international constellation. This is why, at this stage, it is insisting that negotiations should be resumed. Further developments will be considerably determined by the attitude the international community takes and its resolution to place the entirety of Kosovo under its control, thus hindering the operation of the Serbian secret services in the enclaves. For those services are most responsible for preventing integration of the Serbs into Kosovo institutions and the normalization of their relations with the Albanian community.

I. Visits to the enclaves: general circumstances

The first in the series of visits was realized in the traumatic period in the wake of the proclamation of Kosovo's independence. It was only natural that the Serb population was more anxious than ever before about the present and the future alike. Such general psychosis became an even more fertile soil for political manipulation by official Belgrade. Belgrade's policy fuels high hopes among the Serb population on the one hand, and on the other blocks their rational perception of the situation. It hinders positive processes among Serbs and Albanians, no matter how uncertain and far-fetched these might seem today. Furthermore, the plan for 'functional separation' of Kosovo's North leaves the Serb enclaves south of the Ibar River in a dangerous and problematic situation. No wonder, therefore, that the mood in the enclaves we visited oscillates dramatically between an irrational hope that Kosovo may reunite with Serbia and total despair. Objectively, due to Serbia's policy, to the inadequate efficiency of Kosovo and international institutions, and to a prevalent absence of goodwill on the part of the Albanian majority, the Serb population is still seriously endangered, literally and in terms of everyday existence. No matter how understandable in the light of recent history, the Albanian majority's lack of goodwill produces brutal economic effects. Namely, economic difficulties that affect both Serbs and Albanians encourage some Albanians to profit illegally from 'advantageous political circumstances' to the detriment of Serbs whose homes and lands they usurp. Attempts to establish the rule of law – particularly by the Kosovo courts – are more often than not abortive, since under overt pressure sentences are mostly not implemented.

Life in the enclaves

The life of Serbs in the enclaves mirrors the grave challenges facing the revival of the entire region. Even priorities are hard to set when it comes to coexistence between the two ethnic groups. The Albanians are on one side, the performance of KFOR and the UNMIK mission on another, while official Belgrade's huge machinery of decision-making - fatal for both states - is on a third. Somewhere in the midst of it all, politically

invisible, are some 80,000 people south of the Ibar River. And their everyday existence is being 'solved' by statements such as that made by the former premier of the Russian Federation Primakov, for example, suggesting 'a collective move to the north'.

All those factors affect the everyday life of the Serbs in the enclaves. The great majority live in extreme poverty and are elderly people. What they need is to have their economic, housing and other 'petty' problems solved, rather than high politics.

Mission to the enclaves⁴

Before 21-23 March 2008, the Helsinki Committee team had made several tours of all the enclaves planned for this mission, in the course of which it drew up a programme for the visit. It set aside the first day for the area of Brezovica, i.e. Strpce as the biggest enclave (16,000 inhabitants), and the second for Musnikovo (Sredacka Zupa), including the villages of Recane and Novake. Visits to Orahovac and Velika Foca were planned for the third day. During that preparatory stage, the team contacted local leaders, who manifested readiness for communication and discussion. All the informal meetings planned as question-and-answer events were supposed to take place in public places selected by local leaders themselves.

The visit to Brezovica (Annex I) was obstructed by local members of the Serbian Radical Party and the Security Service.⁵ Posters carrying the names of Rada Trajkovic and Sonja Biserko appeared in the streets in the early morning of the day of the planned visit.

Namely, the Helsinki Committee's monitoring team was having lunch in the 'Luboten' restaurant in Brezovica when a group of some 20-30 young men assembled outside it. The message that the team was unwelcome was more than obvious – some of the young men were repeatedly going in and out of the restaurant, one was taking pictures of the team, while the rest were waiting in the lobby. Policemen of the Kosovo Protection Corps, accompanying the team, decided when the time was right for it to leave the restaurant. The number of people waiting outside the restaurant had grown to some 60 men in the meantime. The moment the Helsinki Committee team stepped outside, they began throwing stones, eggs and snowballs at it. No one was hurt except for Professor Obrad Savic of the Belgrade Circle, who was struck lightly on the head. Cameramen from the local Herc TV – evidently informed that there would be some kind of incident – were shooting the scene, and their footage was immediately sent via cable to Serb diaspora organizations.

The team left in a bus for Hotel 'Narcis', where it waited for two hours to be driven back to Prizren. Smaller groups of people were hurling eggs and snowballs at the bus on the way back. It is interesting to note that a reporter for the Belgrade-based Kurir daily called Sonja Biserko on her cell phone actually during the 'incident' outside the restaurant. 'The word goes that people would not have you there,' he said. 'It's the Security Service that would not have us here,' she replied.

