

Advancing Interethnic Integration in Serbia and the Upcoming Local and Parliamentary Elections

Introduction

On March 1, 2016, in Belgrade, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) held another session of the Regional Forum with representatives of the diplomatic corps in Serbia. Members from all six municipalities of the Region of Southwestern Serbia/Sandzak were present.¹

This roundtable represents the first thematic event devoted to the issues of advancing interethnic integration. In addition, the intention of the organizers was to achieve an agreement on the conduct of the elections at the local level, in order to secure a peaceful process as well that results of the elections would be accepted by all. Similarly to the session of the Regional Forum held in September 2014, present were representatives of the diplomatic corps in Belgrade.

The roundtable is a part of the initiative supported by the Open Society Foundation.

This report offers a short overview of the roundtable discussions. With the aim to stimulate open discussions, the roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule, hence the statements that are mentioned are not attributed to actual speakers. CIG's Associate in Serbia, Igor Novakovic, has prepared this report, and CIG bears full responsibility for its content.

Advancing Interethnic Integration in Serbia

The roundtable was opened by two notable members of the diplomatic corps in Belgrade, representatives of two countries which are among the most visible ones in the Region with the development aid and project programs. They underlined several important questions for advancing the situation of Bosnjaks in Serbia: 1) The Region should be integrated through the development of road and railroad infrastructure; 2) Security situation should be improved; 3. The Region and the Bosnjaks should be fully integrated into Serbia's system of governance, and this integration should be based on mutual respect, equal chances and equitable development of all regions in Serbia; 4) There is a need for a stable political environment, i.e. elections should be peaceful and results should be accepted by all sides that participate in the process; 5) Education should not be based on segregation, since it undoubtedly leads to instability and further alienation of ethnic communities in the Region; 6) Education should be based on realistic needs of the society and further economic growth; 7) A better framework for the economic development

¹Municipalities Nova Varoš, Novi Pazar, Priboj, Prijepolje, Sjenica, and Tutin.

should be created, in order to adapt the local environment to the realistic needs of the investors;

8) People from the Region should be involved in the process of Serbia's European integration, as well as obtain concrete benefits out of it.

One of the two representatives of the diplomatic corps who opened the session emphasized that the strand of Islam that is prevalent in the Region is among the most tolerant in the world, and that this fact should be kept in mind when we talk about integration. Therefore it is the duty of politicians from both the national and the local levels to maintain and use this heritage and to support dialogue, hence to prevent further radicalization of the situation in the region.

Answering the question of how to proceed on the path of integration, one of the representatives of the civil society from the Region said that the Regional Forum should be used and upgraded into a regional platform for dialogue and cooperation to advance the integration of the Region and the Bosnjaks into Serbia's system of governance. The regional platform would consist of representatives of the civil society, who could count on the help of the municipalities in the region. She stressed that certain steps have already been taken a week before the roundtable in a smaller session of the Regional Forum in Prijepolje that was composed exclusively of the members of the civil society from the Region. The speaker emphasized that integration implies existence of a two-way process and that the Bosnjak could not be sufficiently integrated into the society in Serbia if the majority community does not participate in the process.

One of the permanent members of the Forum from Novi Pazar said that the state policy aimed at integration is best reflected in the regulatory framework, the Constitution, and the laws. In this sense, state institutions (both, the central government and local governments) have to comply with the existing regulations on the protection of minorities and increasingly treat members of the minority communities as their own citizens. This latter aspect is particularly important while dealing with the crimes committed against the Bosnjaks in the 1990s, which have not yet been resolved. In other words, this speaker said, there is a need for a rule of law. He also stressed the need for an intermediate level of government, similar to Vojvodina, which would resolve the implementation of minority rights in a more direct way. Other participants also pointed out the urgent need for a revision of the legal minority-related framework in Serbia.

A participant expressed concern that the full implementation of existing laws on education and the use of Bosnian language in the Region would open a new front for misunderstanding and conflicts among the Bosnjaks, as there is a fundamental disagreement among them on how to approach these issues. He stressed that the segregation in education is intrinsic to this law, which is also noticeable in Vojvodina, since a number of ethnic communities live in parallel worlds, hence creating a number of practical problems. He stressed that it is necessary to deal with the past, and the state must take concrete action in this regard, in order to restore confidence in the institutions of Bosnjaks.

A member of the Forum from Sjenica pointed out that these questions need to be answered through the Action Plan for National Minorities under Chapter 23 of Serbia's pre-accession negotiations for the membership in the European Union.

A permanent Forum member from Novi Pazar asked the question what are the interests of the Bosnjaks and how are they defined. He stated that the interests of the Bosnjaks do not necessarily

imply the interests of the political parties. He pointed out that if the policy advocated by the Bosnjak National Council (BNC) today were by chance implemented in the 1990s, the Bosnjaks themselves would protest against it and treat it as a violation of minority rights, because it implies separation and segregation. He then called for an integration of the education system, without segregation, where everyone will learn all about everyone, including members of the majority community—the Serbs—which in some municipalities of the Region a minority, as in Sjenica, and the Bosnjaks. To create such a system of dialogue and debate is necessary. The same is true of history textbooks. Another participant commented that the existing minority framework does not respect specificities of certain minorities. It is possible to create solutions that encourage integration, such as, creation of a common history textbook for everybody to learn about everyone.

These statements were opposed by some of other members of the Forum, who stressed that there is a legislative framework and institutions, such is BNC, which is in charge of implementation of these provisions, and that it is necessary for both the state and the local governments to respect BNC's decisions.

