



EUNPACK

A CONFLICT SENSITIVE UNPACKING OF
THE EU COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH
TO CONFLICT AND CRISES MECHANISM

POLICY BRIEF

Public Perceptions of the EU's Role in Crisis Management in North Mitrovica

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Summary and Recommendations

EUNPACK combines theoretical and methodological approaches from the study of institutions in political science and from the study of field level practices in anthropology and in peace and conflict studies. In the empirically oriented analyses of the EU's field-level contribution to the management of the Kosovo-Serbia crises, EUNPACK WP 5 has focused on a selection of sites in Northern Kosovo, including the bridges in Mitrovica. The choice of the latter relates to the fact that Mitrovica has a mixed Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb population that is fairly clearly divided by the river Ibar and the bridges across the river have been a source of tension, albeit to differing degrees.

The social tension in this area is also reflected in terminology as the terms we use to denominate the two populations whose attitudes and perceptions this policy paper tries to reflect, namely the 'Kosovo-Albanian' and the 'Kosovo-Serb' are controversial and not necessarily accepted by the respective populations. The reason why we still choose to use these terms is that this is the terminology used by the international community at large, the European Union included. Moreover, until the underlying issues that creates social tension in Northern Kosovo are solved, this is also the least controversial terminology.

This policy paper presents data on the public perceptions among the population in Northern Mitrovica of the EU's role in local crisis management. The first part of this brief provides a short historical overview of the development of the particular crisis in Mitrovica, focusing on the northern part of town and the EU's engagement in managing this crisis. The second part presents methodology and data; key findings are presented in the third section.

We make the following policy recommendations regarding the EU's engagement in North Mitrovica:

- **The EU needs to improve the communication about its work in Mitrovica** and support for the population in the north;
- **The Serbian language, including the Cyrillic alphabet, should be used as widely as possible** to engage the local population in North Mitrovica to offer recognition of the Serbian language and culture as valuable resources to be maintained and developed in Kosovo;
- **EU actors should be more low-key about the reconstruction of the Main bridge.** The population in North Mitrovica continues to view the EU's engagement in crisis management as misguided and imbalanced – favouring one side in the local conflict, i.e. the Kosovo-Albanians. The Main bridge continues to be avoided by the majority of Kosovo-Serbs in North Mitrovica, which means that high-profile publicity about efforts to reconstruct and re-open the Main bridge may, in fact, be counterproductive. As "leisure and fun" are among the main reasons for Kosovo-Serbs to cross the bridge, it might be more useful to support the setting up of a big movie theatre in South Mitrovica, close to the Main Bridge, for example, which would show films in Serbian.

North Mitrovica – background

Following the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, which aimed to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the Kosovo-Serb population that remained in Kosovo ended mainly up in separate ethnically defined enclaves (which they would rarely leave), which had separate forms of local government and administration supported by the Serbian authorities in Belgrade.¹ The OSCE referred to these as *parallel structures* of governance that the UNMIK did not recognise (see report *Parallel structures*, 2003). This included parallel security structures, courts, administrative structures, schools and healthcare (ibid.). Serbia's administrative support to the Kosovo-Serb population included, for example, issuing driving licences, passports and other documents. The reason for the continued existence of parallel structures in Kosovo-Serb enclaves was related both to public perceptions among the Kosovo-Serb population concerning the alleged lower level of professionalism among education and healthcare professionals of Kosovo-Albanian origin and the fear of potential retributory behaviour (ibid. pp. 31-33). Also, the Serbian government continued to pay double salaries both to education and healthcare professionals, which provided instrumental reasons for continued loyalty to parallel governance structures (ibid.). Mitrovica became one of the flashpoints of this new governance set up in Kosovo, where the river Ibar became a border between the parallel structures.

