



VOTERS, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND ELECTIONS IN SANDZAK

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on April 5, 2012 in Novi Pazar a roundtable for the region's political party and civil society representatives. In addition, in April a number of consultations were held with political leaders, civil society representatives, and various analysts in Sandzak and Belgrade. The objective of the activities was to analyze the upcoming election campaign in the Sandzak region and the manner in which the newly formed Regional Forum consisting of political party and civil society representatives from Sandzak could contribute to the promotion of issues of common interest in the campaign.

Meeting under the CIG auspices, members of political parties and civil society representatives agreed in February 2012 to establish the Regional Forum as a mechanism to jointly debate policy and political issues in Sandzak. Representatives of Serb and Bosnjak political parties and civil society committed to contribute to the Forum. It is envisioned that the activities of the Forum would include town-hall style meetings, TV debates, informal discussions of policy issues in the region, reports and analysis of the work of local governments, and policy advice for the local authorities.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office through the British Embassy in Belgrade funded the activities.

The report is based on the roundtable discussions and consultations with politicians and analysts in Sandzak and Belgrade. The participants contributed to the discussions in their personal capacities and their positions do not necessarily reflect those of organizations they represent. The report is prepared by CIG's vice president Shpetim Gashi and CIG is solely responsible for its content.

Political Parties and Election Campaign

The participants addressed the competition between parties, ideological differences, voter party loyalty, and the role of religion in politics, within both Serb and Bosnjak parties. The discussion showed that Sandzak is facing a number of problems of democratic transition and consolidation, such as aggressive political party competition, campaigns dominated by personal grievances, and neglect of real issues such as the effectiveness of public administration, accountability for public spending, and professionalism of sensitive institutions such as the police.

The participants agreed that parties should try to play fair in the campaign in an effort to show that Sandzak's political actors have achieved a considerable level of political maturity, thus improving the reputation of the region and potentially attracting internal and foreign investment and gradually eliminating the main excuse for the Serbian government's insufficient level of attention to the problems in the region—that the dispute in Sandzak is intra-Bosnjak and they themselves should resolve it. Though not the poorest in resources, the Sandzak region remains among Serbia's most underdeveloped regions.

The region is also still suffering from the legacy of the recent past. Most of the crimes committed by the Serbian army and police in the 1990s against the Bosnjak population have not been investigated. Many say shedding light on these crimes, in which allegedly a number of local police were also involved at the time, is a precondition for good interethnic relations and for the Bosnjak population's trust in the Serbian government. The interlocutors expected that these topics would recur in campaigns and debates until at least some of the crimes are resolved and perpetrators identified and sentenced. Until this happens, the crimes would be considered collective responsibility. Some, however, feared that opening the files of the events in the 1990s could ignite new hostilities between communities. The dilemma of whether to open files of the past remains a problem in many post-communist East European countries where a debate has been going on for a while.

The participants agreed that this recent history is one of the main obstacles for the parties' inability to agree to play fair in election campaigns. Some parties say that the past should not dominate the debate while others tend to make it a main campaign issue. A participant said that the Bosnjak parties are gradually being divided into two blocks: those so-called pro-Belgrade parties and anti-Belgrade parties. The so-called pro-Belgrade parties include those that are part of the governing coalition at the central level, such as the Social Democratic Party of Serbia/Sandzak Democratic Party, the Party of Democratic Action of Sandzak and its allies. The anti-Belgrade parties include those that are not in the government, such as the Bosnjak Democratic Community. A number of participants, however, said that the Bosnjak parties in the current Serbian governing coalitions are focused on resolving the problems of Sandzak and improving the situation there, and not representing Belgrade. They said that they have achieved successes in this regard and will continue to implement their goals through work within the state institutions.