One of the high-ranking members of the Forum said that, besides the respect for the existing legal framework, the right of veto by minority MPs on issues concerning minorities should be endorsed. He proposed creation of an agreement between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, which would comprehensively regulate the position of the Bosnjaks in the entire Sandzak, especially on the issues concerning punishment for crimes committed during the 1990s. Finally, he called for the creation of a Department of Bosnian Language at the State University in Novi Pazar.

In response to these views, one of the Serb participants from the Region said that the crimes committed against Bosnjaks can only be individual, not collective, and that the local authorities in the last few years have taken a number of steps to heal wounds at least at the local level and that the memory of the victims is remembered in a dignified manner. On the other hand, he rejected the need for the introduction of another, middle level of government without a dialogue and determining if all citizens who live in this Region support that. He also pointed out that the local government in his municipality is willing, as always, to give proportional representation in the local government in the future, as it is today, to the Bosnjaks regardless if they are mathematically for the formation of the governing majority.

A representative of the civil society from Novi Pazar stated that it is obviously needed to define recommendations for inter-confessional and inter-religious dialogue in Serbia that would lead to a change of the legislative framework for minorities, and towards building a civic society rather than a segregated and an ethnically divided society.

A permanent Forum member from the ranks of the civil society stated that the dialogue should be based on the principle that a right of the others is everything that does not threaten us, and that details should be treated accordingly.

A high-ranking participant from Novi Pazar stressed the need to work together to create positive associations in Serbia whenever someone mentions Novi Pazar and Sandzak, which is only

possible through dialogue and economic progress, and that the narrative and actions that lead to segregation can only prevent such developments.

It was concluded that a dialogue on these issues certainly should be continued but not in the pre-election atmosphere.

Upcoming Local and Parliamentary Elections

The second part of the roundtable was devoted to the issue of the local and parliamentary elections in the Region. One of the parties that will participate in the elections advocates reaching of a comprehensive agreement, which would mean greater involvement in prevention of possible electoral fraud and incidents. Therefore, a member of that party proposed to create a permanent body at the state level which would be composed of state prosecutors and representatives of the OSCE and EU with a mandate to monitor the elections. In addition, citizens who report inconsistencies in the electoral process would be granted the status of protected witnesses. The agreement should include a ban on the use of state and local resources for election campaign and that all the media should commit to equally represent all candidates.

Some of the elements of the proposal were acceptable to participants from other parties but some were not. However, they showed substantial interest to continue talks at the local level, with an aim to prevent pre-election tensions. In this regard, they considered that an agreement on political correctness would be the first step that could contribute to this objective.

A number of representatives of the international community expressed their interest to support this process as did representatives of the local civil society. However, since it was not possible to reach any convergence of views at the meeting, but participants agreed that the talks should continue at the local level with the mediation of the local civil society and the international community.

List of Participants

Sead Biberović, Coordinator, NGO Urban-In, Novi Pazar
Zora Čelović, Director, NGO Women's Initiative, Priboj
Aida Ćorović, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Democratic Party
Sabina Dazdarević, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak
Branislav Dilparić, President of the Municipal Assembly of Nova Varoš, Socialist Party of Serbia
Mirsad Duran, Director, NGO Nova Vizija, Prijepolje
Muhedin Fijuljanin, Vice President of the Bosnjak National Minority Council
Nihad Hasanović, President of the Sandžak Democratic Party
Enis Imamović, Member of Parliament of Serbia, Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak
Mirsad Jusufović, Member of the City Council of Novi Pazar, Sandžak Democratic Party
Fahrudin Kladninčanin, Director, NGO Forum 10, Novi Pazar
Šemsudin Kučević, Mayor of Tutin, Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak
Meho Mahmutović, Mayor of Novi Pazar, Sandžak Democratic Party
Fahrudin Mekić, Head of the Cabinet of the Mayor of Novi Pazar, Sandžak Democratic Party
Hazbo Mujović, Mayor of Sjenica, Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak
Zibija Šarenkapić, Director, NGO Culture Center Damad, Novi Pazar
Ahmedin Škrijelj, Legal Advisor of the Parliamentary Group of the Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak and Secretary of the Bosnjak National Minority Council
Vlado Radulović, Counselor in the Department for Advancement of Minority Rights, Office for Human and Minority Rights, Government of Serbia
Teo Taraniš, Coordinator, Forum 10, Novi Pazar
Sulejman Ugljanin, Member of Parliament of Serbia, President of the Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak and President of the Bosnjak National Minority Council
Saša Vasilić, President of the Municipality Assembly of Priboj, Serbian Progressive Party
Almir Vučelj, Project Assistant, OSCE Novi Pazar

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Mario Barfus, Project Manager, Novi Pazar Training Facility, OSCE Mission to Serbia
Oscar Benedict, Deputy Head of the EU Delegation in Serbia
Mehmet Kemal Bozay, Ambassador, Embassy of Turkey in Serbia
Leo D'aes, Ambassador, Embassy of Belgium in Serbia
Tommaso Diegoli, Political and Press Affairs Officer, OSCE Mission to Serbia
Gordon Duguid, Deputy Head of the Mission, U.S. Embassy in Serbia
Vedat Gül, Counsellor, Embassy of Turkey in Serbia
Brian Martin, Political Officer, U.S. Embassy in Serbia
Maja Mičić, National Program Officer, Embassy of Switzerland Serbia
Jean-Daniel Ruch, Ambassador, Embassy of Switzerland Serbia
Saskia Salzmann, Regional Human Security Adviser, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland

CIG and Open Society Foundation

Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Alex Roinishvili Grigorev, President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Igor Novaković, Associate in Serbia, Council for Inclusive Governance
Aleksandra Šanjević, Program Coordinator, Open Society Foundation