

Self-Determination Movement and Kosovo Serbs, An Uneasy Relationship

Introduction

The Self-Determination Movement (VV) and Kosovo Serbs have had an uneasy relationship. VV says Belgrade is the culprit, arguing that its actions are directed against Belgrade and Kosovo's government, not against Kosovo Serbs. Kosovo Serbs say many of Belgrade's positions, including on the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities, reflect their interests. Consequently, if you are against Belgrade and the Association/Community, you are also against Kosovo Serbs. Belgrade and Kosovo Serb interests, in most cases, are inseparable, many Serbs argue. Then Kosovo Serbs should themselves define and present their interests is VV's response. If the proposal for the Association/Community had come from Kosovo Serbs, VV's approach would have been different. It would have discussed its merit with Kosovo Serbs. But when proposals come from Belgrade, VV rejects them outright. VV's problem is with the demander, Belgrade, than with the demand, the Association/Community.

The allocation of political favors and economic benefits rather than ideology constitutes the core of the current political system.¹ Providing favors to their militants and oligarchs is the way

¹ Though Kosovo parties claim to represent liberal (left) and conservative (right) ideologies, their distinctions in practice are blurry. On taxes, VV favors progressive taxation, lower taxes for middle and low-income families and higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy. Other parties have no clear position. On social issues, all parties tend to be similar. Except for the president, no other senior official or party leader took part at a gay parade held recently in Pristina. They also have relatively similar positions on such issues as religion and abortion. On labor, they have no clear distinctions. No party has a position on minimum wage and they all support strong employee rights but in practice ignore massive rights violations by companies. On trade, except for VV, which is in favor of some restrictions to protect local producers, other parties favor free trade, though they offer no explanation why, is it because they want to keep prices lower or for other reasons. VV is also against privatization of major national assets, such as airports, energy, and telecommunications, while other parties support it. On healthcare and education, they all support a government-funded system that offers affordable healthcare and education for everyone. On social programs, they are all on the same page, perhaps mostly for political reasons. They all support massive welfare programs, including pensions to a large number of war veterans, 47000, and all only in passing talk about tighter controls or decreasing funding for these programs. Only pensions for war veterans take 10 percent of Kosovo's state budget. Ideologically, those that declare themselves conservative, such as PDK, LDK, and AAK, should be strongly against allocating 10 percent of the budget for a single social program. And VV should also call for more effective oversight. On foreign policy, there are no differences except for what kind of relations Kosovo should have with Serbia. On environment, there are no clear differences. No party has specific policies to repair the rivers and forests that have been degraded after the war and clean up thousands of illegal garbage dumps, which, many

parties maintain and strengthen their power. They support the continuation of this system because it allows them unlimited access to the national wealth and to run the country unchecked. Only a powerful political and economic society could undermine the corrupt elites, reform the system, and place Kosovo on an irreversible path to democratic consolidation. But reforming a system embedded in corruption is not an easy task.

These are some of the conclusions of a roundtable on the relations between VV and Kosovo Serbs organized by the Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) in June 2016 in Pristina for a number of VV representatives and members of Kosovo Serb civil society.

The roundtable is part of a larger project on relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo funded by and implemented in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

This report is solely based on the roundtable discussions and individual meetings with participants. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule. We have tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions, and ask for the understanding of participants whose remarks may have not been fully captured in this brief report. CIG's vice president Shpetim Gashi prepared the report and CIG takes responsibility for its content.

No integration without ‘liberation’

Albanian and Serb politicians have successfully integrated themselves, gained wealth and political power, and obtained the support of the international community as guarantors of peace and stability, but the society remains disintegrated, massively unemployed, politically weak, and ethnically divided.² Many speakers said that politicians occasionally make “patriotic” statements to “ensure” their voters that they care about national interests. But away from public attention, Serb and Albanian politicians get along very well, doing business together and becoming rich. They knock on their voters’ doors only days before an election to ‘reconfirm’ their own legitimacy. Some participants argued that the society votes but is not involved in policy-making. “It is simply a spectator.” Neither Serbs nor Albanians are integrated in the system. Many reported that only party militants and staunch supporters are able to find jobs. Replying to a Serb speaker’s concern about the low number of Serbs employed in public companies, a participant agreed that, for instance, very few Serbs are employed in the Kosovo Energy Corporation or Post and Telecommunication of Kosovo, but also there are very few employed Albanians not affiliated with major parties. They singled out Kosovo’s public television as one of the largest ‘political’ employers and whose only ‘public service is the production of bad news.’ The public sector employs over 80,000 people. To keep their jobs, people have to vote for the party that hired them. In essence, Serbs and Albanians face the same problem: institutional capture by their politicians. They do not need simply a process for interethnic integration, but a process for political and economic liberation, without which there cannot be interethnic integration.

environmental experts say it is already a national emergency. Kosovo Serb parties have so far dealt exclusively with Serb issues.

² A number of participants reported that Kosovo’s parliament and government have a large number of millionaires, and with an overwhelming majority of fairly rich people. At the same time, Kosovo is the poorest in Europe.

