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**GRASS-ROOT APPROACHES TO
INTER-ETHNIC RECONCILIATION
IN THE NORTHERN PART OF
KOSOVO**

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1. Introduction

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica¹ and the northern part of Kosovo is characterized by a tense, fragile, and volatile situation; and at times, outbreak of violence. This area usually draws local and international attention mainly through negative headlines: barricades, ethnic division, social and institutional division, burning and dismantling of customs offices, ethnically motivated violence, lack of rule of law, illegal business not recognizing any ethnic lines, just to name a number of them. Mitrovicë/Mitrovica especially, the divided town at the river Ibër/Ibar has been a hotspot of inter-ethnic tensions and became a synonym for an unresolved conflict in the northern part of Kosovo.

The focus of this paper lies on relations between the Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities, not only because these are the biggest communities by far, but also the most antagonizing ones. It highlights major challenges in inter-ethnic cooperation and approaches taken by the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) and business sectors to address them. These two sectors are the main objects of analysis for inter-ethnic reconciliation in the northern part of Kosovo on the grass-root level.

Reconciliation is widely defined as a process which involves both bottom-up and top-down approaches, - grass-root level and institutions - which aims at restoring relationships between people, communities, as well as between institutions and citizens, and at establishing civic trust². Grass-root organizations are given high importance as key actors in the reconciliation process; however, no matter how actively engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation, they cannot have social impact, if high level political processes do not support reconciliation efforts or run even contrary to it.

The impact of politics on the possibilities of inter-ethnic cooperation is very high; the vast majority of interviewed persons follow a 'no-politics'-policy, not discussing anything that could be linked to politics, in order to be able to establish inter-ethnic contacts at all. At the time of the research and writing of this report (October 2011 – January 2012), Kosovo Serbs had erected barricades as a protest against Kosovo institutions trying to exercise authority in the northern part of Kosovo. NGOs did in some cases adjust their activities to this situation, but generally continued working 'across ethnic lines', whereas the impact of the barricades was heavily felt within the business and trade sectors. Prejudices, often created and/or reinforced by media, are identified as a major obstacle to inter-ethnic contact. Out of fear and mistrust, many members of different communities limit themselves to moving only within 'their area' and do not cross into the 'other's area'. Mixed neighbourhoods thus gain a high importance as (potential) meeting points for different communities. The main strategy applied by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to overcome prejudices is establishing direct relations. Strongly criticized are inter-ethnic activities that only aim at bringing people together just for the sake of inter-ethnic contacts without being based on real needs, concerns or interests. In

¹Names of locations are written in Albanian and Serbian language, unless there is no difference in both languages, according to OSCE standards. The order of the two languages/writings depends on the language pre-dominantly spoken in that place, e.g. for Prishtinë/Priština, as pre-dominantly Kosovo Albanian city, the Albanian name is written first, whereas for Zvečan/Zveçan, with a Kosovo Serb majority, the Serbian spelling is used first.

² De Greiff developed the 'civic trust model', by which he defines reconciliation as "the condition under which citizens can trust one another *as citizens* again or anew. That means that they are sufficiently committed to the norms and values that motivate their ruling institutions, sufficiently confident that those who operate those institutions do also on the basis of those norms and values, and sufficiently secure about their fellow citizens' commitment to abide these basic norms and values." De Greiff 2008, p. 126f

this regard, trade and business are given a key role in restoring relations between communities as they are exclusively based on mutual interest.

There is a broad variety of different activities, but also a broad array of different approaches applied in inter-ethnic cooperation. Mainly, the grass-root level is engaged in (re-)establishing relations between communities, often through personal contacts between members of different communities and by offering joint activities. Some NGOs chose a more indirect approach in implementing projects in two separate locations, with punctual contacts. Another approach taken by NGOs is to focus on intra-community work as a pre-condition for future inter-ethnic cooperation. The variety of approaches is enrichment, not a competition, but needs coordination respectively agreeing on an overarching common goal.

Inter-ethnic communication has improved over the past years and it is an encouraging indicator that organizations continued joint activities despite the barricades, although business related and other self-initiated contacts decreased in that time. However, as long as the political situation in the northern part of Kosovo is not solved and unless the institutional level does not support the efforts on the grass-root level, any reconciliation process will get stuck and the relations between communities will remain fragile. Important issues like return of the displaced persons, dealing with the past or acknowledgement of victims cannot be addressed by the grass-root level only. Establishing relations, fostering inter-ethnic contacts and communication, dissolving prejudices is the main focus of grass-root organizations, as well as engaging in intra-community work for more diversity.

1.1. Methods of Research

This research looks only at grass-root approaches to inter-ethnic reconciliation in the northern part of Kosovo. The focus is on inter-ethnic cooperation and communication between different communities, and it assumes that this is the starting point of any reconciliation process.

The study is based on desk-research as well as direct interviews, including very diverse set of actors in order to gain a broad picture. In total, interviews with 35 persons were conducted, the interview partners include: Kosovo Albanians (17), Kosovo Serbs (10), representatives of Roma (1), Bosniak (1) and Turkish (2) communities. Most interview partners of the civil society sector are based in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, south and north. This also reflects the situation on the ground: Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is the place where most civil society activities take place, where most inter-ethnic activities are implemented, and where the line of division runs through. Civil society and business related activities were the main focus of the research.

2. Context of the northern part of Kosovo

2.1. Communities

The northern part of Kosovo includes three municipalities: Zubin Potok, Zvečan/Zveçan, Leposavić/Leposaviq and the municipality of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica³.

³ The administration of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is complex, with three competing authorities: the Ahtisaari plan foresees a division of the pre-2008 municipality of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica into two municipalities: Mitrovicë/Mitrovica South and Mitrovicë/Mitrovica North. This has not been implemented yet. Mitrovicë/Mitrovica South operates as municipality under Kosovo law, with the northern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica formally remaining under the same jurisdiction as long as the new municipalities have not been created. This jurisdiction is de facto only on paper. Since 2002, the UNMIK

The city of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is divided by the Ibër/Ibar river which also marks the clear dividing line between the majority Kosovo Albanian population, south of the river, and a majority Kosovo Serb population north of the river⁴. As there has been no reliable census since 1981 for the entire area, demographic figures are based on estimates. According to estimates used by KFOR, Kosovo Police, the institutions of Kosovo and the international presence in Kosovo, there are between 120,000 – 130,000 inhabitants in the four municipalities. Approximately there are 75,000-80,000 Kosovo Albanians and 40,000 Serbs including about 10,000 Bosniaks, Turks, and RAE communities living in the area, majority of whom – 7,000 – live north of the river⁵. Due to the war in 1998/1999, members of the respective non-majority communities were forced to leave, have fled, moved or migrated. During the riots in 2004, many Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo were dispelled and moved to the northern part of Kosovo.

The return process in the northern part of Kosovo is very slow. Not only has the original population been displaced – Kosovo Serbs once living in southern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica now live in the northern part, Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians once living in northern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica now live in the southern part – but also have Serb internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of Kosovo moved to the northern part of Kosovo⁶. With students and professors coming to northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, this part of town has become the urban center for Serbs in Kosovo and profoundly changed its character in the last decade, technically serving as a ‘Serb capital’ for Kosovo Serbs. Northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica hosts a newly built university, displaced from Prishtinë/Priština, a theater, also displaced from Prishtinë/Priština, as well as a large, fully equipped hospital and other institutions.

Although they are the majority, Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs are not the only communities living in the northern part of Kosovo. Mitrovicë/Mitrovica was once home to one of the largest Roma settlement in the area with 8,000⁷ Roma living in a compact settlement, the 'Roma Mahala', just south of the Ibër/Ibar. After the total destruction of the settlement during the 1999 conflict and the entire Roma population fleeing, the return had only started in 2007. Most Roma who had been accommodated in several camps in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, have returned to reconstructed buildings in 'Roma Mahala' in the southern part. Now an estimated 1,230⁸ Roma live in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. The Ashkali community counts approximately 425 members living in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, mainly in the Dy Korriku/Sitničko Naselje-
neighbourhood⁹.

Administration in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica (UAM) acts as the governing authority in that part of the town, financed through the official Kosovo budget. UAM's power is challenged by another authority in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica: the Serbian parallel municipality structures that act under Serbian Law and were established in 2008 after elections organized by Serbia in Kosovo thereby violating the UNSCR 1244. See also: IKS 2009, p.6ff

⁴For a detailed and comprehensive overview on Kosovo communities see OSCE Communities Profile, OSCE 2011

⁵ According to OSCE estimates, the four municipalities together have a population of roughly 180,000 inhabitants, out of which the majority, 115 000, are Kosovo Albanians, living pre-dominantly in south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica (110,000). Approximately 66,000 Kosovo Serbs live in the four municipalities, in all places but in the southern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica municipality. Approximately 7,000 members of non-Serb communities live in the northern part of Kosovo, and around 3,000 non-Albanians in the southern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. OSCE 2011

⁶ According to UNHCR statistics, in 2010 Mitrovicë/Mitrovica area counted 14.585 IDPs, out of a total of 18.258 IDPs in entire Kosovo. 6957 are Serb IDPs, 7.317 Albanians, and 262 Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians. See: UNHCR 2011, p.3

⁷ Demographic data taken from OSCE municipal profiles 2009, and ECMI EthnoPolitical Map

⁸See OSCE Communities Profiles, OSCE 2011, p. 214

⁹See OSCE Communities Profiles, OSCE 2011, p.65

Most members of the Turkish community, around 1,900 persons¹⁰, live in the southern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. The Bosniak community of approximately 6,000 members prior to the 1999 conflict, nowadays counts 1,500 members in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica municipality. The majority, 1,000, live in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, out of which nearly 300 in the Bosniak Mahala¹¹, and close to 500 in the southern part. Another 300-500 Bosniaks live in Leposavić/Leposaviq municipality, in mainly two villages, Rvatska/Hrvatska and Berberishtë/Berberishtë. The Bošnjacka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve is one of the mixed neighbourhoods in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, with several communities living there. Other mixed neighbourhoods in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica are Kodra e Minatorëve/Mikronaselje (Miners' Hill), Kroi i Vitakut/Brdjani, Suvi Do/Suhodoll and other smaller neighbourhoods.

Albanians in the northern part of Kosovo live either in the before mentioned ethnically mixed neighbourhoods in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, or in mono-ethnic villages in the other three municipalities. Zubin Potok has one Kosovo Albanian village, Çabër/Çabra with approximately 1,000¹² inhabitants. In the municipality of Zvečan/Zveçan there are three Albanian villages, Boletin/Boljetin, Lipë/Lipa and Zhazhë/Žaža with around 400 residents altogether¹³. Approximately 300 Kosovo Albanians¹⁴ live in the three villages of the Leposavić/Leposaviq municipality, Koshtovë/Košutovo, Bisticë e Shalës/Šaljska Bistrica and Cerajë/Ceranje. In all cases, only a part of the pre-war residents have returned so far.