Bridges across the Ibar in Mitrovica

There are four bridges in Mitrovica across the river Ibar. This includes the *Main bridge* (sometimes referred to as the *New bridge*) in the centre of town; the *Railway bridge* (or *secondary bridge*) in the north-eastern part of town; the *Pedestrian bridge*, just west of the Main bridge; and a bridge on the south-west outskirts of town.² As the border between the parallel structures of governance in Northern and Southern Kosovo runs across the river Ibar, the bridges in Mitrovica have become manifest sites of tensions. The clearest example of this has included systematic efforts by Kosovo-Serbs in North Mitrovica to guard the bridges and block them from regular traffic. To do so, an informal security organisation was formed in Northern Mitrovica in the aftermath of the 1999 bombing called the *Bridge Watchers*. These were originally citizens who volunteered to guard the bridges and even take on some quasi-policing functions in 1999-2001 when UNMIK lacked an effective presence in North Mitrovica. Very quickly, these Bridge Watchers virtually took over the role of the main law enforcement agency there (Parallel structures 2003:11).³ The Main bridge has since been a site of tension and even armed violence, culminating in the death of at least 14 people and hundreds wounded in March 2004.⁴

¹ This refers primarily to the following municipalities: Leposavić/Leposaviq, Zvečan/Zveçan, Zubin Potok and Mitrovicë/Mitrovica north. See also Kursani (2014).

² See map in Annex I.

³ Initially, the Bridge Watchers organisation received political and financial support from Belgrade via the budget of the municipal hospital in North Mitrovica, falling under the Serbian Ministry of Health, but this support was later curbed (Parallel structures 2003:11).

⁴ The source of violence in March 2004 was a situation where two Kosovo-Albanian children drowned in the Ibar after reportedly being chased by Kosovo-Serbs. In reaction to this, there was a drive-by shooting incident in which a Serbian youth was wounded, which agitated the Kosovo-Serb population in North Mitrovica. Crowds of Kosovo-Albanians stormed the bridges and tried to enter North Mitrovica on March 17, 2004 and shooting incidents and grenade explosions led to death of 6 people. UN and NATO troops rushed to the scene to contain the violence.

Such incidents recur with various degrees of intensity, most recently including violent incidents in June 2014.⁵ In August 2016, the EU launched a major reconstruction of the Main bridge, allocating at least €1 million for the renovation of the bridge and the adjacent streets with a planned re-opening in early 2017. This effort was delayed, however, due to roadblocks being set up on the northern side of the bridge (see Bátora et al 2017a for more on this). The EU's involvement in North Mitrovica saw another backlash in mid-2017 as the EU Office in Kosovo/EU Special Representative had to cancel €7.8 million of financial support that was aimed at constructing the new building of North Mitrovica University (€4.5 million) and constructing a new cultural centre in North Mitrovica (€3.3 million). The reasons given by the EU Office in Kosovo for the cancellation of the projects was that “the local authorities failed to remove the existing illegal buildings and free the access to all working areas.”⁶ Obviously, the situation in Mitrovica continues to be tense and it is thus useful to study the public attitudes in Northern Mitrovica towards the EU and its role in managing the crisis.

Methodology and data collection

The EUNPACK WP5 team developed a survey questionnaire based on a template used in all other EUNPACK research on public attitudes and perceptions. The survey had to be adapted to fit local circumstances in Kosovo and, more specifically, in Mitrovica. Survey teams coordinated by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) were deployed into North Mitrovica on the 10th and 11th July 2017 and collected responses from 106 respondents. The five field researchers randomly chose passers-by in locations close to the bridges in the town centre. For comparative purposes, an identical survey was conducted in South Mitrovica by researchers deployed by the Kosovo Centre for Security Studies (KCSS). The survey was conducted by four field researchers on the same dates.⁷

