Eugen STRĂUȚIU (1)
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania
Cristina-Alexandra DEFFERT (2)
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

DIVIDED CITIES: A CASE STUDY ON RECENT EVENTS IN MITROVICA

Abstract:	*The city of Mitrovica, located in the north of Kosovo province, went through a bloody phase during the war in 1999, when almost the entire Roma population was evacuated from the town and the Serb population, originally living on the south bank of the Ibar River, was resettled on the north bank.*
	Today, Mitrovica remains an ethnically and religiously segregated town, the object of peace-keeping missions by KFOR (Kosovo Force) and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). Violent clashes between nationalities, or between the Serb population and the authorities, have recurred several times.
	The objective recapitulation of events is the first step towards a correct understanding of the phenomenon and then to sketch out scenarios of pacification and civilized coexistence of nationalities. Our research aims to provide an updated listing of the main moments in the recent history of the conflict, based on which we will contribute to a correct understanding and prioritization of the causes, detail and explain the current picture of the problem, and then sketch some scenarios for solutions. We will add a brief comparative look, with explanatory value, on other cases of divided cities, to grasp the common and different elements.
	To this end, we will use tools specific to history, political science, cultural studies and security studies. We will operate with document analysis, causal analysis, comparative analysis and case study, in the hope of getting as close as possible to the correct explanations and feasible solutions.
Keywords:	**Kosovo War; Mitrovica; divided city; ethnic conflict; separatism**
Contact details of the authors:	E-mail: eugen.strautiu@ulbsibiu.ro (1) cristinaalexandra.deffert@ulbsibiu.ro (2)
Institutional affiliation of the authors:	**Department of International Relations, Political Science and Security Studies, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania (1) (2)**
Institutions address:	Calea Dumbrăvii No. 34, 2nd Floor, 550324, Sibiu, Romania, phone 0040269422169 (1) (2)

Introduction

The problem of divided cities has benefited from the attention of international researchers, who have offered less theoretical approaches (with rather superficial approaches in terms of definitions, characterizations, classifications), and more case studies. In Romania, this topic does not seem to have been interesting at all. The main explanation lies in the lack of cases of towns divided along ethnic and/or cultural lines throughout the country. In the Romanian case, absolute segregation was characteristic of Transylvanian cities until the mid-19th century (the interior of the cities being reserved, by drastic legislation, for constitutionally "recognized nations" - from which Romanians were excluded)[1]. In the two extra-Carpathian "voivodates", we have witnessed a numerical, economic

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[1] Lambert M. Surhone, Mariam T. Tennoe, Susan F. Henssonow, *Unio Trium Nationum*, Betascript Publishing, Beau Bassin, 2011

and cultural domination of the urban landscape by ethno-religious minorities, with Romanians representing insignificant minorities[1].

Based on this reality, during the Austro-Hungarian dualism (1867-1918) and especially during the Communism (1945-1989), the cities experienced a constant infusion of Romanian population, in a generally peaceful and constructive multicultural atmosphere, so that the segregation of cities along ethnic lines was not perpetuated.

At the same time, in the immediate vicinity of Romania, divided cities are both a historical and (especially) a contemporary reality. The cases of Mostar (Bosnia-Herzegovina)[2] and Mitrovica (Kosovo) are the best known, with Mostar being researched more often and in greater depth. Due to the nature of the problem, the methodological approach of our thematic approach implies multi-disciplinarity, with history, cultural studies, economics, law, political science, security studies - and not only - contributing to the presentation and explanation of the phenomenon.

In the present research, we aim to provide a brief theoretical framework of the problem of segregated cities, as a context for further elaboration of the case of Mitrovica in Kosovo - where we will emphasize especially the recent state of the phenomenon, which is little studied by scholars. Among the works that place the Mitrovica problem in the paradigm of divided cities, we mention the article by Anna Jarstad and Sandra Segall, *Grasping the Empirical Realities of Peace in Post-war Northern Mitrovica* (2019)[3] and the volume chapter of Pinos Jaume Castan *Mitrovica: A City (Re)Shaped by Divisions* (2016)[4].