The incident was manifestly prearranged to convey the message: ‘Keep away from the enclaves.’ Yet this ‘spontaneous popular happening’ lacked the energy characteristic of similar gatherings in the past. In a way, by people’s somewhat half-hearted and staged performance it more resembled the Belgrade rally of 21 February.

It should be noted that Strpce municipality is one of five municipalities to be included in the Serbian entity by the plan that minister Samardzic submitted to UNMIK.

On the second and the third days, the monitoring team talked to people in Musnikovo (Annex II) and Orahovac (Annex III), and its experience was quite opposite to that of the first day.

In the village of Musnikovo, people mostly complained about transportation to the nearest hospital in Gracanica. Even when transportation is provided to them, they travel in fear. Getting medicaments is also problematic. When medicaments are delivered to state-run pharmacies, the people running them often claim there is nothing in stock and direct customers to privately-owned apothecaries. Moreover, people complain about corruption among municipal officials when it comes to the 40 Euros per person subsidy from UNMIK. For instance, an official in Orahovac had been telling citizens that no assistance whatever had ever reached the town. But when the team talked to him, his earlier claims turned out to be untrue. The general impression is that most people are confused, particularly those in small and faraway places with smaller Serb communities. Unlike them, people in Orahovac – a place with a bigger Serb population – do follow political developments (no matter how little they actually can decide on their own lives). They manifest more interest in Kosovo’s status, and in political moves by the leaders of the Serb National Council and the Belgrade-based Democratic Party of Serbia and Serbian Radical Party. So they are easily manipulated, since only carefully selected pieces of information reach them via ‘trustworthy’ municipal officials. The atmosphere in Musnikovo is different. People feel abandoned. Local ‘pawns’ are few, so the village itself is not exactly an attractive target of nationalistic propaganda. Younger generations have already left for Serbia or North Kosovo, so that the elderly people who remain feel all the more lonely. And they are notably disappointed in Kostunica’s policy. An old man told the team that he and his Bosniak neighbours socialized and regularly visited each other, e.g. for Christmas or Ramadan. The media in Belgrade or for that matter Serbian politicians, never refer to such positive models of coexistence. For positive models do open the door to the hope that coexistence is possible. Which is why the capacity of people such as the above-mentioned interviewee – people who will not yield to the ideology of ‘higher goals’ or ‘Kosovo ethics’ – need to be harnessed.

II. Some lessons learnt

The challenges to NGO engagement in the Serb enclaves are diverse and numerous. First of all, official Belgrade has for years been imposing on the local Serb population the

notion that the NGOs are 'traitors'. Furthermore, the population's memory of a quite recent past, and their present existence in actual danger, totally overshadow the memory of Milosevic's brutality to the Albanian population. In other words, they seem not to recall that era at all. The Belgrade regime - through its 'envoys,' i.e. secret agents and outposts of the Serbian Radical Party in the first place - unscrupulously plays upon people's negative perception of NGOs in order to prevent any contact. The motives are clear: any exposure of the local Serbs to alternative, and in particular creative, ideas for the settlement of their problems weakens the official policy's manipulative potential. And that policy is shaped for 'domestic' use only, and is aimed at fuelling people's unrealistic expectations, rather than at betterment of their position or encouraging their rational behaviour in the ethnically complex territory of Kosovo. The Helsinki Committee's monitoring team experienced the effects of such a policy, when the group of manipulated people attacked it in Strpce. However, our informal meetings in other enclaves showed that the regime's anxiety over contacts between the local population and NGO activists was fully justified. Though initially biased towards the Committee's team, people were soon displaying more and more trust, and readiness to openly discuss their concerns. It would be naïve to expect that these informal meetings basically changed people's perception of the realities. But be that as it may, communication became easier than expected at the beginning. And that is in itself an encouraging advance in implementation of the project.

Although the objective of the visit was generally focussed upon the Serb enclaves, impressions about the overall environment were unavoidable. These mostly relate to the engagement of the international community, as well as to the potential of both Albanian and Serb elites for positive modification of Kosovo society. This aspect necessitates careful consideration, since it could significantly channel NGO activism in Kosovo. Furthermore, it is important to assess the extent to which the economic potential of the Serb enclaves could be harnessed to their advantage. This potential is presently dormant, because that suits official Belgrade's policy for Kosovo, and seemingly also because of an absence of ideas about how to use that potential within Albanian society as a whole.