The participants said that the campaign would have positive and negative elements. The positive elements include the focus of the parties, especially those in power, on the issues and projects that they have promoted and implemented in the past four years and the articulation of new promises. The negative elements would include personal attacks, especially labeling opponents as traitors. Eliminating the negative elements is impossible, but the participants said the public and civil society organizations could help to encourage a more positive campaign. After all, they are also part of the democratic election process. Personal attacks are quite common even in the oldest democracies such as the United States or France. The public could help by engaging more in the election campaign through town hall meetings, TV debates, and direct meetings with their representatives to shift the debate towards policies and issues of governance. The public should make it clear to their politicians what they expect from them, that they do not benefit from debates based on personal grievances, and that they may penalize political parties and candidates

at the voting booth. Though the political parties would be held primarily responsible for eventual negative implications of the campaign on the region, a number of participants said that the other sectors of society should assume their part of responsibility and become more active and bring more substantive issues to the debate.

The political debate in Sandzak is mostly dominated by the disputes between Bosnjak parties and their affiliate organizations. These intra-ethnic issues are also expected to dominate the campaign. The participants suggested that the Serb parties should also be included in the debate about the priorities for the region and make their own offers to the citizens. The Belgrade-based parties should make clear to the voters what they offer to Sandzak, one participant said. Such involvement would not only advance the level of debate from personal grievances to real problems but could also contribute to the resolution of intra-Bosnjak disputes by promoting a healthier debate.

Participants said that there is always a chance for incidents. There were election incidents in the last elections but political parties should try to prevent and manage such incidents by increasing interparty communication and explaining the nature and motives of incidents quickly, the participants advised. The presence of Serb representatives in the work of the Regional Forum is also important, as the Serb community constitutes half of Sandzak's population. Meetings of only Bosnjak leaders would make it look as if the Bosnjaks are the problem in this area. "This is not true, and this should not be our message."

Managing the Election Campaign

Personal attacks are part of the debate between political parties and their representatives in many transitional and well-established democracies. Parties in Sandzak are no different. Therefore, the political parties and their members in Sandzak should accept personal attacks as part of election campaigns. However, political leaders and civil society members can help in managing the elements of the election campaign that focus on personal issues that are irrelevant for the voters. Efforts should also be made also to prevent some of the negative campaigning. Many believe that negative campaigning is part of the democratic system but those involved should try to minimize it and focus on the issues that matter to the electorate.

Many participants expected that the campaign and competition for votes would be aggressive. There are too many parties competing for too few votes. Some said that it is a democratic system and every party has the right to run the type of campaign they think would benefit them the most. Parties will adjust their strategies and tactics to their position vis-à-vis the public: some would get more votes from running an aggressive campaign while others may lose votes from such campaigning, and thus may focus on ideas, programs, and concrete projects. Some participants noted that Sandzak should not be singled out as a region with an aggressive political party competition. They said that the Serb parties based in Belgrade are running even more aggressive campaigns filled with personal attacks. They also said that even the Serbian Orthodox Church is more involved in the Serbian party politics than the Islamic community in the Bosnjak party politics. Dirty campaigns are obviously not good, but it is also difficult to run clean campaigns in places with many problems, some speakers noted.

Participants said that it is not enough for political parties just to issue press releases and send good messages but that they should also communicate more with the public. In this context, they analyzed the capacity of the Forum to contribute to a fair campaign and agreed to try to organize a TV debate of members of the political parties and civil society in Sandzak. However, many said that the Forum could be a useful mechanism in helping in the resolution of the problems in Sandzak after the elections by promoting inter-party cooperation, communication between voters and their representatives through town-hall debates, and by helping in the articulation of problems and solutions. The Forum should hold its meetings in various Sandzak municipalities, especially in Priboj, Nova Varos, and Prijepolje that are usually neglected in these types of activities.

Drafting of some informal rules to minimize the negative campaigning was considered important, especially in dealing with those that break the norms of democratic campaigning. The participants suggested the words, inappropriate usage of which would clearly constitute a violation of such norms, such as genocide, thief, chetnik, servant, loser, killer, liar, traitor, terrorist, fascist, drug addict, or gay should not be used. One of the participants pointed out that there are quite a few words usage of which is prohibited by law. They also said that no words with ethnic characteristics should be used, no messages that call for aggression should be sent, no offensive remarks against women should be made, and that children should not be used in the campaigning.