Findings

Perceptions of the EU in North Mitrovica

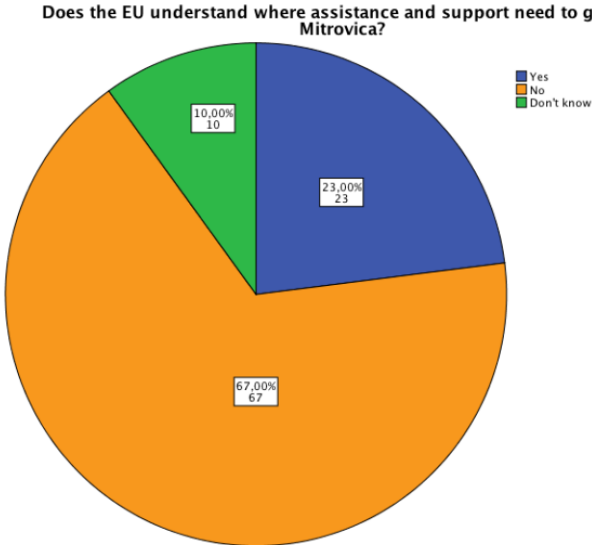
The EU faces some major challenges if seen through the lenses of a majority of the respondents in North Mitrovica. First, there seems to be a widely held belief that the EU does not understand where assistance and help is most needed in Mitrovica (see Figure 1). Compared to this, 39 respondents in South Mitrovica held that the EU did understand where assistance was needed while 23 responded negatively to this question.

⁵ In incidents in June 2014, several cars were set ablaze and the clashes left 13 policemen and 10 civilians injured.

⁶ See *EU in Kosovo cancels 7.8 million euro projects in North Mitrovica*, EEAS Press Release, July 21, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kosovo_en/30243/EU%20in%20Kosovo%20cancels%207.8%20million%20euro%20projects%20in%20North%20Mitrovica

⁷ Findings from this survey are reported in Bátora et.al 2017.

Figure 1. EU’s understanding of where assistances needs to go



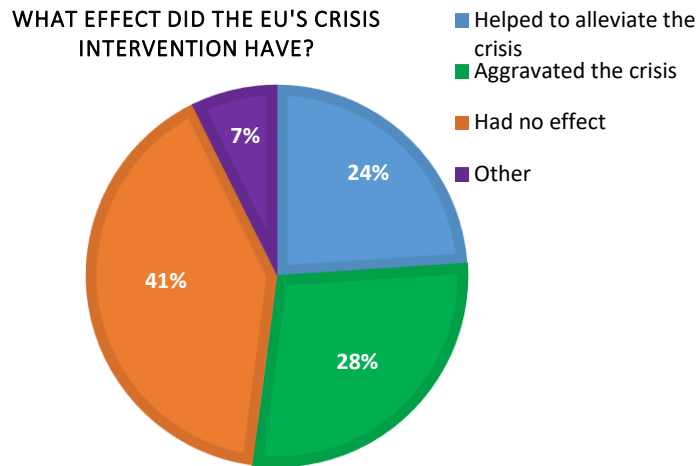
Second, there seems to be an ethnic cleavage in how the EU is perceived by the population on both sides of the river in Mitrovica. Overall, those who indicate Kosovo-Serb as their ethnicity tend to have a more negative view of the EU than those who indicate Kosovo-Albanian as their ethnicity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Perceptions of the EU’s understanding of local development aid needs in Mitrovica

		Ethnicity				Total
		K-Albanian	K-Serb	Both KA and KS	Other	
Does the EU understand where assistance and support need to go here in Mitrovica?	Yes	32	21	7	1	61
	No	22	44	22	2	90
Total		54	65	29	3	151