2.2. Socio-economic aspects

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is remembered as an industrial area, home to one of the biggest industrial complexes in the former Yugoslavia, the Trepça/Trepça mining complex. Only a fraction of then 22,000 workers are employed today¹⁵. Since 1999, the unemployment rate in the northern part of Kosovo is significantly above the Kosovo average¹⁶; thus, affecting all the communities. The northern part of Kosovo has been hit hard by de-industrialization and unresolved ethnic conflict. It is not surprising that the economic situation and high unemployment are perceived as the major problems, regardless of the ethnic background¹⁷. In southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, the main economic activities are organized around the private sector with 95 percent of all businesses having maximum five employees, and approximately half of them dealing with trade and retail¹⁸. The public sector in the northern part of Kosovo is divided into Kosovo institutions and those financed by Serbian government, usually referred to as parallel structures. The latter

¹⁰ OSCE 2011, p. 303

¹¹ According to the Bosniak community representative of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica: 1200 Bosniaks in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica including Bosniak Mahala, and 300 in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica; in Leposavić/Leposaviq municipality 800 – 1000 Bosniaks in mainly two villages; before the conflict, 7.500 Bosniaks lived in that area. Most were dispelled from the southern part after the 1999-conflict or migrated to Serbia (Sandžak) or to third countries. Interview on 13 December 2011 in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica

¹² According to estimations of community: 1.400 Kosovo-Albanians. Interview with municipal official from Kosovo municipality Zubin Potok, Çabër/Çabra, 18 October 2011

¹³ OSCE 2011, p. 35; Estimations of municipal official range from 600 – 800 inhabitants; Interview with municipal official from Kosovo municipality Zvečan/Zveçan, on 24 October 2011

¹⁴ OSCE 2011, p. 35

¹⁵ See Palairt 2003, p. 8; IKS 2009, p. 16

¹⁶ See IKS 2009, p. 14

¹⁷ See UNDP 2011, p. 15f

¹⁸ See IKS 2009, p. 15

provides a large number of working places¹⁹ and salaries valued at 150 percent of those paid in Serbia for the same position. By funding Serbian institutions in Kosovo, Serbian government tries to exert political influence and control. The private sector is less developed than in the southern part²⁰, and in reverse, in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, the public sector is not of such an importance with regards to employment as in the northern part.

The northern part of Kosovo is pre-dominantly rural²¹. Agriculture is underdeveloped, although it offers a great potential especially in the area of foresting and wood processing, which is a scarce resource in other parts of Kosovo²².

2.3. Institutional and Political Divide

The predominantly Serb inhabited the northern part of Kosovo has, ever since June 1999, never been under full effective control of UNMIK and less of Kosovo government. In the northern part of Kosovo, unlike the other parts of Kosovo, the declaration of independence in 2008 was followed by protests and violent clashes. For the first time, Serbia organized local elections for Serbs in Kosovo in 2008, which was generally attributed to be an action taken by Serbia as a result of the declaration of independence. Serbia established its own municipal structures, operating under Serbian law. However, these elections were neither recognized by the Kosovo institutions nor by UNMIK, since they violated the UNSCR 1244. Moreover, these municipalities are not recognized either by Kosovo, or UNMIK or any other international mission in Kosovo. In addition to the municipalities, authorities in Serbia have established and continue to support other institutions, known as parallel institutions in the northern part of Kosovo. They include health institutions, education system, judicial system, electricity supply and telecommunications, social welfare and pension – this enumeration is not exhaustive, but it shows that the parallel institutions cover all the sectors so that one can avoid nearly any contact with Kosovo institutions and be able to live with the services provided by Serbian led and funded institutions.

Kosovo institutions do operate in the northern part of Kosovo, though their presence is limited. Issuing Kosovo documents is one of the few municipal resorts working. Kosovo institutions are able to provide health care and education mainly to Kosovo Albanians and other non-Serb communities living in that area. Kosovo police is present in all municipalities. The International Crisis Group (ICG) characterizes the situation as “dual sovereignty”, summarizing:

“Serbia and Kosovo institutions intersect and overlap in the North without formal boundaries or rules. The majority Serb and minority Albanian communities there live within separate social, political and security structures. They have developed pragmatic ways of navigating between these parallel systems where cooperation is unavoidable”²³.

2.4. The Barricades

After Kosovo's declaration of independence, Serbia did not allow Kosovar goods with Kosovo documents to enter Serbia. As this issue failed to be discussed and resolved at the “technical dialogue” facilitated by the EU on 20 July 2011, Kosovo government

¹⁹For a detailed overview on Serbia-funded institutions and influence of Serbia in Kosovo, see ICG 2011

²⁰See also KIPRED 2008, p. 10

²¹See World Bank 2009, p. 20

²²See Haener 2011, p. 31f

²³ICG 2011, p. i

decided to introduce a reciprocal ban on goods from Serbia. On 25 July 2011, Kosovo police Areaal Operations Special Units (ROSU) were sent to two border crossings in the northern part of Kosovo, Jarinje and Brnjak, in order to implement this ban and to deploy Kosovo Custom there, which had not been staffed since 2008. This action sparked violent clashes where one Kosovo police officer was shot dead. The ROSU withdrew, Kosovo Serbs erected roadblocks while KFOR took over the situation and continues to control the area. The main roads leading to the two border crossings are blocked by barricades, and “alternative roads”, mountainous tracks, are being used as the only ways taking one to and from different parts of the northern part of Kosovo and Serbia. The situation has become fragile and volatile. The dispute has long gone beyond the starting point of deployment or non-deployment of Kosovo customs officers at the said border crossings. Belgrade has, for a period, backed Kosovo Serbs into erecting and maintaining the barricades as a peaceful mean for their “legitimate fight for their rights”. However, facing the pressure from the European Union, Belgrade has decided since December 2011 to change the rhetoric. The Serbian president, followed by other ministers and high politicians, are now requesting that Kosovo Serbs remove the barricades.

The northern part of Kosovo faces the problem of two opposing goals and political stands of the parties involved: integration into Kosovo system versus remaining in or re-integration into Serbian system. The barricades have literally cemented the existing divide. Without doubts, this has had an impact on the research. The first interviews were conducted in October 2011, when most people still hoped that the issue could be resolved quickly. Some potential interview partners declined to be asked as this “was not the right time”, others were more careful in their answers then they would have been before the barricades. Overall, a huge pressure and depression could be felt. Even more than limiting physical movement, the barricades seemed to have a huge psychological impact especially on those who were open to inter-ethnic cooperation. This psychological burden should not be underestimated.

3. Overview on Inter-ethnic Relations

3.1. Geographical Lines of Division

The northern part of Kosovo is perceived as being separated from the rest of Kosovo, with Mitrovicë/Mitrovica being the symbol of a divided town. And in fact, nearly everything and everybody is separated. Health and school systems operate separately; Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb children do not meet at all from kindergarten all the way to university level within the education system. All Albanian villages in the northern part are accessible – at least through side roads – without passing through ‘Serb territory’. The ethnically mixed area Tri Solitera/Tre Rrokaqet in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica has an extra pedestrian bridge nearby the main bridge in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, to be able to cross to the south without having to pass ‘Serb neighbourhoods’. The mixed area, Kodra e Minatorëve/Mikronaselje, is connected to south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica by an extra bus line – passing through north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, but not stopping at any of the bus stops in the north. The same goes for Albanian villages in Leposavić/Leposaviq municipality; before the barricades were erected, the bus from and to southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica ran three times a day without stopping in Serb inhabited locations on the way²⁴..

²⁴ Since barricades were established, the road leading to the Albanian villages through Leposavić/Leposaviq municipality was blocked off; only an alternative macadam route connects the villages to Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, bypassing „Serb“ territory and surpassing the barricades.

No public transport is provided to go to nearby Leposavić/Leposaviq for example. Kosovo Albanians living in the northern part of Kosovo do their shopping generally in the south. The health system operates by and large separated, Serbian funded and Kosovo run health facilities treat their respective communities apart. For the vast majority of Kosovo Albanians living in the south, and the vast majority of Kosovo Serbs living north of Ibër/Ibar, there is no need and no coincidental possibility to meet. The same goes for Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs living in the North: the infrastructure and resources provided by the parallel institutions allow for avoiding contact. Most of the roads, bus transport, bridges, that were built after the war were established with exactly that aim: to avoid inter-ethnic contact and thus reduce further conflict potential and increase the (feeling of) security for the respective communities. Contact avoidance as a conflict prevention measure is regarded as a practical possibility for continuing to live in the same area by several residents of Kosovo Albanian villages in Leposavić/Leposaviq and Zvečan/Zveçan, at least until some level of confidence has been rebuilt between the two communities, Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serbs²⁵.

When many roads between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb inhabited locations were blocked by the barricades, not only at the Ibër/Ibar river, but also in the northern part of Kosovo itself, it was essential for Kosovo Albanians living there to have 'special access'. However, leading separate lives, accessing separate institutions, using separated infrastructure to some extent, might make it challenging to overcome the ethnic division in the longer term.

There are only few locations where people of different communities meet in daily life. These are mainly ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, like Kodra e Minatorëve/Mikronaselje, Suvi Do/Suhodoll, and especially Bošnjaka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve, where trade has turned that neighbourhood into a multi-ethnic marketplace during the past years. Shops are mainly held by Kosovo Albanians, whereas customers are pre-dominantly Kosovo Serbs, from either side of the Ibër/Ibar and not necessarily residents of the Bosniak Mahala. These mixed neighborhoods are usually accessible for all communities without fear.

3.2. Motivation for Contacts across the Lines

Despite all the challenges and obstacles, inter-ethnic contact has increased over the past years, although opinions among interview partners differ which level those relations have reached and how much the recent erection of barricades has an influence on it. There are several motivations for taking the effort to engage in inter-ethnic communication and contact, whether for business purposes or for working actively against the divide. The interview partners have mentioned economic prosperity as well as the prospects for EU membership, which both Serbia and Kosovo aspire to join, to be some of the main driving forces. Looking for becoming a member of a bigger union with a broad cultural diversity, and at the same time not wanting to communicate with your neighbors living in the same town or in the next village is paradoxical. However it was noted by those interviewed that this paradoxical stance would not be tolerated by the EU which emphasizes the need on good neighborhood relations²⁶. Others base their engagement for inter-ethnic relations on the arguments that one needs and depends on neighbors that

²⁵ Interviews with Kosovo Albanian officials of municipalities, 24. October 2011, and with Kosovo Albanian residents in northern municipalities, 28. November 2011; the Kosovo Albanian village in the municipality Zubin Potok, Çabër/Çabra, is much closer to Mitrovicë/Mitrovica than to Zubin Potok; being oriented towards Mitrovicë/Mitrovica (south) and not towards Zubin Potok is less a strategy of contact avoidance but also a matter of practicality.