One of the risks is that the campaign can become a struggle between Sandzak and Belgrade. The Sandzak parties should not ignore Belgrade but they should not focus entirely on the Serbian government's actions toward Sandzak. They also called on Belgrade to look at the bigger picture of the region. Some participants said that a number of Serbian government officials think that by "accommodating Rasim Ljajic of the Social Democratic Party of Serbia and Sulejman Ugljanin of the Party of Democratic Action of Sandzak, they have accommodated the needs of the people of Sandzak." Many in Belgrade point out that the Bosnjak community has two ministers in the central government while other minority communities have none. But some in Sandzak say their inclusion into the government has had a number of negative effects. They say that when the interests of the Bosnjak political leaders in the central government are in conflict with democratic principles, their personal political interests prevail because they use their influence within the government to advance their position. The annulment of the election results for the National Minority Council of the Bosnjak Community is often mentioned as an example of such conflict. The results were annulled after an opposition list gained sufficient votes to form the majority in the Council. Currently, there are two councils in Sandzak, one with an extended technical mandate and one formed based on the election results not recognized by the Serbian government. The Serbian government had decided to form the Minority Councils to better accommodate the needs of the minority communities, but, ironically, in Sandzak it has had an opposite effect. The existence of the two councils has become a source of tension within the Bosnjak community. There was consensus that this issue needs to be resolved as soon as possible.

The participants agreed that the message to Belgrade should be that "Belgrade is part of the problem and should be part of the solution."

The participants said that the main campaign issues should be the lack of adequate roads in Sandzak, the poor system of education, the insufficient professionalism of the public administration, and the high level of unemployment. Many speakers said that most parties would try to avoid these issues, mostly because they have no answers to them. The events that happened in the 1990s should also be explained; otherwise they will remain present for a while. “We can continue to live like this but with a lot of mistrust about each other. We need to come out with the names of people that did bad things. Otherwise it would be difficult to build a safe future for all communities here.”

Conclusion

Though moving steadily towards consolidation, the minority community parties in Serbia, including Sandzak, are still in transition: politicians continue to move from one party to another, new parties and civic initiatives are being formed, and internal party debate is increasing. Political parties and alliances continue to split and regroup. Former foes ally and form coalitions while former allies and friends become adversaries. Many believe these splits are primarily based on personal and partisan gains rather than on ideological and policy differences.

Although the public political debate is about policies and strategies, voters of the Sandzak region, according to various analyses, believe that their political representatives are striving to maximize their own private gains at the expense of their constituencies. The population is growing cynical, viewing the bickering within and between parties and party leaders as selfish and far removed from their needs. Confidence in parties and political institutions is decreasing.

The majority opinion is that the political efforts and resources should be directed at developing capacities of – rather than at unifying – the Bosnjak political parties. The argument in support of this position is that political differences produce innovative approaches and contribute to building healthy democratic parties. Politicians of the entire political spectrum believe that the political leadership, including local governance institutions, needs to be strengthened at a faster pace in order to be able to address the accumulating of the problems during the past few years. Many emphasized that this could only be achieved with greater flexibility and pragmatism and intensive debate among political and non-political entities in Sandzak. The newly formed Regional Forum consisting of the Bosnjak and Serb political parties and civil society representatives, including the media, intellectuals, and analysts could contribute to coordinate such debate and encourage such pragmatism.

List of Participants

Alphabetic order

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Aida Ćorović, Urban-In
Mirsad Duran, New Vision NGO
Esad Džudžević, Coalition List for Sandzak
Shpetim Gashi, Council for Inclusive Governance
Alex Grigorev, Council for Inclusive Governance
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Esad Hodžić, Sandzak Democratic Party
Mirsad Jusufović, Sandzak Democratic Party
Safet Krlić, Kasaba Enterprise
Hazbo Mujović, Sjenica Municipality
Zibija Šarenkapić, Cultural Center DamaD
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