Divided cities. Some theoretical approaches

The topic of divided cities began to be systematically explored in the context of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Peter Marcuse's landmark study, *What's So New About Divided Cities?* published in the "International Journal of Urban and Regional Research"[5]. Among the definitions circulated in the research literature, we note that of Rabinowitz and Monterescu, in 2008: divided cities are characterized by "barriers of race, religion, and nationality, encoded in dualistic metaphors of East and West, uptown and downtown, and northside and southside"[6]. In contrast, mixed cities present themselves as "a certain mix in housing zones, ongoing neighborly relations, socioeconomic proximity, and various modes of joint solidarity", in which "individuals and groups on both sides actually share elements of identity, symbolic traits, and cultural markers, signifying the mixed town as a locus of joint memory, affiliation, and self-identification"[7]. Joel Kotek refers to the same phenomenon of segregated cities as the "border city", which he defines as follows: "that are not only polarized on an ethnic or ideological basis (cf. Berlin during the Cold War), but are, above all, disputed because of their location on fault-lines between ethnic, religious or ideological wholes"[8]. Other reference works, such as the OECD's 2018 report *Divided Cities: Understanding Intra-Urban Inequalities*, lists several causes and criteria for city segregation, including income (the gap between rich and poor), the presence of migrants (the extent to which they form separate communities), the accessibility of transportation (both public and personal)[9]. In a more elaborate form, the factors of urban segregation can be classified into two broad categories: cultural and socio-economic. In the first category is religion, then identity/ethnicity/nationality, and finally culture/language. In the second category, we talk about

[1] Laurențiu Rădvan, *Orașele din țările române în evul mediu (sfârșitul sec. al XIII-lea – începutul sec. al XVI-lea)*, Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași, 2011, pp. 215-222
[2] Giulia Carabelli, *The Divided City and the Grassroots. The (Un)making of Ethnic Divisions in Mostar*, Palgrave MacMilan, Singapore, 2018
[3] Anna Jarstad, Sandra Segall, *Grasping the Empirical Realities of Peace in Post-war Northern Mitrovica*, "Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal", Vol. 4, No. 2-3, 2019, pp. 239-259
[4] Jaume Castan Pinos, *Mitrovica: A City (Re)Shaped by Divisions*, in É. Ó Ciardha, G. Vojvoda (Eds.), *Politics of Identity in Post-conflict States*, Routledge, London, 2016, pp. 128–142
[5] Peter Marcuse, *What's So New About Divided Cities?*, "International Journal of Urban and Regional Research", Vol. 17, Issue 3, 1993, pp. 355-365
[6] D. Rabinowitz, D. Monterescu, *Reconfiguring the "Mixed Town": Urban Transformations of Ethnonational Relations in Palestine and Israel*, "International Journal of Middle East Studies", Vol. 40, 2008, p. 217
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 198
[8] Joel Kotek, *Divided Cities in the European Cultural Context*, "Progress in Planning", No. 52, 1999, p. 228
[9] OECD, *Divided Cities: Understanding Intra-urban Inequalities*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018

competition for economic resources and demographic change[1]. Several more recent case studies, in a non-exhaustive presentation, propose comparative analysis (Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia)[2] or focused analysis, with reference to Beirut as neighborhood planning [3], Sao Paolo as a city of organized crime[4], Berlin as a geopolitically divided city[5], Jerusalem as a divided Holy City[6] etc.