²⁶ Interviews Kosovo Albanian NGO representative, 02 November 2011, Kosovo Albanian businessman, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica 31 October 2011

all live under the same sky and breathe same air. Cultural diversity is deemed an enrichment, “the better you know other communities, the more you are valid as a person; the more cultures you know, the richer you are”²⁷.

In general, most inter-ethnic contacts occur in private individual relations as well as in business and trade. Not only is there cooperation between companies, there are also instances where Kosovo Albanians and Roma work in the northern part mainly in construction or as day laborers. Inter-ethnic contacts are also established at working places such as at various NGOs, international organizations, and agencies, as well as through NGO organized activities.

Inter-ethnic communication can be observed at the institutional level as well. One of the few services Kosovo municipalities in the north provide is issuing Kosovo documents, such as ID cards and passports. These municipal offices operate in Albanian villages. A considerably large number of Kosovo Serbs travel to these villages to apply for Kosovo IDs, and this makes a good case for where and how inter-ethnic contacts take place. Kosovo ID cards are for example required recently to receive pensions paid by Kosovo institutions. Kosovo Serbs applying for these documents are not willing to lose the benefits just for the sake of following the publicly voiced motto of Kosovo Serb and Serbian politicians to not recognize Kosovo institutions. Individually and quietly, they follow another policy if it is in their personal interest. The recently erected barricades, however, have led to the decrease – but not to a total halt - of Kosovo Serbs applications because of the difficulties faced to bypass these barricades.

3.3. Business

Business activities seem to be less problematic for inter-ethnic engagement. Many interview partners emphasized that they believed business relations are functioning quite well, mostly referring to trade in Bošnjaka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve as one huge multi-ethnic market place. There are no figures as to how many companies cooperate 'across ethnic lines', as many engage in business activities on a low profile, and estimations among businessmen differ²⁸. It is widely acknowledged that trade and business cooperation generally has a positive impact on inter-ethnic relations and that the cooperation has significantly improved over the last few years. 'Business does not know nationalities' and 'trade connects people' are some of the statements often made. Cooperation in the business sector functions well, because, as some of them have claimed, business benefits everyone involved: businessmen are interested in profit, not ethnic background, people want to find a job and workers earn a living, “only money conciliates people, not the flag” a Kosovo Serb businessman concluded²⁹.

The barricades have had an enormous impact on business activities. Trade in the Bošnjaka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve for example has decreased to an approximate 50 percent, ever since the barricades have been erected³⁰. An interviewed business

²⁷ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

²⁸ Whereas a Kosovo Albanian businessman in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica estimates that half of the companies in the northern part of Kosovo are registered in Kosovo, with Kosovo institution documents, a Kosovo Albanian business consultant believes this number to be 'relatively low'; being registered at Kosovo institutions signifies having business relations with companies in other parts of Kosovo mainly owned by Kosovo Albanians, or at least aiming to establish such business relations. Interviews with Kosovo Albanian businessman, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 31 October 2011, and with Kosovo Albanian business consultant from Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 03 November 2011

²⁹ Interview with Kosovo Serb businessman in the northern part of Kosovo, 01 November 2011

³⁰ Interview with Bosniak community representative, 13 December 2011, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica

consultant expects many shops to close soon for not being able to pay the rent³¹. Two of the three interviewed Kosovo Serb businessmen are not able to sell their products – their market is in southern Kosovo, but due to the barricades and the high tensions they are not able to transport their goods south of the Ibër/Ibar river. The economic losses are considerable; one of them already had to dismiss several employees³². At the time of the interview in October, it was reported that some Kosovo Albanian workers are still on construction sites in the northern part of Kosovo but their number had significantly dropped in comparison to the time before the barricades were erected.

3.4. Civil Society Organizations

In the last two years, a broad variety of inter-ethnic activities have taken place in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and the northern part of Kosovo. A compilation of projects implemented in 2010/11³³ shows that more than fifty activities were implemented by nearly as many different organizations involving more than thousand participants. The range of activities is very broad – from training, seminars and workshops, to building networks, from children and youth groups, cleaning the Ibër/Ibar river jointly, offering Albanian language courses for Kosovo Serbs, running rock schools; issuing a news magazine in all languages; from organizing sports tournament and joint excursions to offering women groups and economic development projects.

The majority of those activities were implemented by less than ten organizations, out of which five are very active. The majority of organizations have conducted at least a single event with inter-ethnic component, often in cooperation with other NGOs. The few NGOs which are very active are mainly implementing long(er)-term projects. Most of the NGOs are founded as 'mono-ethnic' organizations, which implement certain activities with other 'mono-ethnic' NGOs. The intensity of those contacts ranges from very loose, related to implementation of short-term projects, to very consolidated, jointly running a centre and activities for several years. Only few NGOs or initiatives³⁴ employ staff members from different communities, two of them located in the Bošnjaka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve. Other initiatives and organizations with employees of various communities have two offices, one in the southern and one in the northern part of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, with close cooperation and regular meetings of staff. Two of the active organizations define themselves as multi-ethnic; one having its main office in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica with staff coming from both sides of the town.

The vast majority of organizations already operate for several years now. Some of the organizations had been established by international NGOs and later transformed into local NGOs. Against this background, it is remarkable that the latest organization that was founded in 2010 has done so without any international assistance and was created by intellectuals from both northern and southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica as a multi-ethnic

³¹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian business consultant from Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 03 November 2011

³² Interview with Kosovo Serb businessmen in the northern part of Kosovo, 01 November 2011

³³ Based mainly on publicly accessible documents, KIPRED created a database of implemented activities in the past two years. Although the database is probably not exhaustive, it gives an overview on the variety of activities and approaches, as well as on the variety of organisations and target groups. The two-year period was chosen to get an impression of the actual status and filtering the impact of the barricades.

³⁴ 'Initiative' is used to describe a non-registered organisation/group that operates with high degree of independence from the NGO that has established the initiative.

organization aiming at overcoming the ethnic division among citizens³⁵. This is a relatively outstanding approach as it differs from the 'average' NGO in that area and indicates that – at least some - citizens of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica feel that they have to change something by themselves in order to restore broken relationships.

Nearly twenty percent of all the activities were youth related. Another twenty percent had specifically women as target group. Several interview partners stressed that it was easier to work with women in the field of inter-ethnic cooperation, because women were considered to be more courageous, more sensitive and addressing women would actually mean addressing the entire community, as women were more inclusive³⁶. There are several women organizations engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation; out of the five most active organizations in inter-ethnic cooperation are two women organizations, other active organizations are led by women. The fact that 13 out of 19 interviewed NGO representatives and participants were women underlines the strong role that women play in this sector.

3.5. Relations between different communities

When mentioning 'inter-ethnic relations', usually the focus is immediately and often only on Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities³⁷. Given the size of the two in comparison to other communities, as well as the antagonizing political views related to the two, this is understandable. However, it is wrong to focus only on Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs and to thus forget and marginalize other communities, a Kosovo Albanian representative of a multi-ethnic organization warned³⁸. An NGO representative from northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica complained that many donors were considering projects to be inter-ethnic only if they included both Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, but not if they addressed only one of the two plus other communities³⁹.

The Roma representative of an NGO stressed that her community simply wants to live in peace and have good relations with everyone. They cooperate with and work for “whoever calls them”, but also mentioned that she felt Roma were like “a football”, moved from one side to another, respectively being between all sides⁴⁰. A Kosovo Albanian NGO leader who cooperates with one of the Roma NGOs states that further support to the Roma community living in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, in the Roma Mahala, is needed, “because they are in the south only two or three years, as the return has started only then and it is needed to still work on re-integration”⁴¹. For many services, like health treatment, school etc, Roma are (still) more oriented towards northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica as they used to receive support from Serbian run institutions while they lived in camps in the northern part of Kosovo after having been displaced from the Roma Mahala in the south.

³⁵ Interviews with Kosovo Albanian representatives of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica on 11 November 2011

³⁶ Interviews with Kosovo-Albanian representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011, participants of NGO activities/residents of mixed neighbourhood, 10 November; Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011, and Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, 31 October 2011

³⁷ For a detailed and comprehensive overview on Kosovo communities see OSCE Communities Profile, OSCE 2011

³⁸ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 11 November 2011

³⁹ Interview with representative of NGO in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica on 26 October 2011

⁴⁰ Interview with Roma representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 24 October 2011

⁴¹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

The Turkish and Bosniak communities are generally perceived to be integrated or as “not having any special difficulties”⁴² in relation to any other community. Several interview partners pointed out that Bosniaks are in the special position to mediate between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serbs, or to create a link between the two, in times when it is difficult to establish direct contacts. Examples given by interview partners were all connected to having Bosniaks providing transport for goods or persons as truck and taxi drivers. Again, since the erection of barricades, thanks to Bosniak taxi drivers, Kosovo Serbs are able to get to Albanian villages to apply for documents⁴³. Bosniaks living south of the Ibër/Ibar, as well as those living in Bošnjačka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve, are more oriented to the south and integrated into Kosovo systems and society, whereas Bosniaks living in the Leposavić/Leposaviq municipality are integrated into the society and institutions that function there; basically they attend Serbia funded schools and work in health and education institutions under Serbian run institutions. Bosniaks living in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica move north and south, are working in both institutions. As a community, they often felt like being „between to fires“, but would always try to find a balance between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities⁴⁴ a community representative explained. In his opinion, the possibility for a link between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs to be created lies in the fact that Bosniaks share the language with Kosovo Serbs – although slightly different⁴⁵ – and the same religion with Kosovo Albanians as well as the support for the independence of Kosovo since the 1990s. Many Bosniaks are also fluent in Albanian language.

The function of connecting Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serbs community is what characterizes the Bošnjačka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, not just because of the mixed population living there with a relatively large number of Bosniaks, but also because of the attractive location between areas predominantly inhabited by Kosovo Serbs on one and Kosovo Albanians on the other side.

