

Kosovo's North: Breaking the Deadlock

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on December 2-3, 2011 in Ecka near Zrenjanin, Serbia, a roundtable for various Kosovo Serb representatives and officials of Serbia's parliamentary parties and government. Participants included members of Serbia's Democratic Party, G17 Plus, Socialist Party of Serbia, Serbian Renewal Movement, Liberal Democratic Party, and Kosovo's Independent Liberal Party and United Serb List, as well as a number of civil society representatives. The objective of the roundtable was to search for ways to break Kosovo's north deadlock and to strengthen cooperation between Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs active in Kosovo's institutions. The roundtable was part of an initiative on the Future of the Serb Community in Kosovo funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Searching for a Pragmatic Policy Towards the Crisis Kosovo's North

The first part of the discussion addressed Belgrade's policy on the north. Some participants said that Belgrade does not have a clear and consistent policy towards the north, as illustrated by a number of recent policy reversals, including President Boris Tadic's call for the removal of barricades and the agreement on Integrated Border/Boundary Management reached between Pristina and Belgrade in Brussels, which Serbia opposed until the last moment. While at the beginning of the crisis, Belgrade sent its representatives to the north and encouraged Serbs there to resist Kosovo institutions' efforts to establish their authority by all means necessary, including erection of barricades, it recently called on them to remove the barricades and accept all the agreements reached with Pristina in Brussels. According to a participant, one of such agreements, on Integrated Border/Boundary Management, is in direct conflict with the main objective of the Serbs in the north, preventing Pristina from sending its customs officers to the northern crossing points. The goal of the barricades was to show that the northern Serbs don't want to live in an independent Kosovo. Belgrade's overnight policy reversal—President Boris Tadic's call to remove the barricades—surprised many in the north. The majority of the participants supported the removal of the barricades, but they called for a more consistent and pragmatic policy, namely that Belgrade should have not supported them from the start. Some said that barricades could only be effective if used as a tool to achieve a goal (i.e. extracting certain compromises from Pristina or the international community) but not when they become an end in itself. "The barricades are no longer effective. From now on they could only harm the interests of the Serb community by further alienating the international community," one of the participants said.

The crisis in the north has become the most significant stumbling block for advancing Serbia's European integration and a serious obstacle for the consolidation of Kosovo's institutions. Belgrade and Pristina spend most of their resources dealing with the north instead of addressing economic problems, unemployment, corruption, and organized crime. Neither has come up with

a realistically feasible proposal to resolve the crisis so far. Pristina insists on the implementation of the Ahtisaari Plan while Belgrade asserts that the Serbian institutions in the north should operate unhindered according to Serbian laws. Both Belgrade and Pristina say a solution for the north should take into account the current realities, but they point out only the realities that are favorable to them: Pristina says Belgrade should accept the reality that Kosovo is independent while Belgrade says that Pristina should accept the reality that it doesn't control the north.

The sooner Belgrade and Pristina publicly acknowledge and confront these two different but simultaneously existing realities the better. Both sides should work together to narrow the gap between these two conflicting realities. Belgrade and Pristina should become more receptive to an Ahtisaari Plus model that would accommodate northern Serbs' demands for more security guarantees and self-rule and Pristina's and international community's fears of partition, a number of participants suggested. Some discussants argued that an Ahtisaari Plus model is the maximum the Serbs can obtain at this point but feared that the longer the Serbs wait the more difficult it may become to apply this model. The ball is in Belgrade's court. Belgrade should become more proactive, propose solutions, and not just wait for others to take the lead and then switch positions overnight, causing confusion among the Serb population in Kosovo of its real goals. An Ahtisaari Plus model should include stronger competencies for northern Serbs on education, healthcare, local governance, security, direct relationship with Belgrade, and "confederal" relationship to Pristina. It should be agreed in direct dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. In effect, adding a Plus to the Ahtisaari Plan provisions on the Serb community's rights. And this should be done without modification of rights for the Serbs in the south.

Serb representatives from the central part of Kosovo called all players involved in Kosovo-related policies to view the problem of Kosovo Serbs as a single problem and not as separate problems of the Serbs from the north and of the Serbs from the south. Otherwise, they cautioned, the consequences for the Serbs in the south could be catastrophic.