Overview of Mitrovica: historical context, urban space and division

Mitrovica, a city in northern Kosovo, situated at a strategic crossroads in the Balkans, has a tremendously complex historical background, shaped by various political entities. The earliest references to Mitrovica date back to the Ottoman period, when it emerged as a modest Turkish-Eastern settlement; however, its urban development was significantly influenced by its geographic context and the dynamics of neighboring settlements, particularly Trepča and Zvečan[7]. As Zvečan's military significance waned and Trepča's mining operations declined, Mitrovica began to flourish, ultimately achieving recognition as a "varoš"[8] (city) by the late 19th century, following the construction of the railway in 1873[9]. Thus, the interplay of favorable geographical conditions, agricultural resources, and its position as a communication junction facilitated its transition from a relatively insignificant settlement to a prominent urban center in the region.

Furthermore, Mitrovica has historically exemplified a multicultural environment. Kosovo has always been a pluralistic society in which diverse ethnic groups have coexisted, communicating in several languages and practicing the main Balkan religions (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism), with urban centers serving as pivotal places for this cultural plurality[10]. This phenomenon was and remains very evident in Mitrovica, where significant demographic changes took place with the construction of the railway as it not only facilitated the influx of diverse populations, including merchants, craftsmen and workers from different backgrounds, but also catalyzed the growth of the city as a commercial and administrative center[11]. In addition, the complex social fabric of Mitrovica can be understood within the context of the Ottoman "millet" system[12], which structured the identities and rights of various religious and ethnic communities. The distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims underpinned the Ottoman social hierarchy, yet religious affiliation was not the sole marker of identity; administrative classifications and local contexts shaped community interactions[13]. Consequently, Mitrovica emerged as a cultural microcosm, where the interplay of diverse groups contributed to its urban development and economic vitality.

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[1] Gizem Caner, Fulin Bölen, *"Multicultural" Cities or "Divided" Cities: What Makes the Difference?*, Conference Paper, 2012 p. 3, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272833411_%27Multicultural%27_cities_or_%27divided%27_cities_what_ma kes_the_difference?enrichId=rgreq-ecbc96bd33f3fef7d17beefed907b8b7-XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzI3MjgzMzQxMTtBUzo2NTUxMjY3NzE1NTYzNTNAMTUzMzIwNTgwMj Y5MA%3D%3D&el=1_x_2&_esc=publicationCoverPdf (10.10.2024)

[2] Jon Calame, Esther Charlesworth, Lebbeus Woods, *Divided Cities: Belfast, Beirut, Jerusalem, Mostar, and Nicosia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009

[3] David Aouad, *Neighborhood Planning for a Divided City: The Case of Beirut*, "Urban Planning", Volume 7, Issue 1, 2022, pp. 129–141

[4] Teresa P. R. Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000

[5] Hartmut Häußermann, Andreas Kapphan, *Berlin: From Divided to Fragmented City?. Socio-Spatial Changes Since 1990*, in Hartmut Häußermann, Andreas Kapphan (Eds.) *Berlin: von der geteilten zur gespaltenen Stadt? Sozialräumlicher Wandel seit 1990*, Leske + Budrich, Opladen, 2013, pp. 77-94

[6] Bernard Wasserstein, *Divided Jerusalem: The Struggle for the Holy City*, Yale University Press, Yale, 2008

[7] Jaume Castan Pinos, *Mitrovica: A City (Re)Shaped by Division*, "Politics of Identity", Vol. 29, No. 9, 2015, pp. 128-142.

[8] Vjeran Kursar, *Being an Ottoman Vlach: On Vlach Identity (Ies), Role and Status in Western Parts of the Ottoman Balkans*, "OTAM", No. 34, 2013, pp. 130-132

[9] Bedri Muhadri, *The Invasion of Kosovo from the Ottomans in the XIV Century*, "European Journal of Social Sciences Studies", Vol. 2, No. 6, 2017, p. 17

[10] Marzena Maciulewicz, *Divided Cities. A Case Study of Mitrovica*, University of Warsaw, Warsaw, 2019, pp. 159-62

[11] *Idem*

[12] Ebubekir Ceylan, *The Millet System in the Ottoman Empire*, in Judi Upton Word (Ed.), *New Millenium Perspectives in the Humanities*, Fatih University/Brigham Young University, Global Humanities Press, New York, 2002, pp. 245-266