4. Challenges and Approaches

4.1. Politics

The Importance of Politics

Looking at the recent developments, the barricades and the visible divide between Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities in the northern part of Kosovo, it might seem that inter-ethnic activities and trade show no impact and are not able to bridge the divide. As elaborated before, reconciliation is a multi-dimensional process, which requires both the engagement on the grass-root level as well as on the political level. While NGO and business activities play an important role in establishing contacts between communities and people, the political dispute between Kosovo and Serbia, together with the foggy institutional set-up in the north, run completely contrary to such endeavours. In this situation, grass-root activities can probably hardly achieve more than

*“[...] while trying to answer whether Kosovo is a republic, whether it is Serbia, or independent, one cannot live. I can shout tomorrow 'Kosovo is Serbia', but I don't have water, electricity, can't find a job – or I can shout 'Kosovo is a republic', but on the other side, life is a catastrophe. We focus on solving our real problems”**

⁴² Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁴³ Interviews with Kosovo Albanian municipal representative of municipality in the northern part of Kosovo on 18 October 2011, and with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO on 26 October 2011, and with Kosovo Albanian business consultant on 03 November 2011

⁴⁴ Interview with Bosniak community representative of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 13 December 2011

⁴⁵ Officially, Serbian and Bosnian are two languages, but they are very similar. Everyone knowing one of the two understands also the other language.

preparing the ground for establishing and maintaining inter-ethnic relations. “It is not the time now to start cooperation, we can just wait and establish contacts in the meantime”, is the strategy pursued by the newly founded local multi-ethnic organization⁴⁶. This assessment is shared by several other NGOs who are not starting new projects for the time being. Those with already established inter-ethnic contacts and cooperation running for several years now, continue with their activities as the relations and trust created over the time proved strong enough to do so, as an NGO representative in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica notes: “we work, we continue, we did not stop for a single day. I think that people have understood that this [the barricades] is not something between communities, this is something stronger; it is about politics”⁴⁷. There is confidence that “contacts that were reached within several years cannot be lost within several months”⁴⁸. It is obvious that a clear distinction is made between the grass-root and the political level, although there is interdependence: whereas (personal) relationships between people and communities, at least to a certain degree, function on the grass-root level, no cooperation seems to be possible on the political level.

The 'No-Politics'-Policy

Inter-ethnic cooperation on the grass-root level generally functions well only if politics is kept aside. This is the assessment of virtually all the interviewed persons in both business and civil society sectors. Like a mantra, it was repeated over and over again by everyone: 'We don't deal with politics'. “This is the only way how to keep balance and relationship”⁴⁹. Not discussing different political opinions serves as a conflict-prevention strategy, as explained by an NGO representative:

“For someone, Kosovo is a state, for someone else, Kosovo is not a state. But this does not hinder us to work our job. To finish what we owe to our community, our children, our pensioners or to whomever. We usually do not talk about those things. Whether or not this is good, it is a question mark. But it is the only way how it functions. [...] If you say, this is black, and I say, this is white, then we try to convince each other that this is black or white and we would never finish”⁵⁰

Besides not talking about political issues, the further implementation of the 'no-politics'-policy looks slightly different in various organizations. Acting status-neutral is especially important for organizations operating in the northern part of Kosovo; avoiding any doubts that they could recognize Kosovo institutions and the statehood of Kosovo through their projects is a necessary condition to operate there⁵¹.

*“We are always in some kind of 'situation', always. We have never been without a 'situation'. Let's finally solve it.”**

Most NGOs have developed a pragmatic approach⁵² in dealing with the two institutional systems, the parallel institutions and the Kosovo institutions. They stay in touch with representatives of both institutional systems if necessary, sometimes even bringing officials of the two sides at the same table to discuss about or agree on an issue. This

⁴⁶ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representatives of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 11 November 2011

* Interview with Kosovo-Serb representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁴⁷ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁴⁸ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica 26 October 2011

⁴⁹ Interview with Kosovo-Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 31 October 2011

⁵⁰ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁵¹ Interviews with three representatives of three different NGOs based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica on 20 October 2011, 24 October 2011, 26 October 2011

⁵² Few are very strict in not cooperating with any institution of either system and to maintain total neutrality; interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 24 October 2011

approach does not include the recognition of the legitimacy of both systems; it is a pure pragmatic approach on trying to solve issues with those who are in the position to do so⁵³.

A similar pragmatic approach towards these institutions can be observed with regards to Kosovo Serbs applying for Kosovo documents and vehicle registration. There are also cases where, in addition to registering their companies under Serbian legislation, Kosovo Serbs register their companies under Kosovo's legislation in order to suite their business needs⁵⁴. As one Kosovo Serb entrepreneur expresses "I want to do business here in Kosovo, so I also register here and pay all my taxes. I want to live here and want also my children to live here"⁵⁵. Similarly, Kosovo Albanians are also reported to have registered their companies under Serbian legislation⁵⁶.

The strict adherence to the "no-politics"-policy creates space for pragmatic approaches and solutions by avoiding any topic of potential dispute and by focusing on current problems and achievable solutions. This approach of conflict avoidance might be a – or the only – possible approach for the moment; but, as also questioned by one activist above, it offers no durable strategy for the future. Engaging in political conflict transformation process, however, cannot be left to the grass-root level alone.

Political Solution Required

As much as no one who is engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation talks about politics, that much nearly all interview partners long for a solution to the 'situation' – which means both, an immediate solution (remove the barricades, lift the physical limitations, decrease the high tensions) and a long-term solution (a political framework that clarifies who and which institution, which system is in control of what and thus puts an end to the political conflict). The actual difficulties in cooperation are assessed to be less of inter-ethnic but more of political nature⁵⁷. Many businessmen, municipal officials, NGO representatives from both sides of the Ibër/Ibar, feel tired of the unresolved conflict which consumes too much of their energy⁵⁸. Especially the barricades and tensions were experienced as a "psychological burden"⁵⁹.

*"You need to find a compromise where both sides will be dissatisfied with. And so be it."***

⁵³ Examples of such cooperation were mentioned in three interviews with representatives of NGOs in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011 and 26 October 2011; acting status-neutral is also important for donors if they work in the northern part of Kosovo, interview with international representative of international agency, Prishtinë/Priština, 20 October 2011

* Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 24 October 2011

⁵⁴ One of the interviewed Kosovo Serb businessman had his company registered only in Kosovo under Kosovo law as his market was only inside Kosovo, south of the Ibër/Ibar, cooperating with Kosovo Albanian companies. Since of July 2011, he is not able to deliver his goods any more and in fact had to stop running his business. Interview on 01 November 2011

⁵⁵ Interview on 01 November 2011

⁵⁶ Interview with Kosovo Serb businessman on 01 November 2011

⁵⁷ Interview with Kosovo Albanian official from Kosovo municipality in the northern part of Kosovo, 24 October 2011, and with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

** Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁵⁸ Interview with Kosovo Albanian municipal official from Kosovo municipality in the northern part of Kosovo, 24 October 2011, with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011, with representative of NGO in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011, with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, 02 November 2011

⁵⁹ Interview with municipal official from Kosovo municipality Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011

“There is this burden of waiting every day what will happen; are they going to remove the barricades or are they not going to remove the barricades? Will someone shoot again or not? – We have learned to live with these things, but in our sub consciousness there is a huge tension and big pressure.”⁶⁰

Politics have an immense influence on the operations of NGOs and business sectors. Both sectors feel they have no impact on the political situation, neither related to the immediate situation and the barricades nor on finding a long-term solution. Referring to the high intra-community pressure, a Kosovo Serb businessman remarks that “I am a Serb and have to act as all others, I cannot go against the barricades, I am too small, have no influence – and it would be too risky”⁶¹. Solving the political situation was left to local politicians and the international community, more specifically the European Union – but never involved the civil society or business sector which do not want to deal with politics and feel to be too weak to be able to exert any kind of influence. According to an Albanian entrepreneur in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, “the business sector can hardly correct politics”⁶², while various NGO representatives believe that the civil society does not have an impact at all and that the political orders in the northern part of Kosovo leak from Belgrade, it creates a reality in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica which they do not like⁶³.

Over the last months, numerous proposals have been voiced by Kosovo and Serbian governments and relevant international actors. These suggestions range from the integration of the northern part of Kosovo into Kosovo institutions, implementation of the Ahtisaari plan, the creation of special districts with some sort of Ahtisaari Plus plan, all the way to territorial swaps between Kosovo and Serbia. The majority of the interviewed adhered to the 'no-politics' policy and did not express any rejection of or favor for any of the proposals made so far. The more widespread impression is that if the solution is within a range of acceptable options⁶⁴ it is not that important how the solution looks like in detail; it is more important to finally have a solution and a clear and stable framework within which to operate and co-operate.

*“If the state is called Kosovo, Banana, Serbia, Tajikistan – I don't care. I want to live normally, a better life.”**

Many interview partners are optimistic that, with a political solution, the intra-community pressure and political tensions would decrease, and that under a clear framework, people would be much more willing and able to meet and to cooperate. Or, as a Kosovo Albanian NGO-representative put it, the inter-ethnic relations “wouldn't improve unless the political positions aren't changing: on both sides of course”⁶⁵.

4.2. Intra-community Pressure

Rules of the Inter-ethnic Game

Tightly connected to the overall political situation is the intra-community pressure, which defines the behavior, considered acceptable for members of a community. Although these are unwritten rules, they form some kind of common knowledge of what is deemed

⁶⁰ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁶¹ Interview with Kosovo Serb businessman, the northern part of Kosovo, 01 November 2011

⁶² Interview with Kosovo Albanian businessman, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 31 October 2011

⁶³ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 31 October 2011

* Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁶⁴ What are deemed acceptable options differs in many cases, and might be diametrically opposed, north and south of the Ibër/Ibar, but this has not been explored in detail in this research.

⁶⁵ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

appropriate, what is socially tolerated and expected from members of a specific community. CDA in a research coined the term 'the rules of the inter-ethnic game':

“The cases suggest that in both K-Serb and K-Albanian communities, there are clear unwritten 'rules of the game' concerning when, how, why and to what extent people can/should interact across conflict lines. These 'rules of the inter-ethnic game' created boundaries on the depth and breadth of relationships that could permissibly be developed and ensured that any inter-ethnic engagement that did occur would not challenge the polarization of K-Serb—K-Albanian relations”⁶⁶.

Several of the interviewed persons, mainly from the civil society sector, but also from the business sector, stated that they themselves felt the consequences of intra-community pressure. They are also noted for having been subject to negative reactions, intimidation, threats and even attacks from members of their own community because they cooperated with 'the others'. One Kosovo Serb activist engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation was told on the street, by some Serb groups, to be careful on what he was doing, threatening him by saying “*don't let it happen that we burn your car*”⁶⁷.

A Kosovo Albanian, living in the northern part, finds himself between two sides, as he is cooperating with and having friends on both sides of the Ibër/Ibar, was named a 'Serbian spy' by members of one community, and beaten by members of the other⁶⁸. Regardless of these intimidating experiences and threats, people continued working as they evidently believe in what they are doing.

“If you have a goal and on the way to it dogs bark at you. If you would, each time a dog barks, turn around and try to scare it away, you will never reach the goal. If nationalists would applaud me, then something would be wrong.”⁶⁹

Not to play by the 'rules of the inter-ethnic game', as this Kosovo-Albanian does, takes courage not everyone has. Usually, the intra-community pressure to adhere to the unwritten rules increases with the feeling of insecurity and the perceived need to protect 'own interests' by 'sticking together' against 'the others'⁷⁰.