All in all, despite possible pessimism and doubts that certain negative processes may be irrevocable, NGO activism in the region, and particularly among the Serb population, must not be ruled out. Some small steps in a positive direction can be made without delay.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The credibility that the Helsinki Committee earned during Milosevic's era and subsequently can be put to good use for encouraging the Prishtina authorities and the international community alike to settle the problems facing the Serb community in Kosovo creatively. It is in the interest of both the Prishtina authorities and the international community to promote this credibility of the Committee among the Serb

population. For their part, the Kosovo authorities could effectuate this interest by helping the Committee to solve some specific cases that it identified during this first mission. The bottom line here is that good news travels fast. Meaning that 'solved' cases can gradually strengthen people's trust in the Committee and other NGOs, and thus turn them into useful partners in the resolution of the problems facing Kosovo society. At the same time, 'good news' would resound positively among the Serb population and fuel its cooperativeness.

The municipal authorities in Strpce (Shtrpcë), Prizren and Orahovac (Rahovecë), and prominent local figures, should be encouraged to focus on the Serbs' security and free movement, should pay more frequent visits to the communities inhabited by Serbs, and should talk to them about the possibilities for return of internally displaced persons.

Activities aimed at the Serb community's integration into the new realities in Kosovo should be intensified.

The Kosovo Police Service (KPS) and the UNMIK police should get more involved in Serb-Albanian confidence-building initiatives.

In Strpce and Orahovac, UNMIK should continue to work on the transformation of parallel institutions and structures, judicial and security ones in particular.

The relevant educational authorities should develop an all-inclusive plan for a more adequate education system and equal rights to education for all ethnic communities.

Municipal services should apply Administrative Instruction 2003/2 for the implementation of UNMIK Decision No. 2001/36 dealing with public services in Kosovo, and should pay special attention to the provisions on communities' proportional representation (the positive discrimination plan).

Medical centres should take steps to implement an integrated health-care system in the service of majority and minority communities alike.

Habitat, in tandem with municipal law-enforcement bodies, should take steps to prevent illegal use of apartments, houses and farms owned by members of the Serb community, and to restore them to their legal owners. All those usurping other people's property should suffer appropriate consequences.

Return of internally displaced persons, and reconstruction of (or compensation for) houses damaged in the 17 March 2004 riots, should be on the priority list of all municipal authorities. The latter should cooperate with UNMIK in order to identify optimal solutions for Serb and other returnees, and strengthen the institutions set up to answer their needs.

Effective measures – legal, economic and financial – should be taken to open up new job vacancies.

Serb returnees, particularly those in rural areas, should be provided with assistance in the form of agricultural machines, artificial fertilizers, seed, stock, etc. or subsidies for farming.

Relevant municipal bodies should secure regular and safe transportation from villages to nearby towns, and back.

All Kosovo institutions should engage in fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and tolerance as preconditions for the return of internally displaced persons.

Annex I

Strpce (Shtërcë) municipality is in south-east Kosovo and borders on the municipalities of Prizren, Suva Reka (Theranda), Uroshevac (Ferizaj), Kashanik and on the FYR of Macedonia. This ethnically mixed municipality has some 13,000 residents and over 1,000 IDPs, mostly from Prizren and Uroshevac. A smaller number of refugees from Bosnia and Croatia are accommodated in collective centres, mostly in the Junior Hotel and in private houses. Serbs make up the majority population (about 80%). According to OSCE, the ethnic structure in Strpce in 1991 was 4,125 (33%) of Albanians, 8,303

(66%) of Serbs and 158 (1%) of people of other ethnicity – all in all, there were 12,586 residents at the time. In September 1999, according to the same source, the municipality was inhabited by 1,830 (16%) Albanians, 9,182 (83%) Serbs and 175 (1%) ‘others’ – a total of 11,187 residents. Apart from Strpce (Shtërcë), Serbs dwell in the villages of Brezovica (Brezovicë), Berovce (Berolcë), Drajkovce (Drajkofcë), Gotovusa (Gotovusha), Izance Izhancë), Jazinec (Jazhincë) Sevice (Sevcë), Susice (Sushicë), Kostanjevo (Koshtanjevë), Vrbestica (Vërbeshiticë), Donja Bitinja (Bitija e Poshtme), as well as in the ethnically mixed villages of Gornja Bitinja (Bitija e Epërme) and Vica (Vicë). The villages of Firaja (Firaj) and Brod are inhabited solely by Albanians.