[13] Bedri Muhadri, *Op. cit.*, pp. 18-19

Addressing the divisions in Mitrovica necessitates examining the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The era was characterized by a centrally driven ideology of "brotherhood and unity"[1], coupled with the personality cult surrounding Josif Broz Tito. This ideology served to suppress rising nationalist sentiments among the various ethnic groups. However, this approach ultimately failed as ethnic identities and nationalist movements emerged, fueled by a resurgence of religious feelings within these communities. Following Tito's death, Kosovo faced increasing ethnic tensions, culminating in the revocation of its autonomy in 1989[2]. The response from the Albanian members of the Kosovo Assembly was to declare independence from Serbia in July 1990, which led to a boycott of Serb-dominated institutions by the Albanian community[3]. This escalating conflict between Albanian secessionists and Serbian authorities significantly affected Mitrovica, disrupting its social fabric and ethnic balance. The 1990s saw the rise of democratic elections in Serbia, during which Kosovo Serbs, feeling marginalized, bolstered Slobodan Milošević's nationalist agenda[4]. His hardline rhetoric intensified the conflict, particularly as the Kosovo Liberation Army launched violent campaigns against Serbian police and officials. This turmoil ultimately triggered NATO's intervention in 1999[5]. Following the Kosovo War in 1999 and the 2008 *Declaration of Independence*[6], Mitrovica suffered economic collapse, turning from the economic center of Kosovo before 1999 to the poorest region in Kosovo after 1999.

Nowadays, Mitrovica (located in northern Kosovo about 40 km from Pristina) is split into two distinct parts: the southern region, primarily inhabited by Albanians, operates under the authority of Pristina, where Albanian is the predominant language[7]. This area features Albanian national symbols, mosques, and the euro as its currency. In contrast, the northern region is predominantly populated by Serbs, where Serbian is the most widely spoken language. Here, Serbian national symbols, Orthodox churches, and the Serbian dinar are prevalent. The city's urban landscape is divided into various neighborhoods, each representing distinct cultural and social dynamics, such as the Bosnian and Romani districts. Identifying a city center is complex, as residents' reference multiple locations based on functional significance, including areas near the former Hotel Jadran and the main mosque. The main bridge in Mitrovica serves as a central piece of infrastructure and a critical element of the city's symbolic landscape, representing fragmentation on functional, social, and symbolic levels[8]. Originally constructed in 1884 using stones from the Zvečan fortress, the bridge underwent numerous renovations, the most important ones being the post-war renovations funded by the French government, which took place between 2000-2001. Throughout the time, the bridge's surroundings evolved significantly. Shortly after the *Declaration of Independence*, barricades, hostile graffiti, and the presence of KFOR[9] and Kosovo police characterized the area. In the past few years, the southern side saw significant renovations, revitalizing the riverbanks and encouraging local activity, while the northern side remained under construction but became more accessible. In addition to the main bridge, other prominent landmarks in Mitrovica's symbolic landscape include the monument on the hill, the Orthodox Church, Lazar's monument, the new mosque, and various national symbols.

The pragmatic aspect of division is very complex. The most visible landmark of this division is the physical barrier created by the main bridge, often referred to as French Bridge. This bridge not only physically separates the northern and southern parts of the city but also symbolizes the broader ethnic and cultural schism that characterizes life in Mitrovica. While it stands close to traffic, smaller bridges nearby facilitate limited