Changing the Rules

The 'rules of the game' are subject to changes, depending on external circumstances, mainly political developments, but also depending on what the community defines as being in its interest and which behavior is deemed acceptable for defending those interests. For the last few years there were slow continuous changes, softening the limitations and expanding the space of what is acceptable with regards to inter-ethnic cooperation. Not only was it easier to cooperate, whether in the civil society or in the business sectors, but it was also easier to socialize in public, to have a coffee. As a Kosovo Albanian representative of an NGO explains:

⁶⁶CDA 2006, p. 28

⁶⁷ Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁶⁸ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 11 November 2011

⁶⁹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 11 November 2011

⁷⁰ Franović speaks of a “security dilemma“ that is created by proclaiming co-existence with 'the others' as unsafe and offering solutions addressing only 'our interests' which are declared to be threatened by 'the others'. Ethnonationalism is thus „a perpetual motion machine – constantly reinforcing itself“.

Franović 2008, p. 36f

“In the past, we were very much thinking of where do we go – we had to go to some place where it is acceptable. But now, my [Kosovo Serb] colleagues even go alone for coffee in the south and they talk Serbian.”⁷¹

Mainly Kosovo Albanians believe that even if they have had some negative reactions in the past, the acceptance for inter-ethnic cooperation has grown over time.

“Sometimes we would hear that my community would say: 'Oh, she cooperates with Serbs or Roma'. But this is not heard any longer, this has become normal. People have already accepted this.”⁷²

While for Kosovo Albanians and other communities the 'rules of the game' have relaxed, the intra-community pressure has decreased and this continues to be so even after the erection of the barricades; for Kosovo Serbs, the 'rules of the game' have changed significantly, on 25 July 2011, limiting all interactions, even those that were publicly tolerated before. The erection of barricades is a very visible sign of how crossing inter-ethnic lines are not only not welcomed, but actively prohibited for the time being. Facing the barricades blocking off a street that leads to the Bošnjacka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve, from the northern side, it is purportedly written: “Don't buy in Bosniak Mahala”.

“Before the barricades, we did not only work together, but also sit together in a café, have a drink together after business, here in Mitrovica or in Prishtina, wherever. Serbs came here and I went there. There is a good friend of ours, he has a good company. And besides that he has a good business, he also has the tradition of making good raki.”^{}*

Changing the 'rule of the game' follows the perceived political necessity. The 25 July 2011 decision to install Kosovo custom officers at the border with Serbia in the north of Kosovo is heavily fought against by not only Kosovo Serbs in that area, but also

*“For us, in the southern part, it is a little easier, we don't have that strong pressure from politicians or community to work or not to work with other communities. Whereas for Serbs it is much more difficult. Now, in the Bosniak Mahala or other multi-ethnic surroundings, this [inter-ethnic cooperation] is doable.”^{**}*

politicians in Serbia. The issue over Kosovo customs officers at the two northern gates has been turned into a fight for the survival of the Serb community in (northern) Kosovo. Kosovo Serb and Serbian politicians and leaders proclaimed the remaining of Kosovo Serbs being at stake and reject all cooperation with Kosovo institutions and international organizations that are said to assist those institutions.

Everyone who continues the cooperation with Kosovo Albanians and/or with Kosovo institutions runs high risk to be labelled a traitor as presumably working against 'Kosovo Serb interests'. By breaching the rules, one has to fear consequences as several examples that purportedly happened show: “I heard, that a [Kosovo Serb] lady was beaten because she bought in the Bosniak Mahala”⁷³. Another Kosovo Serb woman, who continued to go to her working place in South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, and who crossed the main bridge as she used to do before, is reported to have been beaten as well⁷⁴.

⁷¹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁷² Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

^{*} Interview with Kosovo Albanian businessman, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 31 October 2011

⁷³ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁷⁴ Interview with official from Mitrovicë/Mitrovica municipality on 19 October 2011

^{**} Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

Most interview partners mentioned the recently changed 'rules of the game' and the huge pressure under which especially Kosovo Serbs find themselves as a major challenge for inter-ethnic cooperation at the moment and as impediment for keeping contacts, but even more for establishing further ones⁷⁵.

*"[Kosovo Serbs] have problems within their own community now, it is a group of Serbs that doesn't allow people to cooperate. I am sure that there are people who do not cross the bridge still because they are afraid that something will happen."*⁷⁶

Kosovo Serbs acknowledged the vast intra-community pressure and the impact it has on (potential) cooperation, but some of them also stressed that they believed these tensions existed on both sides. It might well be that Kosovo Albanians experience intra-community pressure, but the pressure in the northern part is incomparably higher at the moment.

Dealing with the Rules of the Game

Several approaches to deal with the intra-community pressure can be observed. 'Hiding' or keeping low profile seems to be a strategy followed by Kosovo Serbs obtaining Kosovo documents⁷⁷ or doing business 'across the lines'. Their counterparts help to keep that low profile in order not to bring anyone into difficulties. For instance, a Kosovo Albanian businessman does not advertise nor does he tell anyone that Kosovo Serbs are also his customers; "we do not want to push one's luck, so that someone would have problems"⁷⁸. One representative of an NGO that operates in a mixed area with staff and participants from various communities opines that keeping low profile and sticking strictly to status-neutrality is a strategy to keep intra-community pressure low⁷⁹.

Not crossing the bridge as often as they have done before the barricades were erected is another strategy pursued by both sides; personal contact has been substituted by communication via telephone, internet, and video-conference. Some NGOs and initiatives have two offices, north and south of the Ibër/Ibar, to be easily accessible for

"In the tense situation we are always very careful, not because of me personally, but we are also in contact with colleagues and do not want to harm them and make some trouble, when it can work for some time also without [personal contact]."^{80*}

members of communities on either side and not to expose anyone to a high risk and to offer low-threshold activities as the aim is to reach also those who might not cross the bridge⁸⁰. The two-office policy was established long before the barricades; one NGO had planned to intensify communication, personal exchange and to run the offices on both sides with mixed staff as a measure to fighting the divide. Due to the actual high tensions, this is now implemented more slowly⁸¹. Another strategy is to meet in third, neutral places be it in another country or at least with some distance to the

⁷⁵ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 11 November 2011, with Kosovo Albanian official of Kosovo municipality in the northern part of Kosovo, with Kosovo Serb businessmen, the northern part of Kosovo, 01 November 2011

⁷⁶ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁷⁷ Interview with Kosovo Albanian official of Kosovo municipality in the northern part of Kosovo, 18 October 2011

⁷⁸ Interview with Kosovo Albanian businessman, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 31 October 2011

⁷⁹ Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 24 October 2011

* Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁸⁰ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁸¹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

daily surrounding. This was a more common approach in the early days of inter-ethnic cooperation, but it is still applied, especially in more sensitive areas like having a joint public event like a concert of the Rock School with members from all communities playing together. “We cannot do a big concert in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica because it might always escalate”⁸², is the justification for having the annual joint workshops and concerts in Skopje.

But all in all, the vast majority of those activities that had been running before are continuing despite the barricades; the majority of staff members and NGO activists who have crossed the bridge are still crossing. The barricades and high intra-community tensions have a major impact on business cooperation and on planned intensification and expansion of NGO activities in the area of inter-ethnic cooperation.

4.3. Your Area – My Area – Mixed Area

The Non-Existence of the Other Side

Taking into consideration that there exist only few mixed areas in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and the northern part of Kosovo and that in many cases separate infrastructure has been already set-up as a result of the division “instituted” after June 1999, there are only but limited possibilities to meet 'coincidentally' Someone literally has to make an effort to meet members of the other communities.

The November 2010 UNDP survey found that within a three-months period, “an overwhelming majority of the K-Albanian respondents (73.6 percent) reported to not have had any contact with people of non-Albanian ethnic background”⁸³ Kosovo Serbs and members of the other communities are reported to have had more inter-ethnic contact, 42 and 48 percent. The contacts could have been established staying north or south of the Ibër/Ibar with members of other communities living there. It is thus safe to assume that the number of those having crossed the bridge is even lower. Several interview partners residing in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica estimate that around 90 percent of Kosovo Serbs had never crossed the bridge in the past twelve years⁸⁴. According to one NGO representative:

*„I go there [to south Mitrovica] only, if it is job related and that's it. I don't go there to drink a coffee or to walk. It doesn't exist. That's the line you don't cross. You don't realize that there is something down there. You see the building, but you don't go there and you take it like that. It's crazy. Crazy feeling I can tell you.”**

“The majority of people experience the bridge as barrier. Until there you go, and then after that nothing exists any more. After the bridge, there is nothing. My friend has not crossed the bridge since 1999. He lives all the time here in Mitrovica, he feels no need, is afraid, also today, to cross the bridge. And besides him, I think there is a huge number of people who have never ever crossed that bridge. And then they have constructed such standard that up to the bridge there is everything, and after the bridge, there is nothing.”⁸⁵

The feeling of non-existence of the other side in terms of north and south of the Ibër/Ibar, is more a phenomenon of the younger generation who has not had a chance

⁸² Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁸³ UNDP 2011, p. 47

⁸⁴ Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 28 October 2011, and with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011

⁸⁵ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

* Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October

to experience Mitrovicë/Mitrovica as one united town, as one NGO representative notes that “they actually don't have friends in the South. They are really young; it was already divided at that point”⁸⁶.

The feeling that nothing exists on 'the other side' is a strong indicator of how divided the society is, and how the separation runs the risk to manifesting itself within the younger generation that grows up with that experience and thus accommodates itself within the limits of the own community and area. Even for those who had contacts and friendships before the 1999, going to meet in person is still far from usual if it involves the physical movement of going to 'the other side', no matter if this means across the bridge or to another place predominantly inhabited by another community. There seems to be a division into 'my area', 'your area' and an understanding of who belongs where.

Factors Fostering the Divide

The reasons for not 'crossing the lines' are manifold. Intra-community pressure, the 'rules of the inter-ethnic game' as singled out above, play an important role. Once established and followed, those 'rules' are hard to overcome, as CDA argues: “There are indications that the “rules of the inter-ethnic game” have become internalized and self-enforcing, reducing the need for more direct forms of intra-ethnic intimidation”⁸⁷. Self-limitation in movements and contacts, as described above, are a consequence of the internalization.

Experiences during and after the 1998/99 conflict and the violent clashes in 2004, experiences of persecution and violence, are certainly at the core of the ethnic divide, although explicitly mentioned only by a minority of those interviewed⁸⁸. For Kosovo Serbs, the riots in March 2004 are a strong reason for distrust and fear, as an activist explains.

*“After this [violence in 2004] these people here realized, 'okay, no one can protect us. [...] This is a 200 percent distrust. They don't trust – Mother Teresa could come out of the grave and say 'guys, no one will harm you'. No.”*⁸⁹

In one way or another, members of all communities were subject to attacks, violence, persecution either during the 1998/99 conflict or afterwards which should not serve to justify any violence against anyone, but could explain a high level of mistrust and feeling of being unsafe in the 'other's area'.

