

Serb Engagement in Kosovo’s Politics

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on June 24, 2014 in Belgrade a roundtable for representatives of Kosovo Serb parties, Serbian parties, Serbian government officials, and a number of Serb analysts. The objective of the roundtable was to address the role of the newly elected Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo’s central institutions and to explore ways the Serb representatives could help to overcome obstacles at the local level, particularly in the north.

The roundtable is part of a project on the normalization of Kosovo-Serbia relations and the integration of Kosovo’s north. The project is funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Kosovo Serbs in the north took part in Kosovo’s parliamentary elections for the first time since Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Under the current legislative framework, Kosovo Serbs are guaranteed 10 seats in parliament and are entitled to lead two ministries, if Kosovo’s government has more than 12 ministries. The last government was working with 19 ministries. If the number is less than 12, the Kosovo Serbs are entitled to one ministerial position. The civic initiative Srpska Lista won nine of the 10 guaranteed seats in the June elections and includes also some members of the Independent Liberal Party, which was part of the government with three ministries in the last mandate. The remaining seat went to the Progressive Democratic Party.

The Srpska Lista has the support of the Serbian government and is expected to act in close coordination with Belgrade. Some see this support as a contribution to better advance Kosovo Serb interests. However, a number of speakers said that they fear Belgrade would encourage the new parliamentarians to rather pursue Serbian state interests to “primarily undermine and defy the institutions of Kosovo” and only secondarily to deal with issues of concern for Kosovo Serbs. Furthermore, they are concerned that “constant clashes in the institutions would increase overall tensions between Serbs and Albanians, eclipsing the real issues and make the Serbs look like troublemakers.” Kosovo Albanian parties see Srpska Lista with suspicion and many call it a “Trojan Horse.” In that sense, the majority of the speakers said that the “battle” over national issues should be fought by Belgrade, while Kosovo Serb political representatives should deal exclusively with the issues of the Serb community in Kosovo.

Srpska Lista – Cooperation or Defiance

Belgrade's declared objective has always been to strengthen the Serb community in Kosovo and the Brussels dialogue has been mainly about the interests of the Kosovo Serbs, a speaker said. Belgrade will continue the dialogue with Pristina on the issues of telecommunication, energy, and judiciary in the north with the main objective of improving the lives of the Serbs in Kosovo, a speaker familiar with Belgrade's policy towards Kosovo said. He confirmed that Belgrade would not reduce its political and financial support for the Kosovo Serbs. Regarding the recent incidents following the construction of a park on the bridge in Mitrovica, the speaker blamed Pristina and the international community for exaggerating the issue. "It's not understandable why Washington and Brussels are talking about the park as if it was the main problem in Kosovo." He said that the Srpska Lista will act as a unified actor in Kosovo's institutions and would set a number of objectives to meet during its mandate. He suggested that it would also have a tougher stance than the previous Serb groups in Kosovo's institutions.

Belgrade's management of Srpska Lista was considered by a number of Kosovo Serb speakers as a step backwards in the process of democratization within the Serb community in Kosovo. The Kosovo Serbs had formed a number of political parties independently, were developing capacities for democratic campaigning, ran competitively in the election process and, although in separate lists, had managed to forge effective cooperation in parliament. After all this progress, Srpska Lista in a few weeks undermined the entire progress of the past years, a speaker familiar with the Kosovo Serb political parties said.

The major complaint was that Srpska Lista is an extension of the Movement of Socialists, a small Serbian party led by Serbian Minister Aleksandar Vulin, with five out of nine Srpska Lista members of parliament also being members of this party. Regarding the voting in the north of Kosovo, some speakers said it was complete fraud. "Voters voted for those whom Belgrade had decided to elect. Essentially these people were not elected; they were appointed." The speaker added that the "voting of refugees in Serbia was catastrophic: one person filled out over 10 thousand ballots with the same pen, giving the votes to five people only, all in Vulin's party."

Some speakers said that a united list may be desirable in the current context, but they complained about Belgrade's "micromanagement of every aspect of the campaign," including compiling the candidates' list without considering any "democratic criteria." "It is good to have a joint list under these circumstances, but we need to also define what objectives join us and whether people on the list can contribute to such objectives. An ethnic list is not enough to improve the lives of the Serb community. Professionals are needed in this regard," a speaker argued. He added that there is no guarantee that the 10 elected Kosovo Serb members of parliament will follow joint goals and will be able to achieve much, given that most of them lack experience in politics in general and in dealing with Kosovo's institutions in particular. Furthermore, this group of people is not united by anything other than ethnicity. They have no apparent joint objectives or a

strategy to achieve them. As such, Srpska Lista does not represent an authentic Kosovo Serb force, which has been the objective of many Kosovo Serbs over the years..