[1] Noam Chomsky, *Yugoslavia: Peace, War, and Dissolution*, PM Press, London, 2018, pp. 68-71
[2] Joseph *Marko, The Revocation of the Kosovo Autonomy 1989 – 1991 and Its Consequences for the Idea of European Integration*, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Pristina, 1999, pp. 17-19
[3] Tim Judah, *Kosovo: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, London, 2008, p. 43
[4] Noam Chomsky, *Op. cit.*, pp. 68-71
[5] Klaus Naumann, *NATO, Kosovo, and Military Intervention* "Global Governance", Vol. 8, No. 1, 2002, pp. 13-17
[6] *Kosovo's Declaration of Independence,* https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2008/en/56552, (29.10.2024)
[7] Marzena Maciulewicz, *Op.cit.*, pp. 86-89
[8] Kai Voeckler, *Divided Cities and Building Dialogue. Community Centers in Mostar, Mitrovica and Nicosia* in *Urban Transformation in Southeastern Europe*, 2012, pp. 79-83
[9] Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 57-59

interaction, revealing a community that remains divided yet occasionally engages[1]. Institutionally, Mitrovica is fragmented, with separate municipalities, mayors, and local assemblies governing each side[2]. This dual governance impacts everyday life, from the provision of utilities to the operation of sports teams and schools, which follow different curricula based on ethnicity. Such segregation reflects the broader political climate in Kosovo, where historical grievances and nationalistic sentiments have intensified since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, leading to ongoing tensions between Albanian and Serbian communities[3].

Socially and religiously, the city is marked by distinct identities, with each community maintaining its cultural practices and places of worship. The presence of Serbian Orthodox cemeteries in the south and Muslim Albanian cemeteries in the north further exemplifies this division. Intangible elements, particularly memory and geopolitical allegiance, play a crucial role in perpetuating divisions. Collective memories of past conflicts, displacement, and violence foster a mutual geography of fear among residents. Furthermore, political allegiances shape perspectives on international actors, with NATO viewed favorably by Albanians while Serbs express strong support for Russia and its actions in Crimea and Donbass[4]. Together, these tangible and intangible factors create a pragmatic reality in Mitrovica, where divisions persist despite occasional interactions.

Recent dynamics and escalations in Mitrovica

From the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, Kosovo has encountered periods of intense tension and instability, especially in its inter-ethnic relations and political landscape. A significant escalation occurred in March 2004, when inter-ethnic violence erupted across multiple cities, including Mitrovica, where tensions ran particularly high due to its deep ethnic divisions[5]. Riots primarily targeted Kosovo Serbs, leading to the destruction of homes, churches, and properties, and displacing thousands of people. In Mitrovica, as in other areas, KFOR intervened to protect vulnerable communities, yet the violence underscored the profound ethnic fractures within Kosovo, especially in this divided city[6]. The 2008 *Declaration of Independence* by Kosovo heightened diplomatic conflicts, as Serbia, with support from certain international actors, strongly opposed recognition of Kosovo as an independent state[7]. This event sparked lasting diplomatic and political friction, as Serbia resisted Kosovo's statehood despite recognition from the U.S. and much of the EU. Domestically, Kosovo's governance has faced repeated internal challenges, including political instability and border disputes with Serbia and Montenegro[8]. In Mitrovica, sporadic violence has persisted as an ongoing reminder of unresolved ethnic divides. While EU-mediated talks aim to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, disputes over autonomy for Serb-majority areas, property rights, and the status of the Serbian community remain unresolved, contributing to the complexities of Kosovo's post-war challenges[9].

More recently, in October 2021, Kosovo introduced a "sticker system" following a 13-day blockade of the Jarinje and Brnjak border crossings by Serbian protesters[10]. This blockade stemmed from a longstanding dispute over license plate regulations between Belgrade and Pristina. At the core of the issue was the recognition of each country's license plates; Serbia viewed recognizing Kosovo's plates as a step toward

[1] Jaume Castan Pinos, *Op.cit.*, pp. 128-142

[2] Marzena Maciulewicz, *Op.cit.*, p. 156

[3] Annika Björkdahl, Ivan Gusic, *Mostar and Mitrovica: Contested Grounds for Peacebuilding,* "Lund University", No. 1, 2013, pp. 22-23

