

## **Kosovo Albanian Political Parties and the North**

### **Introduction**

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on October 2, 2012 in Pristina a roundtable for representatives of Kosovo's Albanian political parties, government officials, and members of the civil society including local non-governmental and media organizations.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the issue of the north in light of the upcoming Pristina-Belgrade dialogue and the possibilities of reaching a consensus on this matter among actors of the Kosovo Albanian political spectrum. Do Albanian political parties have consensus on the resolution of the problem of the north? Is it possible to improve cooperation between governing and opposition parties on the issue of the north? How can political parties contribute to a dialogue with the Serbs in the north? How can the civil society organizations help in reaching a national consensus on resolving the dispute in the north? The meeting served as a platform for different actors to express their own views regarding the issue.

Participants in the discussion spoke in their personal capacities. This report does not offer a complete overview of the discussions. It has not been reviewed by the participants and CIG is responsible for its content. The report was prepared by Arber Kuci, CIG's Program Coordinator in Kosovo.

The Kosovo Albanian political parties are united in their desire to resolve the issue of the north, but differ on the approaches. Some said since the north is an internal issue of Kosovo, it should be discussed only by those who live in Kosovo and Kosovo's institutions. Others left open the possibility of including Belgrade in the process, arguing that the problem is caused by the Serbian government's policies and presence in the north and cannot be resolved without talking to Belgrade. Most of the participants were sufficiently clear about the fact that resolving the issue would open the way for tackling other major problems for Kosovo such as economy, unemployment, and the overall standard of living.

### **Reaching an Interparty Consensus**

While the imperative of time was deemed important, the political positioning of Kosovo in relation to the international community following the technical talks conducted last year was considered unsatisfactory. Kosovo's position in the eventual political talks

about the north, some opposition party participants argued, is that of a team which knows that the game has been already sold but, nonetheless, wants to play. According to an interlocutor, territory rather than population has been the main concern and drive of Serbia's policy towards Kosovo. Kosovo already has, he added, a history of engaging in talks with Serbia on an ad-hoc basis, thus insisting that it is important for Kosovo to enter this dialogue only once the core elements upon which the discussion will be based are laid out. In order to reach this stage, the participant said that there are two main issues which must be addressed: first, an internal consensus among the Albanian parties needs to be reached and this could be done without a direct involvement of the international community; and second, Pristina should enter the dialogue with Belgrade with more options on the table, including those of territorial rearrangements. While the former is "hard but doable," the latter should be discussed under the terms of the international framework regarding territorial disputes. In this regard, this participant called upon the notion of 'reciprocity', referring to the relation between minority rights of Albanians in Serbia, namely in the region known as Presevo valley. The speaker argued that Kosovo has provided one of the best political frameworks for the development and protection of human rights of the Serb minority in Kosovo and Serbia should provide the same package to Albanians living in the south of its territory.

Another participant took further this point by noting that consensus among Albanian governing and opposition political parties is needed. He, however, noted that such a consensus or any form of unity should have a defined purpose and clear objectives. Lack of trust among the parties was mentioned as another potential obstacle in this direction. "Last year we were told that there will be no political dialogue [with Belgrade], only technical talks, and now we all know that was not the case," said the participant. Moreover, the discussant said that any national consensus on this matter is contingent upon the tackling of criminal activities in the north, a recurring trend which, according to the participant, was not combated by the government due to alleged involvement of certain politicians in such enterprises. Another point in which, according to the participant, the opposition supported the government was in July 2011 when Pristina moved to establish its authority in two border crossings in the north. "On 25 July, we supported the government, but the time since then has shown that that intervention had the sole purpose to get rid of one of the rights of any normal state, namely the right of intervention," stressed the participant.

Another participant in the discussion said that there is no vision among Albanian political spectrum as far as resolving the issue of the north is concerned. An eventual national consensus, the participant argued, should be built around different platforms that should be presented by each political party. It is through a joint analysis of all the ideas, he added, that the political parties should agree on a common ground. He also stressed the fact that more often than not, due to lack of these ideas political parties tend to rely almost exclusively on international community's input. But Serbs in the north, according to this speaker, often share the same concerns with Albanians in the rest of Kosovo. "I have met with [Serb] mayors of parallel municipalities. They tell me, even if we accept to be part of Pristina's political realm, who guarantees that our votes will not be stolen?" concluded the speaker.

Lack of initiative on the part of the Albanian political parties was also the main point made by another participant, representative of the civil society. According to this discussant, both the government and the political parties until now have engaged in rhetoric discussions rather than offering pragmatic solutions. Kosovo institutions have been asking the international community to serve a ready-made solution, whereas the international community has been asking Kosovo leaders to take action. The discussant argued that the government and the opposition alike are maneuvering “on a tactical, not on a strategic manner.” In order to engage in a more productive process, Pristina should establish a steady channel of communication with Serbs in the north. In the process, he argued, the government will be able to identify the interlocutors with whom eventual political and other arrangements can be made.

Kosovo’s political stabilization and its overall progress over the years has been part of the international endeavors which resulted in the declaration of independence in February 2008. In this context, Kosovo cannot give itself the freedom to decide on a number of major issues, such as the north, on its own. According to a government official, the issue of the north requires solutions rather than questions. “Kosovo is not in a position to draw red lines since its importance in the global framework of international relations is at best incremental.” The issue of the north, according to this participant, is clearly an international issue, as Kosovo’s state itself and its political and legal subjectivity is an international project. “The north is not an internal issue of Kosovo. Internal issues are electricity and sewage,” said the participant, adding that another feature resulting from such circumstances is Kosovo’s lack of coercive power as a potential tool for eventual changes.