A number of Kosovo Serb speakers suggested to officials in Belgrade not to use this group of people for their own narrow interests. “Don’t push them to fight with Kosovo Albanians; encourage them to establish cooperation and act as a force to resolve the many problems accumulated over the years.” The speakers argued that cooperation is the better option, given that the Kosovo Albanians have the absolute majority and can pass and implement any legislation, except for changing the constitution, without the Kosovo Serbs. The Kosovo Serb members of parliament and those running the two ministries should insist on the full implementation of the Ahtisaari package laws relevant to the Serb community in Kosovo. A speaker reported that the Kosovo Albanians have been very reluctant to implement these laws and “are happy when Kosovo Serbs reject the plan and deal with national politics rather than with specific policies.” Even when Kosovo Serb interests are translated into legislation, they rarely get fully implemented. This is partly caused by the the Kosovo Serbs’ insufficient political engagement. Therefore, the Serb community needs an active Kosovo Serb leadership focused on policy rather than politics.

Belgrade should refrain from actions that attract attention but do not resolve the problems facing the Serbs. In fact, they simply eclipse the real issues, a number of speakers argued. One such action was the construction of a park on the bridge in Mitrovica. “The park is a childish game. Parks on bridges make no sense and don’t exist anywhere in the world. This game benefits nobody, not even the authors of this game,” a speaker said. The speaker said that the authors of the “park” are also responsible for the misuse of Serb refugees by voting in their behalf to accommodate “their friends in Kosovo’s parliament.” He also criticized the international community for allowing such massive fraud to happen “in the name of integration.” Another speaker said that on one hand, we have the most democratic representation of the Albanians in the Kosovo parliament, and, on the other, the least democratic for the Serbs.

Another speaker said that Belgrade’s message is contradictory: it asked the Kosovo Serbs to take part in Kosovo’s elections with Kosovo’s symbols, but now asks the elected Kosovo Serbs to refuse to establish municipalities because of Kosovo’s symbols. “We are confused; we don’t know what to expect from Belgrade. It hasn’t had a consistent policy for a long time now.” A speaker said that politicians are constantly creating ghettos instead of advancing integration. It is important to establish the Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo. Politicians have to be realistic. It will not be a parallel government in Kosovo, nor a parallel level of power. However, the Kosovo Serbs can still get something substantive. Such an outcome depends on the Kosovo Serbs that will enter the government. Some level of autonomy is realistic for the Community.

The essence of the problem in the north is that the Brussels agreement has not been implemented on the ground, a speaker said. Another one pointed out that there has not yet been a report to the Serbian parliament about the implementation of the Brussels Agreement, and suggested for the government to prepare one.

A speaker who had been on the list of Srpska Lista was satisfied with the Kosovo Serbs being united in one political force, but was not happy with the result. “It’s not good to have 5 members from Vulin’s party, and none from the largest party in Serbia. The outcome has confused us more than anything else before.” Another speaker said that we are naïve if we think that Belgrade can control who forms Kosovo’s government.

Establishing Functional Local Governance in the North

Some of the speakers blamed Pristina and the international community for the delay in establishing the local institutions in the north, while others also criticized Belgrade officials for not being constructive in the implementation of the Brussels agreement. To help resolve the deadlock, a speaker suggested establishing the Community of the Serb-majority municipalities as soon as possible. “The Community would help coordinate Kosovo Serb efforts and also compensate for the inadequate representation of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo’s central institutions.”

Even though Belgrade had agreed to the local elections in the north and to Kosovo’s parliamentary elections, a speaker said that these elections were “illegal, illegitimate, and not fair” to the elected people. “We were told elections were status neutral but when we went to vote, Kosovo’s symbols were on the ballots.” He argued that the elected officials in the north are under a lot of pressure from all sides: Pristina, Belgrade, and the international community, all asking different things from them. “They can’t please all three actors, and if they have to choose, they will choose Belgrade.”

Belgrade should strengthen the local capacity of the Serbs in Kosovo instead of continuing to “command and control” the community, a speaker said. Time shows that previous governments have also made mistakes regarding their Kosovo policy, and this government should learn from past mistakes. Serbs in Kosovo should focus on strengthening their institutions and provide better services for the population. Only strong institutions guarantee a sustainable future for the community.

The less Belgrade is involved in Kosovo Serb local politics the better, another speaker said. Belgrade should not continue to micromanage Kosovo Serb politics; it should simply help create conditions for them to operate efficiently. He added the timing of “the park on the bridge was terrible.” It only shows that those in charge do not understand the new reality.” He speculated that some in Belgrade believe Crimea’s annexation by Russia has opened the possibility for the north’s annexation, and were hoping that “the park” would set in motion such a project.

In conclusion, the participants recommended that the municipal authorities resolve the budget issue, set up local administrations, and begin to provide local services. The local authorities should deal exclusively with local problems, which are many in the north, and let Belgrade only deal with status-related issues. They also recommended that municipalities hire more qualified managers to help with project implementation.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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