

ESTABLISHING A REGIONAL FORUM A Roundtable Report

March 6, 2012
Novi Pazar, Serbia

A roundtable discussion regarding issues related to the development of Sandžak, organized in Novi Pazar, Serbia by the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) on March 6, 2012, with the support of the British Embassy in Belgrade, confirmed that a minimum level of consensus does exist among the community's different representatives. The roundtable participants agreed that it is necessary to work towards the establishment of more effective channels of communication among different actors in Sandžak and Belgrade. They also acknowledged that further progress requires additional political will rather than more money or investments. That is why the initiative for the creation of the Regional Forum would constitute an essential step in that direction. It would help deconstruct the ownership of problems, and would secure a unified regional approach toward the state (along with the legitimate consultations conducted inside of the community). Everyone consented that the Forum should have a multiethnic character, so to allow all members of the community to perceive their problems as common problems and resolution of issues as improving the lives of all of the inhabitants of these municipalities. In the beginning, the main role of the Forum would be in easing the political tensions during the upcoming election campaign.

Representative and Inclusive Nature of the Forum

The participants discussed the Forum's structure, its representative role, and permanency of its membership. It was agreed that in order for the Forum to voice the problems of all of the community members, it will be necessary to involve representatives of the political parties, local self-government, civil society, media, and the business sector. The Forum should gather key actors who are capable of establishing dialogue.

The participants discussed whether it would be more important to involve local self-governments or political parties. It was concluded that parties are at this moment more relevant to the Forum, as they hold the reins of power and have greater strength than the local administrative institutions. It was stated that 'the parties are those that govern the institutions'. One of the participants noted that it would be important to include the local self-governing bodies as they 'as opposed to the political parties, which function based on ethnicity, work for the benefit of all citizens.' The discussion also addressed the issue of whether the Forum meetings should be held with the highest ranking representatives, or whether deputies could attend too. There was also a proposal that the Forum should not invite the parties, but individuals from the parties instead, in order for the Forum to

gather ambitious persons who can actually spread the message further in their parties, and who could advocate for the implementation of the ideas discussed in the Forum. This would in turn help avoid conflicts within the parties, as individuals would not be representing the parties, but would participate in their own personal capacities. This approach brings into question the sustainability of the Forum and its consistency, because if 'a particular individual does not show up, and no one can replace him, then there is no representation.'

After the discussion, the participants agreed that it would be the most appropriate to invite two representatives per each political party, so as to ensure representation and consistency in participation. It was agreed that the responsibility within the Forum and membership should be individual rather than that of a party.

The discussion also addressed the question of the multiethnic character of the Forum and 'why there are few Serbs at these meetings'. As one of the participants noted, 'Are we going to be addressing the issues of the Bosnjaks or of all the people in this area?'. She asked 'if the questions raised are those of 200,000 or 400,000 people, and if they are being solved for the benefit of all or of the Bosnjaks only?'. Indeed, if the Forum has a regional character, then it is necessary to look for ways to include greater numbers of participants of the Serb nationality.

Functioning of the Forum

The participants discussed about how often the Forum's meetings should be held, and it was concluded that they should be held once every two months. In order to avoid absenteeism, it will be expected from the organizer to send timely notices as well as to suggest dates that would be most appropriate for the Forum's members.

At the beginning, before the Forum begins to operate independently, CIG should take the role of the organizer and the intermediary, a neutral actor that can oversee the process of the dialogue.

The discussants also concurred that the Forum needs to have a rotating chairperson who would suggest topics for the next meeting, coordinate participation, and facilitate discussions.

Media and relations with the media were considered an important issue – whether and to what extent should the media participate in the work of the Forum. The participants agreed that the media plays a key role in the dialogue. Namely, during election campaigns, the media tends to spread hate speech, which does not contribute to the establishment of peace and security, but to the deepening of divisions and spreading of fear and insecurity. Thus, it was considered by the participants that it will be important for the Forum to use the media in order to send the message to the citizens that divisions are not as deep as they appear and that dialogue in the region does exist. The media could also contribute to having the Forum's participants act responsibly toward any agreements reached within the Forum as they would be under media's public scrutiny. In addition to

following the dialogue, the media should also actively participate in the Forum's discussions by pointing out certain problems and providing its own analysis.

It was agreed to have joint press releases for the media, in order to ensure an apolitical Forum.

The Forum's Mission

The Forum should work on establishing closer relations of the region with Belgrade, but also improve relations within the Bosnjak community, and between the Bosnjaks and Serbs as well. Good interethnic relations and cooperation of all communities is of the highest importance for the region.

The Forum needs to focus on questions regarded as 'Sandžak's problems' and to allow frank and open discussions about ways of resolving them. The goal of the Forum is to find a 'common language' of all communities and representatives living in these municipalities. Only this kind of approach can enable the Forum to attract the attention of Belgrade.

First Tasks of the Forum

The participants suggested possible topics for the upcoming first session of the Forum in April. Even though initially they expressed interest in the topics of economy, it was agreed for the first session to address fairness of political campaigns, as that is the 'prerequisite for the further creation of a favorable business environment.' The formation of the Forum before the elections, as well as the joint appearance of the community's different representatives in public after the first meeting of the Forum, could ease the relations within the community. The participants believe that such a step would ease the tensions among the political actors and would also help create an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect before the elections. The public needs to be informed that different political parties do communicate and that the common good of the region is their main objective. A political dialogue among the three main Bosnjak political coalitions and parties representing the Serb population would reduce the usual tensions associated with any election campaign in Sandžak and will work toward alleviating fears of the population.

List of Participants

Adnan Causević, Bosnjak Democratic Community

Aida Ćorović, Urban-In

Esad Džudžević, Coalition List for Sandzak

Shpetim Gashi, Council for Inclusive Governance

Alex Grigorev, Council for Inclusive Governance

Jasna Hajder, British Embassy

Šerif Hamzagić, G17 Plus Party

Konstantin Jovanović, Socialist Party of Serbia

Mirsad Jusufović, Sandzak Democratic Party

Semiha Kačar, Sandzak Committee for Human Rights and Freedoms

Safet Krlic, Kasaba Enterprise

James Moor, British Embassy

Nick Ryder, British Foreign Office

Zibija Šarenkapić, Cultural Center DamaD

Ishak Slezović, Radio 100+

Ivana Stanojević, Council for Inclusive Governance