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INCIDENTS AND TENSIONS IN MITROVICA: THE NEED FOR UNBIASED REPORTING AND THE STRENGTHENING OF THE RULE OF LAW

In light of the recent outburst of violence in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, ECMI Kosovo affirms its position that it is of imperative importance that all incidents are examined individually by the relevant authorities, in a speedy and transparent manner, to prevent further incidents and increase the faith of all citizens in the rule of law. As so often happens, the incidents have quickly been interpreted to be ethnically motivated, although there are no sound grounds to reach such conclusions. Therefore, we urge all media outlets and politicians to take their responsibility, and refrain from jumping to unfounded conclusions about the ethnic motives behind these incidents, in order to avoid the increase of ethnic tensions.

On 9 April, a 17 year-old Serbian man was attacked by a group of unknown persons and stabbed in the chest in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North, near the main bridge over the Ibër/Ibar River. Eyewitnesses reported that the group fled to the south side of the city, however the police are currently still identifying the perpetrators.¹ Three police officers stationed on the bridge have been suspended, as there were multiple eyewitness reports stating they did not intervene in the situation. Representatives from both the Kosovo and Serbian Governments, as well as the EU Office in Kosovo, have all condemned the attack.²

Drawing the conclusion from eyewitness reports that the attackers fled to the Albanian south part of the city, Serbian media have been quick to state that the incident was ethnically motivated. Marko Đurić, the Head of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija at the Serbian Government, adopting this interpretation, announced that the crime was purported on ethnic grounds in a place that should be a symbol of peace, unity and reconciliation. Similarly, Aleksandar Jablanović from Srpska lista, classified the attack as being “on ethnic grounds”.³

After the incident, the situation was very tense in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North. In the course of the day after the stabbing incident, five Albanians and two Bosniaks were slightly injured in a series of three separate fights.⁴

The same day, a 17-year-old Albanian man disappeared near the Ibër/Ibar River, reportedly after an attempt at robbery. Despite large-scale searches by the Kosovo Police, EULEX, Kosovo Security

¹ http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=04&dd=09&nav_category=640&nav_id=979102;
http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/nikola_saveljic_stabilno_uskoro_izlazi_iz_bolnice/4536;
<http://www.zeri.info/kronika/27826/tensionohet-serish-situata-ne-mitrovice/>

² [http://www.kosovaonline.info/?page=1,3,61521;](http://www.kosovaonline.info/?page=1,3,61521) [http://www.zeri.info/kronika/27826/tensionohet-serish-situata-ne-mitrovice/;](http://www.zeri.info/kronika/27826/tensionohet-serish-situata-ne-mitrovice/) <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Hronika/549710/Izboden-mladic-srpske-nacionalnosti-u-Kosovskoj-Mitrovici>

³ http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=04&dd=09&nav_category=640&nav_id=979102

⁴ http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/napad_na_maloletnog_albanca_u_centru_severne_mitrovice/4523

Forces, and KFOR, no traces of the boy have been found so far. Kosovo Police have detained, and subsequently released, two Serbs from Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North who were witnesses to the case.⁵

In the early hours of the night of the 12–13 April, two men were wounded in front of a club in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North in a fight between youth gangs from Mitrovica/Mitrovicë and Zvečan/Zveqan.⁶ Almost at the same time, it is reported a Kosovo police car was shot at in Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North.⁷ On the evening of 13 April, it is reported that an explosive device was thrown at the Kosovo Police station in the municipality of Zubin Potok, and graffiti against the Kosovo Police and EULEX was written on the building.⁸

These incidents first and foremost indicate the weakness of rule of law in the North of Kosovo and the continued insecurity ordinary citizens face. In that regard, ECMI Kosovo urges that all individual crime cases are transparently and swiftly investigated by the relevant authorities and that security forces increase their presence at potentially critical places. We, therefore, welcome the meeting between Minister Ljubomir Marić, Mayor Rakić, and President of the Serbian parallel municipality of Kosovska Mitrovica, Aleksandar Spirić, with representatives of the Kosovo Police, EULEX, KFOR, where urgent measures and increased police presence at potentially critical places were demanded.⁹ The increased vigilance of the Kosovo Police immediately proved effective when, on Sunday 19 April, the police arrested six Albanian and Serbian members of youth gangs who were organising a fight, near the main bridge, through social media.¹⁰

In addition, this series of incidents indicates how easily cases of violence can generate ethnic tensions in the North of Kosovo, although ethnic motives rarely form the primary motive behind the violence. In order to prevent such tensions from escalating, the media and politicians have the joint responsibility to report in an objective manner, and to not use any incidents for their political agendas. As a result of the rash ethnic framing of the stabbing incident of 9 April, many of the other events have been linked to ethnic divisions, explicitly or implicitly, although such insinuations are unfounded, or even downright contradictory, to the facts. Some of the media and politicians have not responded responsibly, taking into consideration the potential outburst of ethnic tensions in these cases.

We hope that the meeting between Mayor Rakić and the Mayor of Mitrovica/Mitrovicë South, Agim Bahtiri, will serve as an example in this regard. On the evening of 11 April, after the news of the disappearance of the Albanian boy had reached the news, both Mayors met and issued a joint statement, in which they warned about an escalation of tensions along ethnic lines, calling for citizens to not fall for potential provocations and emotional charges from both sides, which could endanger the fragile peace that had been reached after years of animosity. They called for a stronger presence of the security services, and urgent measures in order to restore public order and mitigate tensions. They also called on “political representatives from Prishtinë/Priština to protect all citizens of Mitrovica/Mitrovicë from possible unwanted consequences through their authority and transparent work”.¹¹

⁵ <http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/ndalohen-dy-serbe-ne-lidhje-me-zhdukjen-e-sead-alushit-2-61747.html>;
<http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/ukinut-pritvor-dvojici-srba/4553>.

⁶ <http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/u-pucnjavi-u-kosovskoj-mitrovici-dvoje-povredjeo/4541>.

⁷ <http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/tri-hica-na-vozilo-kosovske-policije/4542>.

⁸ <http://live.kallxo.com/sg/MTL/Porosite-e-Sulmit-me-Granate-ne-Stacionin-Policor-te-Zubin-Potokut-6024>.

⁹ <http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/maric-rakic-i-spiric-na-sastanku-sa-rukovodstvom-kp-a-na-severu/4592>.

¹⁰ <http://koha.net/?id=3&l=53792>.

¹¹

<http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/hitan-sastanak-dvojice-gradonacelnika-na-mestu-pretrage-za-nesta-lim-albanskim-mladicem-smiriti-tenzije-i-zastititi-stanovnistvo/4533>.

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About ECMI Kosovo

ECMI Kosovo is the principal non-governmental organisation engaged with minority issues in Kosovo, with the overarching aim to develop inclusive, representative, community-sensitive institutions that support a stable multi-ethnic Kosovo. ECMI Kosovo contributes to the developing, strengthening and implementation of relevant legislation, supports the institutionalisation of communities-related governmental bodies, and enhances the capacity of civil society actors and the government to engage with one another in a constructive and sustainable way.