Belgrade needs to resolve the crisis in the north, or for that matter the Kosovo status dispute, not just to advance its European integration process but also to improve the lives of the people in the north, to strengthen its internal stability, and to improve its reputation abroad, a participant said. Belgrade is still seen as the regional troublemaker in many European countries, most notably in Germany after the clashes between northern Serb demonstrators and German peacekeepers. "It's naive to expect Germany to support your European Union candidacy when you shoot at its soldiers," one of the Kosovo Serb participants opined. He argued that northern Serbs should remove the barricades immediately and try to improve their relations with the international community. "Albanians have an advantage because they have good relations with the international community. Northern Serbs don't." Some feared that despite President Tadic's call to remove the barricades and stabilize the situation, the crisis will continue. Two of four mayors of the Serb-majority northern municipalities belong to Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), the strongest opponent of Serb integration into Kosovo's institutions and an aggressive rival of the governing Democratic Party. Another mayor comes from the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the strongest rival of the Democrats. At a time of pre-election campaign in Serbia, neither DSS nor SNS would take actions that could increase the ratings of the Democratic Party. Many expected the situation would only get worse until the Serbian election in late spring 2012 is over. There are indications that the Kosovo issue will be the main campaign topic for one more time. "Political parties will compete on who is more patriotic, all at the expense of Kosovo Serbs," a Kosovo Serb participant said.

“A realistic solution is what would be given to us, not what we would like to be given to us,” a Serb participant from Kosovo said. Any solution acceptable to the Kosovo Serbs should be acceptable to Belgrade, too. However, it won’t be an easy process to find a model to satisfy the expectations of the northern Serbs. But Belgrade should be more serious in the implementation of its policies and not justify its non-action by saying that it has no control over the northern Serbs. Belgrade funds them, thus it has a lot of leverage over them, a number of participants argued. Northern Serbs’ preferable option is Kosovo’s partition and their incorporation into Serbia. So far, no second preferable option has been articulated. A speaker suggested that a direct dialogue between Pristina and Kosovo Serbs, particularly northern Serbs, should begin as soon as possible. The focus should be on accommodating the remaining Serbs in Kosovo. He said that those Serbs that have not yet returned to Kosovo would most likely never do so.

Serbs from central Kosovo were adamantly against partition. “Serbs in enclaves in central Kosovo are unified in their position against partition.” Partition for Serbs in central Kosovo and eventual unification of Kosovo with Albania would be devastating for the Serb community. The Serb population is uncertain about its future and it trusts neither Belgrade nor Pristina, which, according to the speaker, both care about territory, not people. Northern Serbs should begin cooperation with the international community, especially with KFOR. Kosovo Serbs should know that in an eventual open conflict with KFOR, they would be the losers. “We can’t win against NATO.” Cooperation between Kosovo Serbs in the south and those in the north is essential for a sustainable future in Kosovo, regardless of its status.

Northern Serbs know what they don’t want—integration into Kosovo’s institutions—but not what they want, a participant pointed out. Belgrade can’t convince the northern Serbs now, even if it is pressured to do so by the international community, to integrate into Kosovo’s institution because it has urged them to do the opposite for more than a decade. These positions can’t be reversed overnight. Northern Serbs are not happy with the level of lawlessness in the north and they support the establishment of rule of law, but only if the Serbian laws are applied, not Kosovo laws. Some suggested that those putting up and defending barricades is connected to the organized crime who use the barricades for financial profit but that the problem is real. Many cautioned against ‘criminalizing’ demonstrators and barricades. Despite such dubious activities, the barricades and demonstrations, pointed out a Kosovo Serb participant, represent the will and the concerns of the majority of northern Serbs.”