How is this “liberation” made possible? Kosovo needs brave and professional prosecutors and judges that can take on the rich and powerful. The existing system is not in position to assume such responsibility. It is weak, unprofessional, and controlled by politicians. Only massive public pressure, including street protests, could bring about such change. Some participants invited Serbs to join the Albanians in such efforts, including taking part in protests in Pristina squares. The society should take the leading role in political change and “turn politicians into spectators; not simply serve them as a voting machine.”

Many participants claimed that the politicians also control the private sector, which relies not as much on production but rather on privileged access to the public wealth. Economic liberalization has been pushed only as far as allowing the privatization of public assets, largely ‘bought’ by those running the state or their business friends. Some say that powerful political and economic individuals ‘collude’ to preserve their access to national wealth and run the country unchecked. This collusion undermines the adoption of reforms that would weaken monopolies and correct the market distortions, which currently provide rents for the powerful individuals and companies while imposing high costs on Kosovo’s society.³ A speaker said that the entire Kosovo’s government is characterized by an alliance between political and business elites expressed in terms of “rent-seeker and rent-giver relationship.” Some of the top businessmen are also in politics, including members of parliament and ministers. Some speakers fear that continuation of this unchecked process may reverse the post-war democratic process.

Political parties and businessmen have a reciprocal relationship. Parties rely on the businessmen for financial support—such as funding of electoral campaigns—while businessmen rely on the powerful party and government officials for favors and privileged access to economic resources. VV representatives hint on re-privatization of some assets if they come to power and would also make it difficult to acquire new wealth without abiding the law. VV is not popular among the business crowd. Some reported that the existing regulatory agencies are controlled by those who carry out the “selling and buying of assets,” so making implementation of a fair process of privatization impossible. Transformation of public property into private has been one of the biggest challenges to institutional building and a great opportunity for massive corruption in Kosovo. Many find suspicious the suicide of the former head of the Privatization Agency of Kosovo who reportedly stabbed himself over 12 times.

VV representatives said that the relation between the state and society should be restructured, aiming to weaken political and economic elites and strengthen the society and institutions. In this context, VV suggests overhauling the tax system—introducing progressive taxation where the rich would pay more—and adopt policies that stimulate production so transforming Kosovo’s consumption society into a production society and companies from rent-seekers to producers.

VV representatives argue that their party is best positioned to lead such a process, saying that they showed in Pristina, where VV has the mayor, that they could take on the powerful and the corrupt. Pristina municipal authorities have stopped the illegal construction business, which is

³ The overwhelming majority of companies rely on government privileges and tenders, which, according to various reports, are accompanied by major irregularities. Many say about 20 percent the public budget is wasted on public sector rent-seeking.

run by the most powerful, including President Hashim Thaci's brother, a speaker said. The speakers agree that VV has triggered a lively, though somewhat controversial, debate on the country's future direction. However, for a party to translate its ideas into political action requires the acquisition of power. "VV is stubbornly idealistic for the circumstance," an interlocutor said. Many say that without employing more pragmatism to "bring their ideals and principles closer to Kosovo's reality," VV may not be able to acquire power.

Serb skepticism on Self-Determination Movement

The Serbs share most of the VV's concerns on the state capture, corruption, and organized crime. They confirm that the Serb community is becoming weaker and weaker politically and economically, much weaker than the Albanian community. They also acknowledge that they have no power to go against the powerful politicians in Pristina or Belgrade, especially when a large section of the Serb community depends on Belgrade for jobs and salaries, just as a large number of Albanians depend for jobs on their party connections. The Serbs face similar political challenges. Though they have elections, their representatives are 'selected' by officials in Belgrade rather than 'elected' by voters in Kosovo. Once you get your position, then you have to show loyalty to the party to preserve the job. Professionalism is not a standard required for public jobs. It is not even an asset. Politicians fear professionals and those with integrity.

Despite sharing many concerns, Serbs are skeptical on VV's actions and ideology. They say VV has frequently contributed to raising tensions between Serbs and Albanians by focusing disproportionately on issues of ethnic character. VV's public rhetoric and some of the methods are extreme. They used violence in protests against former minister Aleksandar Jablanovic for reportedly calling mothers of the missing persons "beasts." However, they did not react even mildly when a tapped phone call revealed that the then Prime Minister Hashim Thaci had referred to the people of Malisheve/Malisevo as 'hunting dogs.' Then their actions and statements against the Association/Community are a lot stronger than their actions against corruption and organized crime, even though the latter is a lot more threatening to Kosovo's future. As a result, Serbs consider VV as primarily an anti-Serb party. It could partly be because the Serbs are not familiar with VV's overall ideology and actions, but it is largely because of the way VV represent itself through its extreme actions towards the Serbs.