[4] Balkan Insight, *Two Years On. Balkan States Remain Divided Over Ukraine War*, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/23/two-years-on-balkan-states-remain-divided-over-ukraine-war/, (30.10.2024)

[5] The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *The March Pogrom (2004)*, https://www.srbija.gov.rs/kosovo-metohija/en/8923 (21.10.2024)

[6] Cristina Deffert, Iuliana Neagoş, *The Necessity and Efficiency of Nato-Led International Peacekeeping Operations in Kosovo After 1999*, "Studia Securitatis", No. 2, 2023, pp. 256-269

[7] Colin Warbrick, *Kosovo: The Declaration of Independence,* "The International and Comparative Law Quarterly", Vol. 57, No. 3, 2008, pp. 675-677

[8] Milena Sterio, *The Case of Kosovo: Self-Determination, Secession, and Statehood Under International Law*, "American Society of International Law", Vol. 104, 2010, pp. 361-365

[9] Bashkim Rrahmani, Majlinda Bregu, *Endless EU Facilitated-Mediated Dialogue Between Kosovo and Serbia*, "Insight Turkey", Vol. 25, No. 1, 2023, pp. 223-246

[10] Mihai Melintei, Cristina Deffert, *The Problem of Free Movement of Means of Transport in the Transnistrian and Kosovo Case*, "Anuarul Laboratorului pentru Analiza Conflictului Transnistrean", Vol. 6, No. 1, 2022, p. 67

acknowledging its independence, while Kosovo asserted its right to reciprocal treatment. To resolve the dispute, Kosovo and Serbia agreed that representatives would meet in Brussels to seek a long-term solution over six months. However, no agreement emerged from these negotiations. International mediators, including the EU, continued efforts to bridge differences, and finally, after extended discussions, an agreement was reached[1]. The compromise required Kosovo Serbs to replace Serbian-issued license plates, which referenced towns within Kosovo, with plates issued by the Republic of Kosovo. This agreement marked an essential step in reducing tensions and resolving the ongoing conflict in northern Kosovo, where many ethnic Serbs reside.

Furthermore, in May 2023, Serbs in northern Kosovo largely boycotted local elections, resulting in victories for ethnic Albanian candidates[2]. This led to confrontations on May 29, when twenty-five NATO peacekeepers were injured during clashes with ethnic Serbs opposing the installation of these mayors[3]. Following these events, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić placed the Serbian Armed Forces on heightened alert. On June 14, Serbian authorities arrested three Kosovo Police officers, claiming they crossed the border illegally, a charge Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti disputed, insisting the officers were detained within Kosovo's territory. Furthermore, in June 2023, the Kosovar government designated the Serbian organizations "Civilna Zastita" and "North Brigade" as terrorist groups, citing their involvement in attacks on security forces and public property[4]. While intended to reinforce state control in the north, this move has heightened concerns among Serb communities, with officials like Nenad Rašić warning that such measures could amplify fear and insecurity among local Serbs[5]. The situation escalated with the Banjska attack on September 24, 2023, when Serbian forces clashed with Kosovo police over an unlicensed vehicle, resulting in the death of Kosovo Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku, who was posthumously honored[6]. After the attack, Kosovo police arrested eight individuals, including Serbian Vice President Milan Radoidičić, who accepted responsibility. In response to rising tensions and increased Serbian military presence at the border, NATO reinforced its Kosovo Force with over 130 Romanian troops on October 13 and an additional 200 British soldiers earlier that month[7].