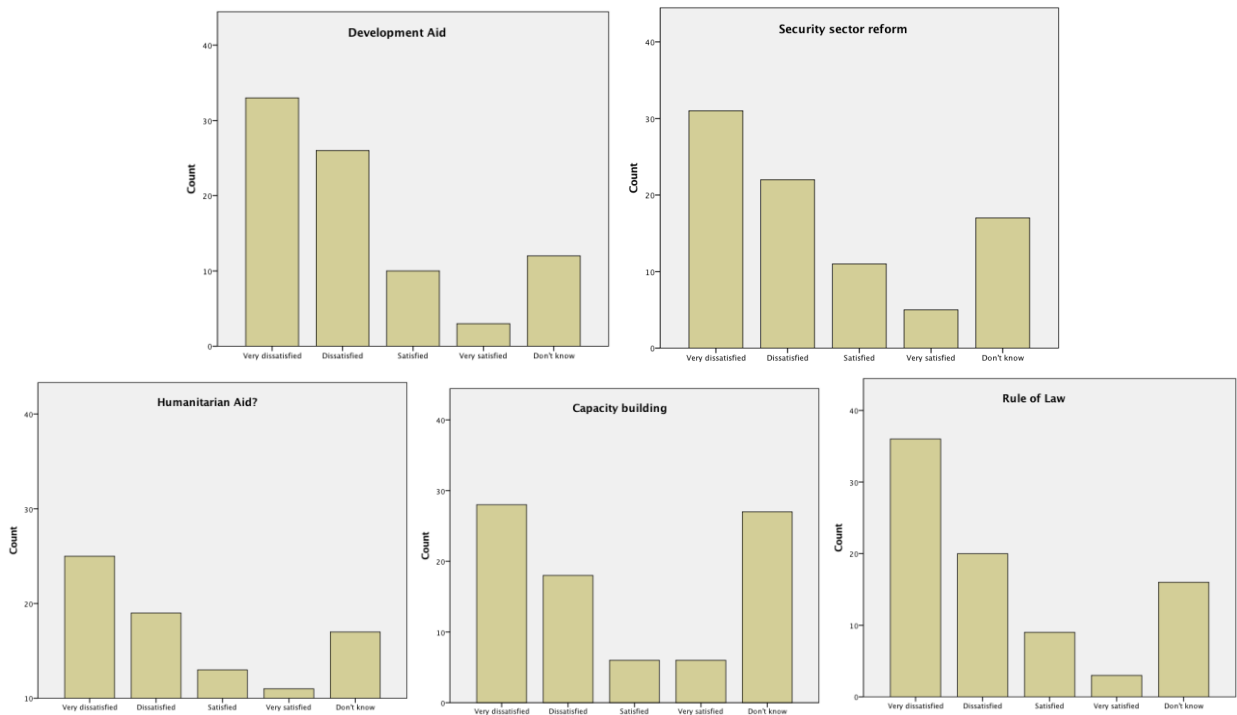
Third, when it comes to assessing the effects of the EU’s intervention in the crisis, a majority of the population in North Mitrovica view this as negative or none at all (see Figure 2). Among the additional answers regarding the EU’s role, some of the North Mitrovica respondents claimed that the EU was “helping war criminals”, that it does “more damage than help”, that it offered “poor help” and that the EU “helped Kosovo-Albanians more”. Again, there is a difference here when compared with the views of the South Mitrovica population where the majority tends to view the EU’s intervention in either positive or neutral terms.

Figure 2. North Mitrovica population views on the effects of the EU's intervention in the crisis



Fourth, when it comes to the degree of satisfaction with various aspects of the EU's engagement in North Mitrovica, there was considerable dissatisfaction with rule of law and development aid as well as with capacity building. The population was comparatively more satisfied with the EU's support for capacity building (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Satisfaction with the EU in North Mitrovica