*„Out of fear, they have lost interest, saying 'what would I look for down there? If I have to think about whether someone down there beats me or, don't give God, kills me or whatever – what are my interests to go there?’“**

Fear and mistrust were mentioned several times as strong obstacles to establish inter-ethnic contacts – fear of what might be the reactions of one's own community for not having respected the 'rules of the game', but also fear of the reactions of members of the other communities when meeting them. This fear was largely characterized as fear of the unknown, based on prejudices that are fuelled by propaganda and misinformation, which is a feeling shared among all sectors and communities⁹⁰.

⁸⁶ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011

⁸⁷ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011

⁸⁸ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011, with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, 02 November 2011

⁸⁹ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

* Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁹⁰ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representatives of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 11 November 2011, with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November, with representative

Young people were considered to be especially vulnerable to misinformation and the creation of strong prejudices, because they have no own experience of inter-ethnic contacts, but rely on media information, as a Kosovo Albanian NGO representative explains:

”Maybe [elder persons] have not been in contact for the last 10 years, but if they meet, they know each other from before and know that they will not harm each other or something bad will happen. But with youth, it is different, more difficult. Each side grows up with TV, media, then they have the opinion that on the other side, all are extremists.”⁹¹

The more time passes, the longer communities stay within their own area, and the more young people have no other experience than separation, the more self-limitation in movement and contacts is considered to be normal, the more difficult it might get to overcome those stereotypes and (internalized) mistrust, especially if media reinforce the prejudices.

Bridging the Divide

Youth is identified as an important target group by many NGOs. The range of activities addressing young people is broad: one NGO offers groups of children in a mixed area to institutionalize the possibilities of inter-ethnic space and create a safe surrounding for meeting and experiencing the interaction with members of other communities⁹². Other organizations bring youth together on excursions or other joint events to establish the first contact and provide for another experience. Some long-term activities are organized in two separate locations, with meetings / joint activities from time to time. Sharing information is part of the strategy in addressing youth and the general population to overcome prejudices.

*„I think the large number [of young people] is afraid. They have prejudices concerning the South or the North – that in the North, only Cetnici are living, that down there are only UÇK people living and so on. Simply, young generation watching TV and media create a wrong picture. “***

Several organizations⁹³ are jointly implementing a project called “Bridging the Divide” which includes also a media component⁹⁴ – a website and print magazine with information from all sides, written by journalists of different communities, Kosovo Serb, Kosovo Albanian, and Bosniak. Providing information from both sides, tackling common issues like electricity supply, criminality or unemployment, but also political developments, shall create a basis for common understanding, fight prejudices, and bring communities together. The main strategy followed by most of the NGOs in the northern part of Kosovo to bridge the gap and dissolve prejudices is to establish direct contact and bring people from various communities together. In some cases, personal contact is supplemented with contacts through social media.

of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011, with Kosovo Serb businessman, the northern part of Kosovo 01 November 2011

⁹¹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁹² Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 24 October 2011

⁹³ CBM as lead NGO in cooperation with CRYM coalition that incorporates seven NGOs and initiatives

⁹⁴ “Bridging the Divide“ consists of three components, media component, infrastructure and CRYM coalition to strengthen the civil society sector in the north.

Out of their own experience, most interview partners are convinced of the high value of personal contacts to overcome prejudices and change perceptions, as one Kosovo Albanian who went to the northern part to a restaurant has experienced himself:

“I have overcome [my prejudices] over the years. One of my prejudices was for example that if they hear me speak Albanian, they will fight me. But I was eating in a Serbian restaurant in the North and ordered some meal, but was meanwhile speaking with some colleague in Albanian, and then the waiter was talking to me in Albanian, some words. So, when people are facing the situations in their skin, they will change the prejudices, the thoughts. But if they are concentrated in gossiping, hearing some rumors, downtown or in national media which are biased, they will definitely be in box and not outside the box, for a long time.”⁹⁵

Few cases were mentioned, where NGO staff or others engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation experienced negative reactions, intimidation or different by members of another community. Interview partners more often mentioned 'nothing happened' or told about reactions they were positively surprised with and those that encouraged them. Also businessmen had similar experiences; a Kosovo Serb businessman felt very much encouraged by the accommodating treatments he received in his interaction with Kosovo institutions⁹⁶.

Interview partners that are engaged in direct inter-ethnic cooperation remembered the first steps as difficult as they did not know how they and the projects would be accepted. However, trust is believed to play an important role in these projects. Trust in the organization, in the aims, meaning that the aims should not be of the nature whereby, for instance, Kosovo Serbs would think that a certain project might have a 'hidden agenda' for installing Kosovo institutions in the north. This applies to the donors as well.

A Kosovo Albanian representative of an NGO that runs a centre in a mixed neighborhood together with a Kosovo Serb organization explained that in the beginning, *“there were some difficulties, but we remained and achieved this respect from all communities. Because all realized that we work only for the benefit of all communities”⁹⁷.*

Own experience and personal contact are important elements to overcome prejudices and establish trust. The significance of the seemingly difficult undertaking to bring people together should not be underestimated. Positive examples of inter-ethnic communication can play an important role in 'correcting' the image of the other side which is often portrayed with negative connotations. However, establishing trust between communities on a broader level cannot rely on personal contacts only but needs the involvement of all levels of society, including media and politics.

Uncomfortable Feelings in the Other's Area

Only few people seem to feel as comfortable in the 'other's area' as they feel in their own area. This is more a general feeling, unrelated to the latest tensions. Most interviewed persons stated that they feel somehow uncomfortable when being 'on the other side', they always have a dose of fear and “never feel free”⁹⁸. There are those who, despite making positive experiences when 'on the other side', they still have those feelings, like a Kosovo Serb acknowledges:

⁹⁵ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁹⁶ Interview with Kosovo Serb businessman, the northern part of Kosovo, 01 November 2011

** Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

⁹⁷ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

⁹⁸ Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 28 October 2011

“This is some unconscious fear. I was in Prishtina, I entered a shop, said in English 'good afternoon', and the girl answered me: 'dobar dan, izvolite' [Serbian for 'good afternoon']. Without any problems. Because she saw that I am not a foreigner. Then you sit in a café, talk to people, when you turn around, then you see that someone is looking at you. Looks at you – and you feel uncomfortable. Maybe he looks because he likes my colleagues, but you always think something bad.”⁹⁹

Many, when going to 'the other's area' do not move alone but are usually accompanied by someone living in the 'other side' whom they know¹⁰⁰. Often those who expect people from the 'other side' feel 'responsible' for their 'guests' safety. Pre-cautionary measures like changing license plates, Kosovo license plates in the southern, and no or Serbian license plates in the northern part, are a routine.

Mixed Areas

The location where inter-ethnic cooperation takes place is very important. Meeting in the Bošnjačka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve, which represents in some way a 'neutral' or a 'buffer' zone is less of a problem. This neighborhood is in the northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, but accounting for its ethnically mixed population, it is considered somehow neither 'really' north nor south. All languages can be heard in that area, signs in shops are usually in Albanian and Serbian. The position of being neither 'my' nor 'your' area, of being in-between makes it easier for Kosovo Serb and Kosovo Albanian community to access that area – it does not represent the 'other side', but to some kind of third place. Two multi-ethnic organizations/initiatives¹⁰¹ operate in that neighborhood. Just in the extension of the Bosniak Mahala, across the bridge in the southern part, one hypermarket has recently opened, another will follow soon. The location is probably not a coincidence, but aims to attract consumers from both sides of the Ibar.

Another mixed neighborhood in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is Kodra e Minatorëve/Mikronaselje, which is clearly in the northern part and a pure residential neighbourhood in contrast to the 'shopping area' of Bošnjačka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve. Kosovo Serbs, Kosovo Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks and others live there without internal separation¹⁰². Children of this neighborhood grow up in a multi-ethnic environment, playing football together. As noted by a Turkish resident:

“Here it is mixed, there is no separation. She is respected, he is respected, that is how you live. Like in the family, when you live with your mother-in-law. She might have a different opinion, but you respect her and she respects you, so you can live together. The same in your neighborhood – you respect and trust each other, then you have a society.”¹⁰³

The women's centre established there by an NGO a few years ago¹⁰⁴, has probably contributed to stability, as it attracted 60 to 100 women on a regular basis who did not all know each other from before. Not all the residents living in this neighborhood have lived there either before the 1998/99 conflict; many Kosovo Serbs from other places in Kosovo have moved to this area. Since the establishment of the women's centre, “inter-

⁹⁹ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

¹⁰¹ Caritas and the Community, Business and Youth Center - this center is jointly run by two NGOs, Mundësia from southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, and Women's Business Association from northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica.

¹⁰² Interview with Kosovo Serb and Turkish residents of this neighbourhood, 11 November 2011

¹⁰³ Turkish resident, interview 11 November 2011

¹⁰⁴ At the time of the writing, the centre was not operating, but it was planned to re-open it.

ethnic problems between communities in that neighborhood decreased a lot”¹⁰⁵ is assessed by the representative of the NGO running that center.

The 'right location' is of high importance for inter-ethnic communication. Mixed areas can provide a supportive environment where members of different communities feel comfortable to move freely and to meet. Those mixed areas are not only important for people living there, but, as shows the Bošnjačka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve can attract people and businesses from outside these neighborhoods which in turn helps to blur the division lines, slowly expanding the 'mixed areas'.

4.4. More than Ethnic Belonging

Inter-ethnic cooperation – a Must?

The idea of cooperating just for the sake of implementing some inter-ethnic projects is largely criticized and rejected. Most agree that pushing people to cooperate will not result in sustainable inter-ethnic relations. An NGO activist complains about his experience with donors who were funding projects where “*it was very important to have in the report a written statement that there have been 25 Albanians and 25 Serbs and that they have done something together; no matter what.*”¹⁰⁶

Also criticized were single events and short-term projects without any follow-up or further activities that would draw on the previously established contacts. Otherwise, an NGO activist contends that this would be:

*“[...] money laundering and throwing of money. Because each of those projects is either focus group, debate, or seminar – after that, we don't have communication. Projects are not sustainable, there are no results. There are only immediate results, like reports, who has said what. But we don't need who has said what; we need direct impact on life.”*¹⁰⁷

An internally KIPRED-compiled overview of activities in the last two years shows, a great number of activities were single events or short-term projects like training, workshop, lectures, mostly implemented by NGOs that did not implement other inter-ethnic activities. Some NGO representatives were very critical towards inter-ethnic activities that they felt were often artificial and had no impact on the society. Those projects would often have no real connection to the community neither would they server their needs, concerns, nor their priorities¹⁰⁸.

The majority of interviewed persons however, were not that critical towards inter-ethnic cooperation as such. They rather questioned the approach, clearly asking for not conducting activities just for the sake of making members of different communities meet if there was no other joint interest involved.