On February 1, 2024, Kosovo imposed a ban on the use of the Serbian dinar, mandating the euro as the sole currency for local transactions[8]. This move has intensified tensions between Belgrade and Pristina, particularly affecting residents in 10 municipalities with significant Serbian populations, including Mitrovica. While Kosovo officials argue that this decision aligns with the constitution's mandate for a single legal currency, many Serbs in Kosovo view it as discriminatory and a violation of their rights. They emphasize that the dinar is commonly used for salaries, pensions, and transactions within Serbian-led institutions like schools and hospitals. In Mitrovica, Serbian protestors condemned the ban, deeming it an infringement on minority rights[9]. This situation followed a contentious UN Security Council meeting, where Kosovo was accused of

[1] Anadolu Ajansı, *Serbs in Kosovo End Longstanding Dispute over Vehicle License Plates,* https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbs-in-kosovo-end-longstanding-dispute-over-vehicle-license-plates/3055090 (25.10.2024)

[2] Reuters, *NATO Soldiers Injured in Kosovo Clashes with Serb Protesters*, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-soldiers-deploy-around-kosovo-town-halls-standoff-with-serb-protesters-2023-05-29/ (25.10.2024)

[3] BBC, *Kosovo: Why Is Violence Flaring Between Ethnic Serbs and Albanians?*, https://www.bbc.com/news/62382069 (25.10.2024)

[4] Reuters, *Kosovo Designates Two Serb Groups as Terrorist Organizations,* https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-designates-two-serb-groups-terrorist-organisations-2023-06-29/ (27.10.2024)

[5] Vijesti, *What Are "Civil Protection" and "Brigade Sever" That Kosovo Wants to Declare as Terrorist Organizations?,* https://en.vijesti.me/world-a/balkan/662842/what-are-the-civil-protection-and-brigade-north-that-kosovo-wants-to-declare-as-terrorist-organizations (27.10.2024)

[6] Al Jazeera, *Kosovo Monastery Siege Ends Following Deadly Attack on Police*, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/24/one-police-officer-killed-in-kosovo-attack-blamed-on-serbia (28.10.2024)

[7] Radio Free Europe, *Romania Sends Reinforcements To KFOR In Kosovo, Says NATO*, https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-kfor-romanian-reinforcements-nato/32637314.html (28.10.2024)

[8] Voice of America, *Kosovo's Ban on Serbian Dinar Leads to Protests,* https://www.voanews.com/a/kosovo-s-ban-on-serbian-dinar-leads-to-protests-/7484291.html (26.10.2024)

[9] The Guardian, *Kosovo Accused of Raising Ethnic Tensions by Banning Use of Serbian Dinar,* https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/06/kosovo-accused-of-raising-ethnic-tensions-by-banning-use-of-serbian-dinar (26.10.2024)

blocking a dinar shipment for Serbian pensions and salaries[1]. Prime Minister Albin Kurti defended the ban as a measure against illegal currency flows rather than financial assistance from Serbia.

In addition, in August 2024, Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani has expressed concerns that reopening the Mitrovica bridge to traffic without coordination with NATO could lead to clashes between Kosovo police and U.S. troops[2]. The bridge, closed since the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, has been the site of severe ethnic violence between Albanians and the predominantly Serbian population in northern Kosovo. Its reopening would be a significant gesture, even as three other bridges already span the river. Osmani emphasized that a conflict between local authorities and U.S. forces is not in Kosovo's interest, highlighting the importance of maintaining peace in the region[3]. Nevertheless, the bridge, once used as a military checkpoint and de facto border, has been open to pedestrians since the post-war renovations were completed and can be crossed freely, without controls, under normal conditions of social and political stability. In case of escalations, access to the bridge was temporarily interrupted[4]. Since 2012, Italian Carabinieri from KFOR and the Kosovo Police have maintained a continuous presence on both ends of the bridge to ensure peace and deter illegal activities.