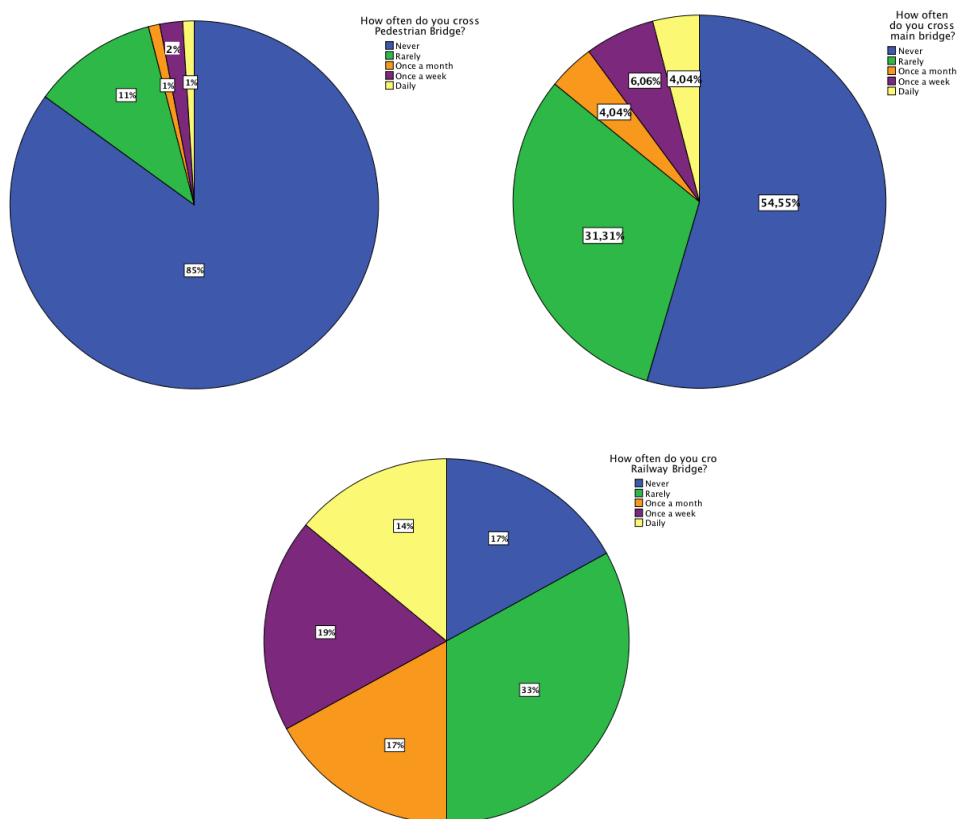
Moving on from perceptions of the EU by population, the fieldwork focused on indicators of behavioural patterns and practices related to the bridges.

Practices around bridges

As mentioned above, bridges in Mitrovica represent a cleavage between structures of governance and ethnicity in the town. Crossing these divides and the ability to extend governance of the Pristina-based political order in Kosovo will depend on the ability to overcome ethnic divides and differences in how populations on both sides of the bridges view the governance order. Arguably, the nature of the challenge lies in overcoming the divides on the level of perceptions, practices and behavioural patterns. EUNPACK has collected data on the practices and behavioural patterns of the population in North Mitrovica regarding the bridges and regarding the reasons for crossing the bridges. Results of similar surveys on the practices and behavioural patterns on the southern side are reported in Bátorá et al (2017).

When it comes to findings on North Mitrovica, first, there are substantial differences in the degree to which the North Mitrovica population uses the three bridges in town. The Railway bridge is clearly most often used for crossing the river Ibar to South Mitrovica. The Main bridge and the Pedestrian bridge are used far less frequently (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Frequency of crossing the bridges by North Mitrovica population



Second, there seems to be an ethnically conditioned divide in terms of bridge use. While Kosovo-Serbs from both North and South Mitrovica mostly use the Railway bridge, Kosovo-Albanians' use of bridges is more evenly distributed and they are more likely to use the Main bridge than the Kosovo-Serbs. See Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Frequency of crossing the Main Bridge: number of respondents (data from both North and South Mitrovica)

		Ethnicity				Total
		K-Albanian	K-Serb	Both KA and KS	Other	
Frequency crossing Main Bridge	Never	2	40	13	1	56
	Rarely	17	18	12	0	47
	Once a month	6	4	2	0	12
	Once a week	7	5	3	1	16
	Daily	31	5	2	1	39
Total		63	72	32	3	170

Table 3. Frequency of crossing the Main bridge: percentage of respondents (numbers from both North and South Mitrovica)