Serbs and a symbolic number of Albanians work for the municipal assembly, which is under UNMIK administration. A new municipal assembly could not be formed, since Serbs boycotted the last local elections. The international administrator of Kosovo, Mr Rücker, opted for a compromise: the assembly was to function with the ‘old’ Serb councillors.

The following Serbian parties are active in the Strpce municipality: Serbian Radical Party (SRS), Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), Democratic Party (DS), Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), Socialists of the Sijaricka Zupa (SZP) and some smaller ones. As for the local Albanians, they are mostly followers of Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partija Demokratike e Kosovës, PDK) and Democratic Alliance of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës, LDK).

The Serb population is under the strong influence of official Belgrade and boycotts Kosovo institutions. Serbs have established parallel institutions of their own – a

municipal government, a court, schools, a medical centre, financial institutions and a Red Cross branch office. Albanians are banned from those institutions. Strpce also has a department of the [Serbian] Coordination Centre for Kosovo and Metohija (currently a Ministry), forest rangers wearing Serbian uniforms, and even Serbian policemen and undercover agents of the Serbian State Security. Both Serbs and Albanians work at the station of the Kosovo Police Service (KPS). Immediately after proclamation of Kosovo's independence, some Serb policemen left the KPS. Members of the Kosovo Protection Force are not employed in the municipality. The KFOR base at Mt Brezovica is a command centre mostly for soldiers from Ukraine, Lithuania and Poland. Together with the UNMIK police, these regularly patrol the entire territory of the municipality. Representatives of the UNMIK administration and the OSCE mission also operate in Strpce. Most Serbs in the municipality drive cars with Serbian plates, which they replace by Kosovo plates whenever they leave the territory. The currency in use is the dinar, rather than the Euro. Pensioners get their cheques from both Serbia and Kosovo.

Citizens use cell phones with Serbian 063 and 064 codes, rather than the 900 code of Kosovo's Vala provider. A considerable part of the territory is covered by the signals of Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS) and other Serbian broadcasters. The local 'Herc' TV airs programmes only in Serbian. Copies of Belgrade newspapers are regularly delivered by buses that make daily round trips, which include Kosovska Mitrovica and Gracanica several times a week.

Strpce municipality has 14 elementary schools, with 190 Serbian and around 70 Albanian teachers. Some 1,600 Serbian and 400 Albanian children attend classes. Until recently, Albanian students from the ethnically mixed villages of Gornja Bitinja (Bitija e Epërme) and Vica (Vicë) were banned from the classrooms used by both Serb and Albanian students before the war. Therefore, they had to attend classes organized in private houses. In 2007, a special school was constructed for Albanian students.

Some 2,000 people are employed, mostly in the domains of education, health-care, administration and tourism, while over 1,800 are farmers. The municipality has more than 100 shops and tourist facilities. Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia visit Brezovica skiing resort in great numbers. No serious incidents have been registered so far.

However, local Serbs oppose the return of Albanians to their houses on the territory of the municipality. In 2002, American soldiers from KFOR arrested KPS policemen Srdjan Stanisic and Nebojsa Kuzmanovic, as well as the Serbs Cvetko and Danijel Staletovic and Ivica Boskovic, for preventing the erection of a tent in the village of Gornja Bitinja (Bitija e Epërme) intended to cater for Albanian returnees. The two afore-mentioned policemen were taken into custody for interfering in the arrest.

As of 17 February 2008, several hundreds of Serbs had been organizing daily marches, starting at 12.44 sharp, to protest against Kosovo's independence. According to KPS sources, some 1,000-1,200 people were marching on 21 March. No Serb residents of the municipality have left their homes.

Annex II

Sredačka Zupa - or the Bistrica Valley (Lugina e Bistricës) as Albanians call it - is a relatively small valley between Mt Brezovica and Prizren, with several Serb villages and some ethnically mixed villages inhabited by Bosniaks and Albanians. The Serb villages include Sredcka (Sreckë), Bogosevci (Bogoshevcë), Racajci (Racajcë), Pejcici, Milacici and Stajkovce (Stajkovcë), while the ethnically mixed ones include Musnikovo (Mushnikovë), Planjane, Gornje Selo, Nebregoste (Nebregoshtë), Manastirica (Manastiricë), Recane (Recanë), Gornje Ljubinje (Ljubinja e Epërme), Dornje Ljubinje (Ljubinja e Poshtme), Drajcici and Lokvica (Lokvicë). Before the NATO intervention, some 2,500 Serbs and over 15,000 Muslims (Bosniaks) and Albanians dwelt in the valley.