VV's representatives deny that their actions are against Kosovo Serbs, saying that their problem is with Belgrade, not with Kosovo Serbs. They acknowledge that extreme measures are often required to counter Belgrade's extreme campaign to undermine Kosovo domestically through the formation of exclusively Belgrade-controlled bodies—such as the Association/Community—and internationally through intense lobbying to prevent Kosovo from joining international institutions such as UNESCO. They also explained that none of their actions were against the Serb community. VV does not protest against the Serb community, but against government policies and public officials. The anger about Aleksandar Jablanovic's statement was expressed in the main square in Pristina, not in Serb villages like in 2004.

Serbs are concerned not only with VV's rhetoric, but also with their policy positions on decentralization, reserved seats, double majority, and other aspects of affirmative action. VV representatives have often said that they would abolish these "positive discrimination" benefits if

they acquire power. Serbs say that VV should unambiguously explain whether they respect these rights for the Serbs. If not, Serbs would remain suspicious of VV.

VV representatives offered an explanation. They said that equality is VV's guiding principle in building a civic democracy and state but acknowledged that vulnerable groups might need additional mechanisms to ensure they have equal opportunities in the system. However, demands for such additional mechanisms should come from the community itself, not from Belgrade. "Our problem is not with the demand, but with the demander." VV would not have had issues with the Association/Community had it been proposed by Kosovo Serbs, but it would not agree to establish mechanisms that are requested by and would serve another state, rather than by a vulnerable community in Kosovo. VV representatives confirmed they will continue to object the formation of the Association/Community but are open to discussions with Kosovo Serbs about their needs. VV would positively respond to Kosovo Serbs' requests and needs, but would strongly object to Belgrade's requests. They said that Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic does not mean well for Kosovo and his plan to form the Association/Community is not to strengthen the Serb community in Kosovo, but to create a small Serbia within Kosovo.

Kosovo Serbs believe VV's fear of the Association/Community and of Belgrade's influence are exaggerated. A community of five percent, politically and economically weak, cannot undermine an overwhelming majority. They invited VV representatives to have direct discussions on why they need the Association/Community and look for approaches that address fears of both sides. Serbs agreed that the issues have been extremely politicized even before anything was put on paper. The Association/Community has already been characterized as a Republika Srpska, a Trojan horse, and a state within a state even though it still does not have a statute.

Unification of Kosovo with Albania is another VV position that makes Kosovo Serbs nervous. They believe they would become an insignificant community in an almost pure Albanian state. It would also have regional ramifications, especially for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. VV representatives argued that their approach includes only peaceful means. "If it's not possible to unite peacefully, then we move on as Kosovo."

Overall, the Serb perceptions about VV are mixed. Many believe with VV in power, Kosovo Serb issues would be addressed genuinely, but are not sure the solutions would satisfy the Serb community. Though VV representatives reiterated that they are against Belgrade's meddling into Kosovo internal affairs, not against Kosovo Serbs, many Kosovo Serbs remain skeptical. Also, though not fully, many Serbs say most of the Belgrade's positions on Kosovo reflect the interests of the Serb community, thus being against Belgrade's positions means one is also against Kosovo Serb interests. The overwhelming Serb community considers VV an extreme organization. VV representatives said that sometimes they may have not been careful enough with their statements but will make sure that their real message gets out. They also promised to translate their party program into Serbian.

Conclusion

Albanians and Serbs alike suffer from political oppression and economic deprivation. Both politics and economic activity have been monopolized and controlled by a small group of people.

Only economic growth coupled with social justice would liberate the society from this state capture. Cooperation between Serbs and Albanians on practical matters is essential to strengthen the society overall. “We need to cooperate with each other; not simply tolerate each other.” Tolerance has a negative connotation, meaning the other community is bad, but please tolerate it. Socio-economic cooperation and development neutralizes ethnic and identity issues.

Political integration without social and economic integration is inadequate because while the former takes place in nice government offices among largely corrupt politicians, the latter takes place in factories and universities among people who earn their living through hard work. To promote social integration, a bottom-up dialogue and cooperation on practical matters—agriculture, environment, access to markets, and education—is necessary and where Serbs and Albanians take part as individuals in their civic rather ethnic capacities. Common interest on these issues is stronger than identity.

More frequent and substantial communication between VV and Serbs would contribute to increasing understanding of each other’s positions. “We can still disagree but at least we will have a better idea about what we are disagreeing about.” VV confirmed that it wants to strengthen cooperation with Kosovo Serbs but will continue to oppose Belgrade’s policies. “VV needs partners in the Serb community, not Belgrade’s spokespersons.” VV representatives said that most of the characterizations of VV as an extreme party as simply portrayals of government-controlled media and hoped that direct communication would clarify these media portrayal. Kosovo Serbs, on the other hand, should become more active politically and socially, taking more homemade initiatives, including forming an independent Kosovo Serb party.

The approach to integration should change. Interethnic integration should not be a goal, but a consequence of social and economic integration, so the focus should be on the latter. A precondition for this integration is authentic and independent politics that is based on concepts, not on individuals. But the international community and the governments in Pristina and Belgrade have excluded the authentic and the independent from the process, mostly because they, unlike “corrupt politicians,” do not offer “easy solution and quick fixes.” Interethnic relations should be based on civic cooperation, gradually making ethnic identification irrelevant.

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