

# Policy Advice of the Serbs in Kosovo to the New Serbian Government and President

## Introduction

Following the election of the new Serbian president and parliament in May 2012 and the establishment of a new Serbian coalition government, the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized two roundtables for representatives of the Serb community in Kosovo and officials of Serbia's political parties and government, as well as members of civil society organizations. The roundtables were held in Arandjelovac and Belgrade on July 21-23, 2012. The discussions addressed the situation of the Kosovo Serbs and offered suggestions to the new Serbian leadership in light of its announced intention to change the state's Kosovo policy.

The majority of participants recommended that the new government's policy towards Kosovo should aim to relax relations between Belgrade and Pristina, to continue the EU-sponsored dialogue with the Kosovo government, to resolve the dispute in Kosovo's north, and to define and implement a strategy to protect the interests of Kosovo Serbs. They asked for the inclusion of political representatives of the Serbs in Kosovo from a full spectrum of political parties in any Kosovo-related decision-making processes in Belgrade. They also called for a wide political consensus to be established in Serbia over the most important issues related to Kosovo.

This report is a summary of the roundtable discussions. To encourage frank and open discussions, remarks have not been attributed to specific discussants and CIG asks for the understanding of those whose remarks have not been fully captured in this brief report. The participants took part in the roundtable in their personal capacities and their positions do not necessarily reflect those of organizations they represent. The participants have not reviewed the report, and CIG takes full responsibility for its content.

A number of participants reported that some of the statements of the newly elected Serbian leadership regarding Kosovo have produced confusion among the Serbs in Kosovo, especially those regarding the implementation of the agreements reached between Belgrade and Pristina in the EU-sponsored dialogue in Brussels. Some Serbian officials have said that the agreements violate the Serbian Constitution and consequently should not be implemented. At the same time, other officials from the same governing parties, and often the same officials, have said that these agreements are international obligations assumed by Serbia and thus should be implemented in full.

## Discussion Summary

The participants differed on the implementation of the agreements. Some said that the agreements should not be implemented, or at least not in Kosovo's north. Others, mostly from the south, said that selective implementation is dangerous for the more vulnerable part of the Serb community in the south. Selective implementation could harm the interests of the Serbs in the south and deepen the division between the Serbs in the north and those in the south. Regardless of their differing views, the majority of the participants believed Serbia had little choice but to implement the agreements in full before the end of the year, when EU is expected to make a decision on the date for starting negotiations for Serbia's EU accession.

Some participants said that the government will try to take a number of steps to improve its international image and reputation, but that these steps will be small. "It is too risky politically for the new government to take big steps," one of them said. Many predicted that the new government would implement the agreements and also continue the dialogue with the aim of reaching new agreements on telecommunications and energy.

The Serbian institutions in Kosovo—also known as parallel institutions—are expected to be the most contentious issue between Belgrade and Pristina and between Belgrade and the international community. Some said that this could become a formal EU condition for Serbia for obtaining the date for starting negotiations for EU membership. A decision that needs a more urgent resolution regards the two local assemblies that came out of the recent Serbian local elections in the municipalities of Zvečan and Zubin Potok in the north, an election that did not have the approval of Belgrade. Some participants said that the new government would have to close down Serbian political and security institutions in the north such as police, courts, and later the local administrations including the local assemblies. They predicted these institutions would be closed within the next six months under the pressure from the international community.

Many asserted that finding a solution for the north that satisfies all parties—Pristina, Kosovo Serbs, Belgrade, and the international community—would be difficult. Talks only between Pristina and Kosovo Serbs in the north would not produce any results either. Belgrade is a necessary interlocutor. In fact, Belgrade should be the counterpart in this dialogue and take the main responsibility for reaching a solution. The Kosovo Serbs, however, should be part of this dialogue since they will be at the receiving end of the potential agreements, the majority of the participants said.

The Kosovo Serbs recommended that the new government should engage them more in the debate on Kosovo. They also said that their own political and civil society representatives should be more active and blunt in telling Belgrade what they expect and want from it. A number of participants predicted that the new government would be more cooperative on Kosovo than the old government, pointing out to President Tomislav Nikolic's initiative to reach an interparty consensus on the Kosovo's issue within the Serbian parliament. They suggested that the president should come up with his proposal for such a consensus as soon as possible. "The Serbian government needs to have a concept about what its Kosovo policy should be and reach a

consensus on it.” Politics towards Kosovo cannot be on the basis of conditions exist or conditions do not exist—a strategy of the previous government.

