

The Ibar Bridge – dividing or connecting Serbs and Albanians in Mitrovica, Kosovo

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Abstract

The Ibar Bridge was built around the 15th century and served to unite the people of Mitrovica. Seventeen years after the conflict of 1998-1999, between Serbs and Kosovo- Albanians, this bridge is known as a symbol of ethnic division. Even today, the bridge is the primary image that represents the city of Mitrovica, both nationally and internationally. Following the arrival of the international military troops in Kosovo, the French KFOR donated to build a new bridge that cost around €1.7 million. For many years, this bridge held many kinds of machines and barricades, such as metallic fences, military and police vehicles, stones and sand. Most recently, a “peace park” was built on the bridge, using flowerpots to serve as barricades to prevent vehicle movement. After an agreement between Pristina and Belgrade, for the freedom of movement, the European Union invested in the revitalization of the bridge with the hope that it will serve both communities as a form of connection. Despite the negative activities that occurred on and around the bridge, local cultural organizations have aspired to ease tension in the area through art and cultural events. What does it mean to the youth of Mitrovica to see this symbolic bridge everyday of their lives feeling unsafe to cross it? Can political agreements alone change the social perspective of the bridge or will the long standing community perspectives remain intact? Are social or political views driving division, or both?

Using an anthropological lens, this study examines the public behavior of the citizens on and around the bridge from the two last decades until today. It also presents different perceptions from the collective memory, dreams and emotions of youth that cross the bridge for the first time in their life.

Keywords:

Bridge, collective memory, culture, identity, trust, Mitrovica, Kosovo