		Ethnicity				Total
		K-Albanian Column N %	K-Serb Column N %	Both KA and KS Column N %	Other Column N %	
Frequency crossing Main Bridge	Never	3,2%	55,6%	40,6%	33,3%	32,9%
	Rarely	27,0%	25,0%	37,5%	0,0%	27,6%
	Once a month	9,5%	5,6%	6,3%	0,0%	7,1%
	Once a week	11,1%	6,9%	9,4%	33,3%	9,4%
	Daily	49,2%	6,9%	6,3%	33,3%	22,9%
Total		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Third, while Kosovo-Serbs cross the Main Bridge less frequently than the Kosovo-Albanians, there is variation between the ethnic groups in terms of their reasons for crossing the Main bridge. While Kosovo-Serbs score highest on “leisure and fun”, “shopping for luxury items” and on “other” reasons,⁸ Kosovo-Albanians score highest on “shopping for groceries”, “leisure and fun” and “visiting relatives”. See Table 4.

⁸ “Administration” is listed by 4 out of 7 Kosovo-Serb respondents who ticked “other” reasons for crossing the Main Bridge.

Table 4. Reasons for crossing the Main Bridge.

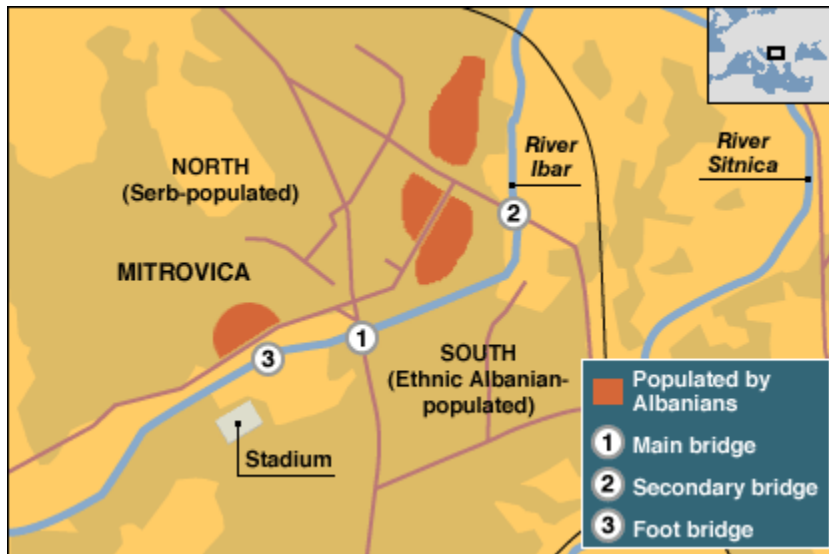
		Ethnicity				Total Count
		K-Albanian Count	K-Serb Count	Both KA and KS Count	Other Count	
Medical help	Yes	5	1	1	0	7
	No	4	22	18	0	44
	Total	9	23	19	0	51
Shopping (groceries)	Yes	19	12	10	0	41
	No	3	12	9	0	24
	Total	22	24	19	0	65
Shopping (Luxury items)	Yes	1	7	3	0	11
	No	3	17	16	0	36
	Total	4	24	19	0	47
Visiting family/relatives	Yes	11	4	7	1	23
	No	2	20	12	0	34
	Total	13	24	19	1	57
Leisure and fun	Yes	18	10	2	0	30
	No	2	19	17	0	38
	Total	20	29	19	0	68
Other	Yes	4	7	8	0	19
	No	53	25	11	1	90
	Total	57	32	19	1	109

The fact that “leisure and fun” scores among the top reasons for crossing the Main Bridge among both the Kosovo-Serbs and the Kosovo-Albanians is perhaps an indicator of stabilisation in the Mitrovica situation. Yet, this needs to be seen in relation to the apparent ethnic divides, both in terms of frequency of crossing the bridges and in terms of preference for choosing the bridges when crossing. The latter two indicators suggest that Mitrovica continues to be a highly divided town.

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Annex I. Location of bridges in Mitrovica



Source: BBC.com.