Some said that Serbian parliamentary parties, except for the Liberal Democratic Party, do have a consensus on Kosovo, namely that nothing outside the Serbian constitution should be accepted, thus the constitution is the consensus. The shortcoming of such a consensus is that it is not possible to implement it in Kosovo, where the Serbian state institutions have no access. Many said that a consensual strategy that would be implementable in Kosovo would have to include additional unpopular decisions and compromises that might be in conflict with the present constitution.

A number of participants noted that Belgrade should be more realistic and pragmatic towards Kosovo. “All Serbs in Kosovo want to be part of Serbia, but this is impossible.” A speaker said that Serbia has made a lot of mistakes in the past, and continues to do so, but it is time to reverse the course. He pointed to the barricades in the north as an example of a recent serious political mistake of Belgrade. “Serbs have not benefited at all from these barricades.”

Some called on the Serbian government to do more to fight crime and corruption in the north. “The criminals dictate the conditions of our lives. A lot of money has been given for hospitals and water systems, but these service institutions are in horrible conditions. Where did this money go? Who should be responsible for this?” a participant asked. The speaker concluded that what has been done so far in the name of patriotism has been to the detriment of the people. “It is time to change the course.” He also said that the Serbian government should be more transparent about the agreements reached with Pristina. It should explain the details of these agreements and not cause confusion among the Serbs. “Serbs still do not know whether the agreements require the Serbs in the north to obtain Kosovo identity cards or Kosovo car license plates.”

Some participants strongly criticized the Serbian government’s policy on Kosovo, dubbing it as a “simulation of policy.” “There is a theater director in Gracanica but there is no theater,” one participant said. A number of participants, however, warned that ending this “simulation of policy” abruptly would affect many Serbs who have no other sources of income. “Thousands of people are working for the Serbian institutions.” Many suggested that the Serbian funds for Kosovo Serbs should be directed towards social development and the Kosovo Serbs should be included in the decision-making on the spending of these funds. In other words, Serbia should gradually close “fictitious institutions” and strengthen those that “contribute to the lives of the Serbs.”

The closure of the Serbian political institutions in Kosovo is expected to be a strong condition for making progress towards Serbia’s eventual EU membership. Participants discussed whether the closure of these institutions would imply recognition of Kosovo’s independence by Belgrade. A speaker said it would not. He noted that recognitions of countries are regulated by the international law. “The recognition of the Serb-majority municipality of Gracanica does not imply the recognition of Kosovo’s independence.”

The participants spoke of the shrinking political and intellectual capacity of the Kosovo Serbs, but they said “we have to work with what we have, not with what we wished we have.” They

said the debate should concentrate more on “what we can do rather than on what we cannot do. Let’s see for what things conditions exist, not only for what things conditions do not exist.”

Some speakers suggested that despite the importance of Kosovo for the Serbs, the topic of Kosovo should not dominate the debate in Serbia. The country has to focus on resolving the daily problems of Serbs in Serbia as well, such as unemployment, declining real wages, budget deficit, dismal state of economy, education, etc. To resolve some of these problems, it should work with the international community. “Serbia is a small country, a poor country, it needs to be reformed and it cannot do it alone.”

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The roundtable participants called for the development of a clear, pragmatic, frank, democratic and transparent policy on Kosovo based on an intra-parliamentary consensus and policy advice by the Kosovo Serbs representing their entire political spectrum. Such should be a brave policy of communicating honestly to the population the reality on the ground, what is and what is not possible in today’s Kosovo, and recognizing the international reality surrounding the Kosovo issue. A new policy should aim at consolidation and preservation of unity among the Kosovo Serbs and not at exacerbating their divisions. The overall immediate goal of Serbia’s Kosovo policy should be to preserve peace and security in Kosovo, preserve the Serb population living there, and improve their lives.

There are no fast and easy answers. It takes time to develop smart and sustainable solutions. Participation of all four factors is necessary in developing such solutions, i.e. Belgrade, Pristina, the international community and the Serbs in Kosovo. Both Belgrade and Pristina should show leadership and take responsibility for solutions that are sometimes unpopular. Every negotiation regarding Kosovo issues should be serious and the ongoing history of missed opportunities should be over.

The following is a set of conclusions and recommendations that came out of the roundtables. They are suggested by individuals or groups of individuals but *are not based on consensus*.

- Belgrade should prepare for a dialogue on the north with Pristina. Kosovo Serbs in the north *and* in the south should take part in this dialogue, giving their advice to both the Belgrade and Pristina teams, since they will be at the receiving end of the eventual agreements. Agreements with the Serbs from Kosovo should be made before each round of the talks in Brussels. Themes for future dialogues should be identified in consultation with the Serbs in Kosovo.
- Further integration of Serbia and Kosovo into the European Union is the only effective larger framework within which resolution of the Kosovo issue is possible. A number of participants suggested that Serbia should not obstruct Kosovo’s European integration and assist EU in implementation of the promises made in Thessaloniki in 2003.
- Belgrade should enter the dialogue in the north with clear objectives. Contradictory statements from Serbian officials about partition, autonomy, and special status for the north are confusing and misleading. The government should tell the Serbs which position it supports and discuss it with the Kosovo Serbs seeking their input in the policy formulation.

- Representatives of Kosovo Serbs should be more actively involved in the decision-making through individual consultations, participation in the work of the new Serbian government's Office for Kosovo, and participation in the teams for dialogue with Kosovo. Serbs who do not necessarily agree with the government's policies should also be included in the debate including those working in Kosovo's institutions. Such participation should not be selective, based on party affiliations. Belgrade should involve people who also have questions for the government, not only those who listen to it.
- One of the problems resolution of which should be considered a top priority is the issue of the Serbian (also known as parallel) institutions in Kosovo and establishment of local administrations acceptable to all—Belgrade, Pristina, and the international community. In dealing with the issue, the majority of the participants asked for a clear distinction to be made between political and service institutions. In reforming the institutions the goal should be streamlining these institutions and making them rational, efficient and functional leaving only those that are existentially necessary for the Kosovo Serbs. The bulk of the money presently spent on these administrations would be more effective if spent on the human development of the Serb community in Kosovo, a much more needed and noble cause. Improvement of the rule of law, justice, and security of the citizens in the north is another goal that should be considered as a priority by Belgrade while dealing with the future of the Serbian institutions in Kosovo. The present chaos in implementing and supervising the rule of law in north Kosovo must be resolved. Serbia should assist EULEX in fighting the organized crime in the north.
- The Serbian government should develop a timely and clear-cut policy on the Serb participation in Kosovo's central and local elections. Most participants called for support of greater Serb participation in Kosovo's institutions that would lead to strengthening of the Serb representation in those institutions. A careful consideration should be given to conducting any future Serbian local elections in Kosovo.
- Belgrade should establish cooperation with the new Serb municipalities formed in central and southern Kosovo.
- The Serbian government should promote and lead an interparty and public debate on Kosovo with the aim of forging political and institutional consensus on resolving the issue of Kosovo. The debate should take place between and within political parties, between governing and opposition parties, between and within the Serbs in the north and those in the south of Kosovo, and with the participation of the civil society. The debate on Kosovo should be free and democratic in which all actors and opinions should be represented in search for a consensual outcome. The debate should include the interests of the Serbs in the north and the interests of the Serbs in the south, options about the resolution of the north dispute, and the policies and strategies of the Serbian government in dealing with the Kosovo issue in general. Currently, there is declaratory consensus among the Serbs about non-recognition of Kosovo's independence but not on the concrete steps that should be taken to resolve daily problems. No more declarations are needed but a state consensus on each of the most important concrete issues facing the Kosovo Serbs, on what steps need to be taken, and on how and who will implement them.

These recommendations will be sent to officials in Belgrade and to representatives of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo's institutions.

## Participants

*English Alphabetical Order*

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**Dusan Gamser**, Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies  
**Oliver Ivanovic**, Civic Initiative “Serbia, Democracy, Justice”  
**Dusan Janjic**, Forum for Ethnic Relations  
**Dragisa Krstovic**, Liberal Democratic Party  
**Jelena Milic**, Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies  
**Smiljana Milisavljevic**, Democratic Party  
**Randjel Nojkic**, United Serb List; Serbian Renewal Movement  
**Krstimir Pantic**, Serbian Progressive Party  
**Stojanka Petkovic**, United Regions of Serbia  
**Dejan Radenkovic**, Socialist Party of Serbia  
**Nenad Radosavljevic**, Network of Serb TV Stations in Kosovo  
**Zivojin Rakocevic**, *Glas Juga*  
**Predrag Simic**, University of Belgrade  
**Aleksandar Stojanovic**, Center for Civil Society Development  
**Momcilo Trajkovic**, Serb Resistance Movement  
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