Furthermore, on September 2, 2024, protests erupted in North Mitrovica after Kosovo authorities shut down five Serbia-run "parallel institutions" in the Serb-majority north[5]. The closure followed raids by Kosovo Police on Serbia-backed facilities, suspected of issuing falsified documents. Around 70-80 Kosovo Serbs gathered to protest the closure of the parallel municipality office. Kosovo's actions were criticized by Western diplomats, including US Ambassador Jeffrey Hovenier, who warned that such uncoordinated moves could escalate tensions, threaten safety, and damage Kosovo's reputation as a reliable international partner, particularly regarding relations with its Serb community[6]. Henceforth, on September 7, 2024, Kosovo's government announced the closure of two of its four border crossings with Serbia, specifically the Brnjak and Merdare crossings[7]. This decision followed protests on the Serbian side, where demonstrators obstructed roads and refused passage to individuals presenting Kosovo-issued documents. Kosovar Interior Minister Xhelal Svecla attributed the closures to the actions of "masked extremist groups in Serbia" that were selectively impeding transit for travelers[8]. He emphasized that these activities occurred under the watch of Serbian authorities.

Thus, the situation in Mitrovica is constantly determined by this division, and every time there is an escalation of ethnic tensions, the theater of actions will always be the northern part of Kosovo and mainly Mitrovica, because it is the most volatile area, where the lack of urban cohesion makes it prone to violence and degradation of human security.

Concluding remarks

All in all, Mitrovica stands as a vivid symbol of the ongoing complexities that shape Kosovo's socio-political landscape. The divisions within Mitrovica today are not just about geography but are rooted in a long history of ethnic tensions, national identities, and conflicting political allegiances. The physical division,

[1] ONU, *Security Council Debates Kosovo's New Rules on Serbian Currency*, https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/02/1146382 (16.02.2024)

[2] Reuters, *Opening Kosovo's Mitrovica Bridge Risks Conflict with US Troops, Says President*, https://www.reuters.com/world/opening-kosovos-mitrovica-bridge-risks-conflict-with-us-troops-says-president-2024-08-15/ (30.10.2024)

[3] Radio Free Europe, *Reopening of Mitrovica Bridge Long Overdue but Must Be Done in Consultation with Allies, Says Kosovo's President,* https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-osmani-mitrovica-bridge-kurti-vucic/33084758.html (30.10.2024)

[4] Marzena Maciulewicz, *Op. cit.*, p. 97

[5] Balkan Insight, *Kosovo Serbs Protest Closure of Serbia-Run 'Parallel Institutions'*, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/09/02/kosovo-serbs-protest-closure-of-serbia-run-parallel-institutions/, (02.11.2024)

[6] *Idem*

[7] Al Jazeera, *Kosovo Closes Two of Four Border Crossings with Serbia After Protests*, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/7/kosovo-closes-two-of-four-border-crossings-with-serbia-after-protests (02.11.2024)

[8] Reuters, *Kosovo Closes Two Border Crossings with Serbia After Protest*, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-closes-two-border-crossings-with-serbia-after-protest-2024-09-07/ (02.11.2024)

symbolized by the main bridge that separates the northern and southern parts of the city, mirrors the fragmented nature of its society, where both Albanians and Serbs continue to live in parallel realities. The challenges that Mitrovica faces are not unique to the city itself but are part of a larger struggle within Kosovo to reconcile its past and build a shared future. While efforts to establish a cohesive, inclusive state have been made, the region remains deeply divided by memories of conflict and fears of the future. Political decisions continue to steady these divisions, creating moments of tension that threaten to escalate into violence.

In the paradigm of human security, the separation of the two communities significantly affects freedom of movement, freedom of political and religious expression, freedom of assembly. In the absence of natural economic and social relations, instead of a homogeneous community, we are witnessing major disruptions in communication and development and the perpetuation of the singularization phenomenon. Any program to resolve the protracted crisis in the case of Mitrovica should be written through chapters and sub-chapters addressed to the above themes, for which we identify causes and solutions.

What seems clear is that the future of Mitrovica depends on more than just political agreements or border negotiations. It requires the rebuilding of trust between communities, a careful balance between state sovereignty and local autonomy, and the sustained involvement of international mediators to ensure that peace remains fragile, but intact. The road ahead is uncertain, but the ongoing efforts to find common ground, both within Mitrovica and across Kosovo, are essential in creating a future where division no longer defines the city, or the nation.

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