The north Kosovo crisis is a chess game on several chessboards: Belgrade-NATO, Belgrade-Pristina, Pristina-international community, and Pristina-Kosovo Serbs. The objective of the game should be to provide sufficient security guarantees for the northern Serbs. The Ahtisaari Plan provides little guidance for the resolution of the crisis in the north; it doesn’t treat the north as a separate issue, it rather provides certain guarantees for the entire Serb community. Some participants suggested accepting the non-status part of the Ahtisaari Plan as an entry point and base a solution on the Z4 Plan offered by the international community to the Serbs in Croatia and rejected by them in 1995. A future plan, according to some participants, should provide more than the Ahtisaari Plan but less than what northern Serbs want. The plan should declare the north a demilitarized zone and provide guarantees that Pristina would not send its security forces in the north. The plan should also be a result of a direct dialogue, not an imposed solution.

Cooperation Between Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs

Kosovo Serb members in Kosovo's parliament spoke about the difficulties they face in the implementation of the sections of the Ahtisaari Plan related to the Serb community. Although it is part of the plan adopted by Kosovo's Parliament, the Albanian parties have rejected draft laws that declare Velika Hoca and the historic area of Prizren, which include a number of Serb churches, as protected zones. They asked for more coordination among Kosovo Serb political representatives and for tangible support from Belgrade. A participant proposed organizing joint Belgrade-Kosovo Serbs teams on specific issues. A number of members of the Serbian Parliament admitted to not having sufficient details about the Kosovo Serb parties and policies. But they pledged more communication with Kosovo Serb parties to better understand their objectives and the issues of concern to the Serbs in Kosovo, although a significant number of members of the Serbian Parliament are against cooperation with the Serbs in Kosovo's institutions.

Open communication and legalization of cooperation are essential. Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo's institutions should have transparent communication to avoid being labeled traitors or patriots. The Serbs in Kosovo's institutions need technical support in the form of trainings. Albanians have been trained for many years by international organizations on drafting amendments and working in groups. Most of the Serbs have only recently joined the parliament and don't have the experience to draft, debate, and critique amendments. Some, according to a speaker, rarely take part in the sessions.

Belgrade should also support communication between Serbian local authorities in the north and the international community, especially with KFOR. Regarding the return of the EULEX mission in the north, participants had different opinions: some suggested the immediate return of the mission while others said that EULEX has lost its credibility by 'taking sides' and shouldn't return.

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Following the meeting in Ecka, CIG was informed by one of the participants who had consultations within the Serbian presidency and the Serbian parliament. It was reported that a decision was made to establish, in early 2012, a consultative body to the presidency that would include elected representatives of the Kosovo Serbs with the participation of those working in the Kosovo institutions to give advice on future policies directed at the Kosovo Serbs and to establish an office at the Serbian parliament where the Serb members of the Kosovo parliament could solicit legal technical help.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Participants were divided into separate working groups of four and were asked to offer brief conclusions and recommendations. The following is a list of their conclusions and recommendations identified by CIG. They are not based on consensus. They are suggested either by the group or by individual participants.

- Northern Serbs should remove barricades immediately. In exchange, they should receive security guarantees from KFOR.
- Serbia's future should not remain hostage to Kosovo's status. Belgrade should resolve the Kosovo status dispute not only for the sake of its EU membership but also for its political stability and economic development.
- Belgrade in consultation with Brussels should nominate local government structures in the north that would be in charge of negotiating a solution on behalf of the northern Serbs.
- The dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina should continue regardless of developments in the north and the agreements should be implemented swiftly and fully.
- Concerns of Kosovo Serbs about accepting Kosovo identity cards and passports, which, according to a number of participants, amounts to giving up Serbian citizenship and identity, need to be addressed by Pristina and Belgrade.
- Elected Kosovo Serb representatives should be including in or at the very least consulted during the ongoing Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.
- Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo should intensify communication and especially the Serbs from the North and the Kosovo government.
- Northern Serbs should be offered a realistic comprehensive package solution.
- Serbs from the north and Serbs from the south should intensify their communication and try to come up with a joint minimum position on how they view the future of the Serb community in Kosovo.

List of Participants

English alphabetical order

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Dusan Janjić, Forum for Ethnic Relations

Dragiša Krstović, Liberal Democratic Party

Petar Miletić, Independent Liberal Party

Randel Nojkić, Serbian Renewal Movement, United Serb List

Stojanka Petković, G17 Plus Party

Dejan Radenković, Socialist Party of Serbia

Nenad Radosavljević, Radio/TV Mir

Momčilo Trajković, Serb Resistance Movement

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