In the last few months, the issue of the north has been on top of Kosovo government’s agenda and the political scene as well as the media. It has more often than not, according to the same speaker, contributed to a high polarization among its political parties as well as between the governing coalition and the opposition. In turn this polarization has created two easily identifiable political blocs. The first bloc, “the bloc of compromise” as he called it, is seen as cooperative and inclined to reach compromises; the other bloc exists solely on the premise of always opposing such an approach, which the participant labeled as “the bloc of denial.” Consequently, the north is often being used by the opposition parties to put Kosovo’s government at stake, rather than Kosovo as a state, arguing that talking to Serbia equals betrayal and not talking to Belgrade is a sign of patriotism. As far as the opposition parties are concerned, the participant noted that the months ahead for some will be an opportunity to change their approach towards the north while for others an opportunity to work towards overthrowing the government. The need for finding solutions, however, entails the necessity to compromise, and a compromise as such in politics is almost always unpopular. “We are not in the business of finding the truth but in the business of finding a compromise,” he said. “In order to preserve your sovereignty, another participants asserted, you must talk to those who violate your sovereignty.”

The idea that Kosovo could enter into a dialogue without the international community was deemed unrealistic by another participant. According to this speaker, first of all Kosovo should decide whether it wants to keep the north within its territory or if it is in favor of territorial swaps. If the general political thought is more in favor of the former option, then, the participant argued, Kosovo should know its instruments and its limitations in regard to resolving the issue. He also pointed at another set of circumstances which leave little or no room for Kosovo to maneuver in the current situation. "If the EU is expected to pressure Serbia to withdraw its security forces from Kosovo, then what if we have a consensus that we do not want to talk with Serbia? I do not think that Kosovo has the power to maneuver in such a way."

According to another participant, Kosovo cannot initiate the process, nor can Serbia impact it. In this respect, the rules are set and changed during the game. "We cannot ask for an either-or situation, but rather try to reach a consensus. Politics is a craft of adapting." Another participant stressed the need for Kosovo to ensure that the north of Kosovo does not slip out of the "international framework of politics and become another Nagorno-Karabakh." As long as it remains in the framework of international relations, Kosovo has better chances of resolving the issue in its favor, he added.

A participant from an opposition party said that Kosovo, as any other normal state, should have its own army and should further strengthen the capacities of its police forces. The coercive apparatus, according to this speaker, should be used in agreement with NATO and countries that support Kosovo, in case a military action is deemed necessary due to an eventual failure to resolve the issue of the north with diplomatic means. Another participant from the opposition, however, disagreed with this point of view. To him this idea seemed both as ineffective as well as utopian. "If I had two lives I would join you, but I have only one," he said. He continued by stressing the need for Kosovo to focus instead on becoming a 'normal' country and become attractive for all its citizens. Furthermore, according to him, Serbia is only obliged to talk to Kosovo because of the presence of the U.S. and the EU in Kosovo, stressing the need for Kosovo to arrange its political actions in the north with its international partners. All participants agreed that Kosovo's coercive power is at best limited and that force should be used only as a last resort.

One of the discussants also mentioned that there are two levels of dialogue that Pristina will most probably enter into in the foreseeable future. The first level of dialogue is between Pristina and Belgrade, and the second one is between Pristina and the north. Whereas for the first one a general consensus among the Albanian political spectrum is needed, the dialogue between Pristina and Serb representatives in the north does not necessarily require a wide internal consensus. Whichever the case, it is most certain, another discussant argued, that Serbs in the north will not discuss with authorities in Pristina without the involvement of Belgrade. This, he continued, should be understood by authorities in Pristina who should start considering the dialogue as a negotiating and policy tool, rather than as sealed and stamped compromise.

## **Conclusion**

The overall sentiment among participants in the roundtable was that resolving the issue of the north is crucial and urgent for the long-term political stability and economic development. Many problems that Kosovo faces today have been and are still being put off by the imminence that the issue of the north retains over the social and economic development. Some speakers said that besides the political representation of the Serb community, Kosovo offers few incentives for the Serbs, or for Albanians for that matter, to wish to live and prosper in the country. This point was highlighted by one of the participants who also noted that this issue is not only important for the Serb community but also for the Albanian majority. “What does Kosovo offer not only to Serbs but also to Albanians as incentives to live here?” asked one of the participants from the opposition parties, “Can we build an attractive Kosovo? Can we show to the citizens that Kosovo is not an interim state?”

A discussant in the roundtable suggested that the issue of the north should be used by Kosovo as a bargaining chip for pushing forward toward a greater economic development and further its EU integration, including achieving recognition from the remaining five EU member states. The fact that the issue of the north is positioned within the framework of the international politics, the speaker argued, means that it is still considered as a potential hotbed of conflict. A discussant proposed that perhaps Kosovo’s government and opposition should discuss the actual bargaining chips that Kosovo can put into play while resolving the issue of the north.

## **List of Participants**

**Sadri Ferati**, Democratic League of Kosovo  
**Ardian Gjini**, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo  
**Dukagjin Gorani**, Government of Kosovo  
**Lutfi Haziri**, Democratic League of Kosovo  
**Valdete Idrizi**, Community Building Mitrovica  
**Adriatik Kelmendi**, *Koha Vision TV*  
**Leon Malazogu**, Democracy for Development Institute  
**Shkamb Qavdarbasha**, Institute for Development Policy  
**Naim Rashiti**, International Crisis Group  
**Xhelal Svecja**, Self-Determination Movement  
**Nexhmedin Spahiu**, Analyst  
**Azem Vllasi**, Analyst  
**Shpetim Gashi**, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Alex Grigorev**, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Arber Kuci**, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Krystyna Marty**, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs  
**Norbert Ruetsche**, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs  
**Okan Uzun**, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs