

Serb Engagement in Kosovo's Central Institutions

Introduction

The participation of the Serbs in Kosovo's institutions has gone through a bumpy process. After the war in 1999, the Kosovo Serbs formed a wide political coalition, Povratak, which participated in the first post-war elections in 2000 and won 22 seats, becoming the third largest political force in Kosovo's parliament. But the 2004 interethnic clashes led to the Serb withdrawal from the parliament and a boycott of the parliamentary elections of 2004 and 2007. Serbs, however, stayed in Kosovo's municipal institutions, judiciary, police, and public administration.

That all changed after Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008. Kosovo Serbs withdrew from all Kosovo's institutions and, in May 2008, the Serbian government organized its own local elections in Kosovo and established "parallel" institutions in Serb-populated municipalities. Receiving a substantial number of votes, the parallel institutions' legitimacy was uncontested until November 2009, when Serbs in the south voted in relatively large numbers in Kosovo's local elections and elected new municipal officers. Turnout in the north, however, was negligible.

The perception that Serb participation into Kosovo's institutions is tantamount to recognition of Kosovo's independence deterred the Serb community from voting in Kosovo's elections and the Serbian government from supporting it after Kosovo declared independence in 2008. This all changed after the Pristina-Belgrade agreement reached in Brussels in April 2013. In line with the agreement and encouraged by Belgrade, the Serbs in Kosovo's north voted in solid numbers for the first time since the declaration of independence in Kosovo's parliamentary elections held in June 2014. The Belgrade-backed Srpska Lista won 9 of 10 parliamentary seats reserved for the Serbs. The Serbs are entitled to two ministerial positions in the government. Many expect a complex relationship between Albanian parties and Srpska Lista in the coalition government, given that Srpska does not recognize Kosovo's independence and by extension its institutions. Many wonder what role would Srpska assume: a pragmatic or defiant role.

To address the role of the Serbs in Kosovo's institutions, the Council for Inclusive Governance organized on September 17 in Pristina a roundtable discussion for several Kosovo political and civil society representatives. Participants included representatives of Kosovo's Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), Self-Determination Movement (VV), and Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), mayors and representatives of Serb-majority municipalities, and a number of analysts. The roundtable was part of a two-year project on Kosovo's north and relations between Kosovo and Serbia funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The interlocutors and participants to the roundtable suggested that the new Serb representatives should be pragmatic and focus on issues that concern the local Serbs rather than on Serbia's national interests. The speakers listed a number of issues that included education, particularly the legalization of the Mitrovica University; healthcare, especially in working on a legal framework for the Serb clinics in Kosovo; privatization of companies in Serb-majority areas to provide benefits from the process to the local population; and agriculture aiming to increase production capacities and ensure access for the Serbs to Kosovo's local markets.

The report is largely based on the roundtable discussions but it also includes content from individual meetings with participants. To encourage a frank discussion, remarks have not been attributed to specific discussants. The participants took part in the roundtable in their personal capacities and their positions do not necessarily reflect those of organizations they represent.

Cooperation or defiance

Serb cooperation with the majority community is key to a successful performance in the institutions and improvement of the lives of Kosovo Serbs, a number of speakers noted. A participant with extensive experience in Kosovo's institutions said that cooperation with Albanian parties should be strengthened and that the international community should continue to facilitate it. Many Serb participants were concerned about the insufficient parliamentary experience of the Serb representatives. Unlike the Povratak Coalition, the new group does not have sufficient capacity to define and implement the objectives that advance the interests of the Serbs in Kosovo, a number of Serb participants, argued. Furthermore, they also lack election legitimacy since "they were elected by individuals that stuffed the ballot boxes in Belgrade," some speaker alleged. As a result, many expected that Belgrade would continue to negotiate with Kosovo's institutions on the behalf of Kosovo Serbs. Some interlocutors noted that this is not necessarily bad given the lack of political capacity of the Kosovo Serb community but were concerned that some in Belgrade may advance their own individual interests at the expense of the Serb community.

Kosovo's institutions should begin a genuine dialogue with Kosovo Serbs on issues of economic development, agriculture, education, and employment, a speaker from an opposition party recommended. He said that the opposition Albanian parties are committed to launch a substantive dialogue with the Serbs but "the Serbs are not yet ready to do it on their own, preferring Belgrade to negotiate on their behalf." Some speakers said that there is a risk that the new representatives would be seen as an extended hand of Belgrade and consequently not be taken seriously by the Albanian leadership. A number of speakers blamed the international community for allowing the alleged vote theft that enabled the election of a number of "pre-determined candidates." Some said that most of the candidates were "nominated rather than elected." But others justified the international community "for closing its eyes just to have the Serbs take part in Kosovo's elections."

The legitimacy of the Serb representatives is an "intra-Serb issue," a number of Albanian speakers said. The Albanians should not question the legitimacy of the Serb representatives. "This is what we have, and we have to work with what we have." After all, a large number of Albanian representatives in the last election were a result of "industrial theft" of the 2010

elections. He added that leadership's authenticity is overestimated. The Serbs had authentic representatives in the past but were not able to do much. The speaker noted that the Serbs in Kosovo have the right to consult with Belgrade, just as "Albanians have the right to consult with Tirana or Washington." "When the Serbs feel they have enough power and believe Kosovo is a good country, they will behave differently. Until then, Belgrade will continue to remain a player." Another speaker said that he agrees that the representatives are authentic, but "they are definitely not legitimate given the manner they were elected."

The direct dialogue between Pristina and the local Serbs may be more difficult than the EU-facilitated high-level talks, because it would be genuine, "not a farce like the Brussels one," a speaker said. He argued that Belgrade is not concerned about the Serbs in Kosovo. Serbs have more municipalities but not a better life. The Brussels dialogue gave substantial space to Belgrade but ignored the Kosovo Serbs, which still have no solutions for even basic services such as healthcare and education. Extra competencies for the municipalities in the north will not improve the lives of the Serbs there; what they need is professional and competent municipalities. He added that the dialogue with Serbs should focus on programmatic policies rather than on ethnic ones. "Let's move from ethnic politics to non-ethnic policies." All Kosovo's citizens are unhappy with the post-war governments, and that is why the Serbs should not only rely on "representation but also strengthen participation," so the dialogue will include more people than just the elected representatives. Kosovo Albanians and Serbs do not need to talk about reconciliation, they have not done anything to each other; the reconciliation should take place between Kosovo and Serbia, the speaker concluded.

The speaker criticized both Albanians and Serbs for focusing on the individuals in the institutions rather than principles on which policies should be based. He called on Albanians and Serbs to sideline the corrupt politicians who continue to benefit in the name of patriotism. "Let's not continue to treat our criminal and corrupt leaders as patriots, let's not protect those involved in organized crime and corruption."

There is no need to invent anything regarding the role of the Serbs in Kosovo's institutions; they represent the interests of the Serb community and trust in them will be build gradually. A speaker said that the international community has played a pragmatic role in the elections and that neither Serbs nor Albanians should expect them to resolve all their problems. The speaker said that Belgrade also facilitated the process and such facilitation should be welcomed. "Without Belgrade's support, the Serbs would not have taken part in elections and institutions." The dialogue did not do miracles but it enabled progress and set the resolution of many issues in the right direction. He said that the Kosovo Serbs have the right to consult with Belgrade and Albanians should not worry about it. "I would consult with members of Albania's government if I knew someone who could give me good advice." The Kosovo Serbs have lost a lot of time and need to begin to work immediately. He said that they should also avoid actions, such as the bridge park in Mitrovica, that could not only provoke the other community but also detract attention from the real issues. He said that the Albanians are more than ever willing to cooperate with Serbs and that the Serbs should show similar level of willingness as they would be the main beneficiaries. "60 million euros are at the disposal of the four municipalities in the north but their leaders are refusing to offer the necessary cooperation to receive the funds."

Some Serb speakers, however, noted that the Serbs are increasing the level of cooperation with the Albanians. They took part in Kosovo's elections and now are participating in Kosovo's institutions. A speaker said that more communication and cooperation is needed between Pristina and local institutions in the north. He said that both communities should begin to bring "ethnic walls down."

Conclusion

Though Kosovo's new institutions have not been formed four months after the elections and the new Serb representatives have not had the opportunity to engage in central politics, the majority of the interlocutors said they should establish good cooperation with their Albanian colleagues and suggested for them to immediately begin addressing issues of education, healthcare, and privatization in Serb-majority areas. None of these issues can be resolved without substantive cooperation with Pristina. Many Albanian and Serb participants believe that the participation of all Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo's political life - as part of the institutions and by voting in elections - will help resolve issues at the local level.

The prevailing opinion was that the Serb community itself should also become more involved and support its representatives with ideas and advice. Many said that it would take time to transform the present conflictual Serb-Albanian relations into partnership, especially when many "political elites of both communities are corrupt," but the conditions for such partnership are improving gradually.

Members of Srpska Lista have publically expressed their dissatisfaction with a potential inclusion of the Self-Determination Movement in a future coalition government, given "Self-Determination's nationalistic rhetoric." But some interlocutors say that if Srpska Lista can work with Hashim Thaci, who is sentenced to 20 years in jail in Serbia for alleged crimes against Serbs, and with Ramush Haradinaj, who is also accused by Belgrade for war crimes against the Serbs, it should also be able to work with people who may have a more nationalist rhetoric. Despite Srpska's objections, many speakers expect Srpska to join Kosovo's coalition government, regardless of the political parties it may include.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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Shpetim Gashi, Vice President, Council for Inclusive Governance
Ardian Gjini, Deputy Chairman, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo
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Marko Jaksic, Lawyer, Mitrovica
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Krystyna Marty, Ambassador of Switzerland to Kosovo
Ljubisa Mijacic, Analyst, Zubin Potok
Dardan Molliqaj, Secretary, Self-Determination Movement
Dragan Nikolic, Mayor of Partes
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Naim Rashiti, Senior Analyst, Balkan Policy Research Group
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