Interest-based Approach

Inter-ethnic cooperation should be based on common needs and interests. If both sides have an interest, then people would also meet, cooperate, establish relations, is the broad conviction and the experience of several NGOs in their work. According to many NGO representatives, the interest-based approach is crucial. This refers to issues these projects

*“Nationalities are not important, but common values and common interests.”**

treat, but also the approach they take in implementing it, for instance, jointly or in two

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

¹⁰⁶ Interview representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 28 October 2011

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 28 October 2011

locations. Only by addressing the needs and interests, and not through 'forcing' inter-ethnic cooperation as a condition to approve a project, can true interest to contact and communicate with members of other communities be awakened. This is regarded as a basis for sustainable relations. Young people that are involved in a programme that runs on both sides of the Ibër/Ibar, “[...] *meet each other even lately. They started to invite each other to the south or the north, even without asking us, which is good*”¹⁰⁹. Concentrating on local needs while being principally open to everyone is the approach of another NGO operating in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica offering art activities to mainly young people. The main goal is not to establish inter-ethnic cooperation, but to attract people who share the same interests, regardless of their ethnic belonging.

The interest-based approach is followed in the previously mentioned cases when Kosovo Serbs go to Albanian villages to apply for Kosovo IDs in order to claim their pension. Similarly, Roma children, living in the Roma Mahala just south of the Ibër/Ibar, attending school in the northern part illustrates how the interest-based approach works. Many of the children were enrolled in school already in the time when they were still living in camps in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. They continued going there, younger sisters and brothers followed. Another reason behind the fact that the majority of Roma children are attending Serbian run schools in the northern part is the financial benefit paid for school children by Serbian institutions¹¹⁰.

Of Special Interest: Economy, Business, Trade, Employment

Many reports, such as that of the UNDP, as well as the impressions shared by people in the northern part of Kosovo, single out the unemployment and the overall economic situation as main concerns¹¹¹. Economic activities are an important part of the interest based approach, not least because it somewhat softens the otherwise strict dividing lines. Kosovo Albanian workers go to construction sites in the northern part of Kosovo to work for Kosovo Serbs, same as Roma do by working as day labourers in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. All the interview entrepreneurs have stated that business functions only when based on some interest. They claimed not to care about the ethnic background of someone, but in business, profit, economic development and cooperation.

Economic development, creating job, employment opportunities would have a major positive impact on inter-ethnic relations was the opinion not only of businessmen, but also of NGO representatives and other interviewed persons. Several NGOs work also in the sector of economic development and income generation. One that implements a project employing over 200 workers of different communities has made the experience that the workers do not only work in mixed groups without any problems, but “*they also, privately, after the job, go together to a coffee bar, they sit, talk in Serbian, in the southern part [of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica], which is amazing.*”¹¹²

*“I am interested only in profit, in business. I am not interested in whether someone goes to church or to mosque, but that he does his job.”***

It is difficult to assess all interactions between members of different communities based purely on personal interest, such as requesting Kosovo documents or as in business and trade, as those contacts are often self-initiated, sporadic and/or of private nature. But the

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

* Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 13 December 2011

¹¹⁰ Interview with Roma representative of NGO, 25 October 2011

¹¹¹ UNDP 2011, p. 15

¹¹² Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

findings support the assumption that an existing mutual interest and benefit can be strong enough to attract people from various communities and encourages them to 'cross ethnic lines'. However, in times with high tensions and intra-community pressure, much more courage is needed to establish or keep inter-ethnic contacts; the interest in staying 'on the safe side' within one's own community is often perceived higher than to cooperate and breach 'the rules of the game'.

Ethnic Belonging is not everything

When dealing with inter-ethnic cooperation, relations and reconciliation, ethnic belonging is the main category. However, several interview partners remarked that they wished nationality would become unimportant, that defining the ethnic belonging of a person as an important category would become obsolete and that not everything would be looked at through the lenses of ethnicity/inter-ethnic relations¹¹³.

Some of the NGOs work according to this approach and do not regard ethnicity as the only important category, do not establish 'quota'. *"In the past, it was always that we had to have proportional staff from south and from north. Still, we don't like to lose the balance, like having a lot of Albanians and no Serbs, but we don't look at it any more like 60:40 percent, or 50:50 – it depends on how good the people are who apply for a job."*¹¹⁴ A similar approach is followed by another NGO that focuses on women's empowerment, *"but without difference which nationality they belong to"*.¹¹⁵

In her case study on reconciliation in the Western Balkans, Franović contends that:

*"Peace activists should not focus primarily on ethnicity, but on structures, cultures and ideologies that are the basis for violent conflict. They should offer people space for taking a rest from the overwhelming and pressing ethnic label, and they should offer them other ways to perceive reality and to act."*¹¹⁶

This is one of the aims of a Mitrovicë/Mitrovica magazine published in three languages, m-magazine: to write about issues other than inter-ethnic conflict and division which is the usual topic with which Mitrovicë/Mitrovica appears in the news. Articles will not be signed any more by a single person but collectively as m-magazine so to avoid the judgment of the content of the article being made based on the ethnic background of the journalist¹¹⁷.

Of course, the ethnic background will further play an important role, but it should not be the only category and a more relaxed approach towards it will help to overcome the dividing ethnic categorizations. Reducing people to their ethnic affiliation only would totally miss the point and overlook the diversity and different opinions within communities and the general society. It would also force people to take sides when focusing exclusively on ethnic definitions. Not focusing on ethnic affiliation only does not necessarily mean to favour a 'we are all equal' approach while covering up structural discrimination and social exclusion.

¹¹³ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 13 December 2011

¹¹⁴ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

¹¹⁵ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 02 November 2011

** Interview with Kosovo Serb businessman, the northern part of Kosovo, 01 November 2011

¹¹⁶ Franović 2008, p. 24

¹¹⁷ Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 26 October 2011

Intra-community work

Some NGOs target only one community. Other organizations that offer inter-ethnic activities have parts of their programme directed towards one community only, or cooperate only in specific areas with other organizations and communities. Intra-community work is not in competition with inter-ethnic cooperation or an obstacle to it. Those NGOs who have decided to focus on one community only see this as the first step and a pre-condition for future inter-ethnic contacts. Especially Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians would live under different conditions, in different situation, with different structure and needs of the communities – or of large groups of the communities –, a Kosovo Serb representative argued. She characterizes the Albanian community – with regards to young people – as “progressing society”, whereas Kosovo Serb society was “regressing”, “*intellectually, in numbers, culturally. How can you then design the same approach? You have to define one common goal, but asymmetric approaches*”¹¹⁸. Intra-community work was seen as a phase for stabilization and preparation, addressing the “*young, violent majority. We need to work with them. My interest is not to talk to young people who are nice – they are very few.*”¹¹⁹

Another NGO representative engaged in intra-community work respectively in activities focusing on specific interests and not on ethnic backgrounds argues that “*people should feel comfortable in their own life and where they live. Then they would be more curious to see something else, it would come as a natural process. If they feel frustrated and unsatisfied, how can you ask him to meet with someone else who is also frustrated and unsatisfied?*”¹²⁰

On the NGO level, most representatives meet across ethnic lines and do cooperate and communicate, but not necessarily the participants of the activities. This should not be regarded as contradicting any reconciliation process, especially if applying the civic trust model where relations between institutions and citizens, and not only personal relationships, are considered crucial. Everyone has the right not to cooperate, not to meet or contact, but to prefer staying within one's own community should be respected. Because of different languages for example, other interests or past experiences.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Limited Improvement

Since 1999, the northern part of Kosovo remains a zone of an unresolved, frozen conflict with outbreak of violence at times. While the territory nominally is under Kosovo's sovereignty, factually it remains under Serbia's control. The area north of Ibër/Ibar river is predominantly inhabited by Kosovo Serbs, constituting the largest and most important compact settlement of Serbs in Kosovo. Serbian funded institutions, including the establishment of parallel municipalities under Serbian law in 2008, thereby violating the UNSCR 1244, are important means for Belgrade government to exert influence in Kosovo. For Kosovo Serbs these institutions are allegedly an assurance that enables their remaining in Kosovo without having to integrate into Kosovo system which is widely rejected by their radical political leaders and Belgrade. Mitrovicë/Mitrovica remains a divided city, with some communication across the lines. The deployment of Kosovo custom officers on 25 July 2011 at the two border crossings in the northern part of Kosovo by Kosovo authorities was received by the Kosovo Serb political leaders and Belgrade as an attempt to extend and reinforce Kosovo's sovereignty in the north, which as a result has ignited Kosovo Serbs protests against such measures. Kosovo Serbs began erecting roadblocks and barricades.

¹¹⁸Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 13 December 2011

¹¹⁹Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 13 December 2011

¹²⁰Interview with Kosovo Albanian representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 13 December 2011

Over the last years, up until erection of the barricades, inter-ethnic relations and communication on the grass-root level have improved. People crossed the bridge in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica more easily, especially from north to south, trade in Bošnjačka Mahala/Lagja e Boshnjakëve increased for example. Even now, people feel more confident and comfortable to meet in several places, like restaurants, coffee bars, and not in only a few places deemed 'neutral' as in the beginning. But the actual political situation runs totally contrary to efforts on the grass-root level to further improve inter-ethnic communication and to bridge the divide.

The barricades made it difficult for people from different communities to continue meeting. Not only because of the physical limitations, but also because of the higher pressure within the communities – at the time of the research, this pressure was the highest within the Kosovo Serb community. Whoever crosses the barricades which were established and supported by those circles that want to keep the northern part under Serbian influence only, breaches the unwritten but powerful 'rule of the game' to not interact, and has to fear sanctions.

The civil society sector, especially those engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation, reconciliation, peace-building and dialogue is generally weak. The few strong organizations and the few very active persons are well known – also with donors and international organizations in Kosovo. This holds the risk that donors, agencies, stakeholders are focusing on the few visible persons and organizations, marginalizing (potential) others and leaving the public discourse to an exclusive circle. Other voices and opinions might remain unheard. Furthermore, it also entails the risk that in case the person or organization for whatever reason drops out of the engagement, a vacuum is created, time and resources have to be invested to fill it¹²¹. In order to reach as many as possible in society and increase the potential impact inter-ethnic cooperation can have on the reconciliation process, it is crucial to also involve as many actors as possible, address as many layers of society as possible, and to create a broad basis.

5.2. Mutual Interest as Motivation

When it comes to interactions between communities based purely on personal interest, such as requesting Kosovo documents or as in business and trade, more people are involved. Although of a more sporadic nature – with exception of stable and long-term business cooperation –, those contacts are self-initiated and support the assumption that an existing mutual interest and benefit can be strong enough to attract people from various communities and encourages them to 'cross ethnic lines'. However, in times with high tensions and intra-community pressure, much more courage is needed to establish or keep inter-ethnic contacts; the interest in staying 'on the safe side' within one's own community is often perceived higher than to cooperate and breach 'the rules of the game'. Since the barricades have been erected, those self-initiated contacts, cooperation between businessmen, but also trade between members of different communities, have significantly decreased.