The ethnically mixed village of Musnikovo is the biggest of all. Some 70 Serbs have never left the village, with its Albanian and Bosniak majority. As for the other ethnically mixed villages, 11 Serb families with 20 members live in Sredcka, 20 families with 36 members in Drajcici, one family of two in Stajkovce, two 3-member families in Planjane, two 2-member families in Lokvica, and 9 families in Gornje Selo. All of these are mostly elderly people. No schools have courses in Serbian, since there are no school children at all.

Prizren municipality and international organizations funded the construction of 32 housing facilities for Serb returnees in the village of Stajkovce. However, just two former residents returned. Several Serb houses were reconstructed in the villages of Sredcka (Sreckë), Musnikovo (Mushnikovë) and Gornje Selo.

German troops are stationed at the KFOR base in Sredcka. They are in charge of protecting the St Archangel monastery. Outposts of the Kosovo Police Service are situated in Sredcka and Musnikovo. Both villages have out-patient wards for Serb patients attended by medical officers from Strpce.

Some Bosniaks in the village of Musnikovo declare themselves as Albanians, They insist on being 'historic' Albanians, despite the fact that most of them do not speak Albanian at all. As of 1971, their children have been following elementary curricula in Albanian, although at home they use only the Bosniak or the Serbian language.

No Serbs from Musnikovo were killed, abducted or reported missing during the war or after it. There are two churches in the village. Serb villagers socialize with their Bosniak and Albanian neighbours. Most of the Serb population were in their homes at the time of the 17 March riots, but were not affected in any way. Some regularly go to nearby towns and face no problems whatsoever.

Nevertheless, local Serbs - returnees in particular - identify as their major problems freedom of movement, unemployment, property rights, health-care, transportation in winter, inadequate information in their mother tongue (via the media), etc. According to

them, humanitarian organizations and the institutions in charge of minority issues and the return of IDPs have made countless promises, but kept only a few of them – all of which has a negative impact on the process of return. The Serbs of Sredacka Zupa do not possess tractors or other farming machinery. Many are not engaged in farming at all.

Annex III

Before the NATO intervention, Orahovac (Rahovecë) municipality had a population of 59,942, of whom 4,080 were Serbs and Montenegrins. The great majority of the inhabitants occupied rural areas, 34 villages all in all. Nowadays, some 1,300 Serbs live in the municipality – around 450 in the northern, Serb section of Orahovac and 850 in the village of Velika Hoca (Hoca e Madhe) .

Orahovac is among the municipalities most affected by the war. Considering its population, the municipality has suffered the biggest material damage and loss of human lives. Although the overall situation has considerably improved thanks to the international community's investment in infrastructure, education and health-care, Albanian-Serb relations are still tense. Serbs live in isolation in the northern section of the town. Few of them freely go to the southern, Albanian section, where all major local institutions are located. Only those Serbs whose lands (mostly vineyards) border on Serb enclaves can freely tend them. Serb land further away from the enclaves has mostly been usurped by Albanians. Habitat is ineffective when it comes to restitution of land, houses and apartments.

A new, multi-ethnic school has been constructed in the Serb section of Orahovac. However, Serb students do not attend it, but go instead to their own schools and follow curricula developed by the Serbian Ministry of Education (which pays the teachers as well).

Forty-six housing facilities for Serbs whose houses had been destroyed in the war were built in the village of Zociste (Zoqishtë) nearby Orahovac. The cost of the construction amounted to 1.6 million Euros and was paid by the Kosovo government. The latter also funded reconstruction of the local monasteries of Kozme and Domjane. Yet not a single Serb has returned to the village so far.

Representatives of Kosovo institutions or international organizations, and NGO activists, often visit Orahovac, talk to its residents and appeal to the Serbs in the northern section to integrate into the local society, partake in the process of privatization and cooperate with local institutions. For their part, Serbs complain that they cannot move freely and do not trust the Kosovo Police Service. During these informal meetings, they regularly raise the issues of missing persons (during the NATO intervention and after the arrival of international forces), unemployment and decentralization. They also complain that stones are often thrown at them in the area of Malisevo (Malisheve) municipality, on their way to Kosovska Mitrovica.

Some Serb houses in Orahovac municipality were torched. Though those houses were empty when torched, repeated accounts of the incidents make local Serbs feel unsafe and distrust the Kosovo Police Service and the UNMIK police. Few Serbs are engaged in the Kosovo Police Service. Anxiety about the future and adverse experience of the past still dominate their lives. In their view, therefore, only KFOR is capable of guaranteeing their security and safety. In spite of everything, even after the proclamation of Kosovo's independence local Serbs have not left their homesteads.