The feeling of especially young people that 'there is nothing on the other side', that nothing exists north/south of the Ibër/Ibar which would be worth crossing the bridge, is

¹²¹Beginning of November 2011, two Kosovo Serb NGO activists of northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica were arrested in Serbia for alleged weapon smuggling. One has been a prominent figure in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica concerning inter-ethnic relations and was named a “favourite of the international officials in the north“ by local media. See Aliu, Fatmir and Barlovac, Bojana: Serbian Police Arrest Two Kosovo Serb EU Staffers. BalkanInsight, 18 November 2011; <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/momcilo-arlov-arrested-in-serbia>

an indication of how divided the society is and of how much each community has created an own area within which to move comfortably. The importance of the 'right' location for inter-ethnic cooperation, where all concerned communities feel comfortable and safe, should not be underestimated.

5.3. Personal Relations – No Politics

The main focus of grass-root activities in inter-ethnic cooperation is, at least for the time being, on establishing relations, bringing people and communities together. Relations have been established in the job related sphere, among colleagues, and project related sphere, among participants. Trade, business, employment is seen as the key issues to establish relations and foster inter-ethnic cooperation. In both sectors, business and NGOs, some work/project/business related relations have been transformed into personal relations and/or friendships even. Relations established have reached the private level, but have hardly had influence in the public sphere, an impact on society and politics as such.

Representatives of NGOs and business are very careful to keep politics, and any discussion about it, out of their area. 'We don't deal with politics' was repeated as a mantra by all interviewed. They all adhere to a 'no-politics' policy as one mechanism to be able to cooperate despite potential different or opposing (political) opinions. Instead, they focus on common issues, practical problem solving, and achieve a good inter-ethnic cooperation. Both, business and civil society sector, have declared to be unable to influence the political level. Their possibilities are very much limited by the overall political influence. For the time being, establishing and maintaining relations may be the only thing they can achieve.

5.4. From Relations to Civic Trust

Establishing direct relations is a very important step to build trust between people. But it would literally have to involve everybody to restore trust within a society through personal relationships only. Not only would this clearly be impossible, but everybody has also the right to not cooperate, not to meet or contact, but to prefer staying within one's own community. Because of different languages for example, other interests or past experiences. Not wanting to establish direct relations to members of other communities does not mean that one automatically torpedoes any reconciliation process in the sense of the civic trust model.

The civic trust model emphasizes not so much direct relations, but trust between members of different communities, between citizens, between institutions and citizens based on shared values and norms and the knowledge that those are enforced respectively that violations of those shared norms sanctioned by institutions.

To establish civic trust, NGOs would have to work on structures, on rule of law, good governance, human rights, dealing with the past, corruption etc. So far, those topics are not the main focus of civil society in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and the northern part of Kosovo. The tricky part for the time being is: as long as Belgrade and Prishtina compete with each other on who is exerting control over the northern part of Kosovo, which institutions are the "real ones", it is impossible to create trust between citizens the competing institutions. What is needed is a political framework and stability. The solution of the political situation would not only bring stability for the present, but also provide a perspective and a common shared vision of the future, which Lederach names

as a condition for any reconciliation process. *“If we don't know where we are going, it is difficult to get there.”*¹²²

5.5. Unaddressed Issues from the Past

The future is only one direction to look at. One cannot build civic trust if not facing the past, addressing human rights violations, if not acknowledging the suffering of 'the other', and if not taking measures to restore the rule of law as well as taking measures to guarantee non-recurrence as a few examples. Dealing with the past as a central element in the process of reconciliation is still a taboo in Kosovo¹²³, especially to talk about crimes committed by members of the own community and recognizing members of “other” communities as victims¹²⁴. Transitional justice and bringing those responsible for crimes to justice was seen as pre-condition for establishing inter-ethnic relations by some interviewed¹²⁵. So far, this issue is not addressed in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and the northern part of Kosovo, and hardly any organization is working on it in Kosovo. Again, this cannot be the task of grass-root organizations only. It is much more the task of institutions to engage in transitional justice, restore the rule of law and guarantee non-recurrence. The need for a complementary top-down approach was mentioned also by several interview partners as a crucial condition for improving relations between different communities¹²⁶.

Return is also an unresolved issue that needs to be addressed. The vast majority of all IDPs in Kosovo live in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and the northern part of Kosovo. Many non-Serbs who had lived in the northern part before June 1999 are now in southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, whereas Serbs from southern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica or other parts of Kosovo, plus a minor number of refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina live in the northern part.

5.6. Multi-dimensional Approach

Civil society organizations implement a huge variety of activities, and have created different ways of operating: as multi-ethnic or mono-ethnic organization jointly implementing a project with other organizations. Others are multi-ethnic organizations with two offices, targeting different communities separately, but establishing contacts where feasible. Some are focusing explicitly only one community, aiming at strengthening the civil society sector, at broadening the options for (mainly young) people, at fostering tolerance and diversity of opinions. Not every inter-ethnic cooperation project is a value per se and a contribution towards reconciliation. In order to foster tolerance, open-mindedness, human rights, creating space for developing and expressing different opinions etc., it might be useful to only address one community and to thus reach a broader circle of participants respectively other participants as it would be the case with inter-ethnic projects. As inter-ethnic cooperation should be based on voluntariness and shared interests, non-cooperation is a legitimate option, too.

¹²²Lederach 2008, p. 77

* Interview with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 28 October 2011

¹²³See also article on BalkanInsight by Elira Çanga, 16 November 2011

¹²⁴The Institute for Researching War Crimes which was set up by the Kosovo government in June 2011 will examine all crimes committed until NATO forces entered Kosovo in June 1999, but not those committed mainly against non-Albanians in the aftermath of the 1998/99 conflict. See:

http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Vendimet_e_mbledhjes_se_19-te_te_Qeverise_2011.pdf;

¹²⁵ Interview with representative of NGO based in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 19 October 2011

¹²⁶ Interviews with Kosovo Serb representative of NGO in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 28 October 2011

Following different approaches and implementing different activities should not lead into a competition over the 'right' or 'wrong' way towards inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation. On the contrary, different approaches could develop synergy effects, could reach a much more and different participants, provided that there is a common goal. Reconciliation is such a complex, multi-dimensional and multi-level process that various, complementary approaches should be considered an enrichment.

6. Recommendations

To institutions (international, national and local):

- apply an inclusive approach, accommodate specific needs and account for sensitivities of members of all communities – e.g. provide services in languages spoken by communities, offer services in locations easily accessible to communities, be aware of and avoid, where possible, symbols, terms, wording that might provoke resentments and are perceived negatively within different communities
- de-politicize issues and focus on constructive problem solving
- recognize language skills (languages spoken by communities in Kosovo) as decisive asset in the employment and promotion process
- implement the law on use of official languages consequently
- develop a strategy for dealing with return and property issues
- engage in dialogue with citizens, especially with communities, business and civil society
- develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the past and transitional justice based on respect for all victims and based on individual responsibility
- introduce supportive incentives: (financial/material) support for employment of non-majority community members in private companies where feasible; a certain percentage of the positions could be co-financed as compensation for the potential higher (administration) costs which occur e.g. through the use of several languages, provision of transportation etc.
- support investment/business in mixed areas and/or areas close to mixed areas easily accessible to members of all communities; e.g. creation of business park with lower tax rate, provision of infrastructure, focusing especially on businesses that create/accommodate demand and/or create working places for members of different communities
- be transparent, implement rule of law in all sectors to establish civic trust between citizens and institutions

To institutions (international, national and local) and donors:

- support learning of languages spoken by communities in Kosovo as language skills are an essential asset in inter-ethnic communication
- apply a pragmatic approach, be flexible to adjust programmes/projects/approaches quickly if required
- develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for stimulating local production; provide start-up incentives and support for professionalization

To donors:

- facilitate contacts between businesses, support establishing of cooperation, e.g. through fairs, providing information and access to fairs, information
- be transparent with regards to own aims and strategy; build trustful relations to implementing partners

- do not focus on few actors only which are commonly known; identify several (potential) leaders, activists and organizations, engage in capacity building and strengthening of resources to broaden the basis of organizations and persons involved, to foster diversity and thus reach more participants and sectors of society

To donors and NGOs:

- develop a long-term strategy and engage in long-term projects; short-term and single activities should be followed up and be integrated into an overarching strategy in order to provide for sustainability
- strengthen intra-community work to increase capacities and resources within communities, to reach potential participants who would not engage in inter-ethnic cooperation (immediately) – the 'hard-to-reach', and to increase tolerance and diversity within communities
- engage in 'mono-ethnic' areas with intra-community projects too
- broaden basis of people engaging in activities: address a diversity of target groups, including all sectors of society, e.g. women, children, youth, unemployed, intellectuals, pensioners
- support initiatives/activities in mixed areas where co-existence functions even if it seems 'super-fluent' at first sight as people are already meeting at home, in street, in shops, without problems; but offering a (more) public space and institutionalise inter-ethnic relations, facilitate discussions, making the meeting space accessible for members of all communities living in that area, will have a stabilizing effect, improve civic trust and strengthen the abilities to deal with conflicts and in fragile situations
- implement projects and activities based on needs and issues of concern – and not for the sake of implementing inter-ethnic projects only

To NGOs:

- establish a network/platform (formal or informal) of all NGOs and initiatives engaged in inter-ethnic cooperation, intra-community work, peace-building, human rights, media, community issues to develop a common goal and plan strategically for the area; exchange information, coordinate activities to boost synergy, implement joint projects where a single organization might not be able to; this network/platform should lobby towards institutions, donors, the general public; it should also develop a joint advocacy policy towards institutions and the political level to strengthen the influence of the civil society sector
- critically evaluate and assess programs and projects with regards to sustainability and their impact
- identify possible 'common spaces' which are accessible for members of different communities for meetings/activities; try to expand 'common spaces' respectively increase the feeling of safety for members of different communities
- identify potential areas of engagement and/or cooperate with other (local/national/areal) organizations addressing issues such as Dealing with the Past, return assistance, human rights
- if applying two-office or intra-community approach, develop strategy to not manifest ethnic divide in the long term

To business:

- be aware of the positive role business can play to foster inter-ethnic contacts and cooperation; promote this role and apply an inclusive approach; reach out and provide services to members of all communities

- establish (formal/informal) network to strengthen the position of business working 'across ethnic lines', to encourage others by good example, and to influence 'rules of the game'

To media:

- establish networks, informal or formal cooperation with journalists from other communities, exchange of information, support in order to gain valid information from different sides
- break the rule of “only bad news are good news”, highlight positive examples, focus on common issues and common concerns
- be aware of the high responsibility for creating prejudices – and in reverse, for dissolving prejudices by engaging in objective reporting, and apply a sensitive, non-discriminatory approach and language
- provide space and the possibility to express and discuss a variety of opinions, even the most pressing issues of the time, invite members of all communities to participate
- explore the possibilities of joint media activities like (co-)production of joint emission, newspaper, magazine; make own media more attractive for members of other communities by e.g. subtitling talk shows, political emissions

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