

Kosovo Serb Political Engagement: Are There Alternatives to Boycott?

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a roundtable for a number of Kosovo Albanian and Serb political party representatives. The meeting was held on December 6, 2016 in Pristina. The objective of the discussion was to analyze the political boycott of the Serb List on their participation in the Kosovo parliament and government, the boycott's impact and search for potential better alternatives. The Serb representatives complained that Kosovo's government has not given them the necessary space to fulfill their goals, especially the one on the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities, and thus boycott remained their last option. Other speakers said that the Serb List is ineffective largely because it acts as Belgrade's political tool rather than as a genuine and authentic Kosovo Serb political force.

The meeting was supported by and organized in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Trust is necessary for sustainable inclusion of Kosovo Serbs in institutions and their cooperation with their Albanian colleagues, a speaker said, adding that trust is getting weaker by day. Serb representatives should be in decision-making positions and they should work towards implementing their coalition agreement with LDK and PDK, which includes the formation of the Association/Community. He said that Serb representatives are not given sufficient space to implement their political objectives, and that the law on Trepca derailed the process entirely. The speaker also mentioned the lack of freedom of movement for Kosovo Serbs, pointing to the case of Mushtishtë, where a number of Kosovo Serbs were not allowed to visit their homes. Another speaker said that the freedom of movement remains a problem in some parts of Kosovo. "Serbs can not go to Mushtishtë while Albanians can not go to the north."

Albanian speakers agreed that trust and relations between Serbs and Albanians remain fragile. "The relations might look good on the surface but once we scratch a little a bit, we find little foundation." A speaker said that Serbs should be active participants in the political process and address real issues. Interethnic relations are important not only for integration but also for Kosovo's economic development. He suggested that Kosovo politicians should not base their political engagement on ethnic issues but also on economic ones. "Ethnic issues are simply manipulated because, unfortunately, they still

bring votes, though admittedly less and less.” “Every factor involved has equal responsibility for the current situation and for resolving it,” a speaker pointed out.

Kosovo Serbs and their Serb List should become a bridge rather than a divide in the relations between Kosovo and Serbia, a speaker argued. He said that fighting through boycott is not successful and it only damages the Serb List, which is seen in Kosovo simply as an extended hand of Serbia. The speaker said that Kosovo’s government has a lot to be blamed for but that the Serb boycott is not the right response. The problem is that Kosovo Serbs do not understand what is their leverage and do not know how to use it. “They have a lot of power in their hands; they can block laws in parliament.” It is in the interest of the Serb List to build its own integrity and become a serious political force rather than remain someone else’s tool, the speaker said.

Another speaker argued that Kosovo Serb representatives want “benefits without responsibilities.” The north municipalities receive funds from Kosovo’s budget but refuse to apply Kosovo laws. This is the reason the fund for the north has not been used yet. Serb representatives refused to accept Kosovo’s legal procurements, thus 15 million euros are simply sitting there. They also refused 13 million euros in capital investment from the Kosovo government. But Pristina took a practical approach nevertheless, and distributed most of these funds. Pristina is not against Kosovo Serb consultation and cooperation with Belgrade, but they should advance and represent their and Kosovo’s interests, the speaker concluded.

It has become fashionable to accuse Belgrade for everything all the time, a speaker argued. But the success in the north is thanks to Belgrade. He explained that people in the north are disappointed and disoriented by many statements of Serbian and Kosovo officials as well as by the events on the ground. “Kosovo officials say your capital is Pristina, while Serbian officials say you are part of Serbia but should integrate into Kosovo.” For real integration to take place, Kosovo Serbs should feel part of and welcomed in Kosovo. There are many things the Kosovo government can do in the short term: respect the law on languages, improve quality of translation of official documents, and improve freedom of movement. It could also offer more information about the Brussels dialogue; people in the north have very little information about the consequences of the agreements for the north.

Food for thought

Below are a number of statements, questions, and ideas mentioned at the meeting and were considered as potential points to be addressed in CIG’s future meetings.

- How to make the Serb community a bridge rather than a divide between Pristina and Belgrade?
- Kosovo Serbs need to define and utilize their political leverage. They can be more effective and powerful than they are now.

- What happens after the boycott? Boycott is a legitimate political tool but an analysis is necessary to see whether it brings the desired results and whether there are better alternatives to address the existing problems. Kosovo's opposition parties also boycotted the parliament for a period of time, though they have now returned, after, many say, realizing that their participation is more effective than boycott. Some suggested that the Serb List could decide to boycott certain sessions, but not the entire parliamentary work.
- Freedom of movement is not good either in the north or in the south (examples mentioned were Mushtishtë, Gjakova, and Kosovo's Prime Minister's visit in the north). Some speakers said they were disappointed by the lack of strong statements by the Albanians to condemn the prevention of Serbs to visit their homes. Also, many said that the statements by Serb officials, especially local institutions in the north, about the Prime Minister's visit were inappropriate.
- Is Belgrade's involvement in Kosovo all bad? Could the progress in the north have taken place without Belgrade? Some speakers said that the process of integration in the north is primarily thanks to Belgrade. Some asked if Kosovo Albanians say Belgrade's involvement is not good, then why Pristina is primarily talking to Belgrade bypassing Kosovo Serbs? Pristina itself is facilitating Belgrade's involvement in Kosovo's affairs.
- The development fund for the north has accumulated over 15 million euros but is not being utilized for political reasons. A way should be found to invest the money in the north.
- The Association/Community is the main part of the coalition agreement, and as such it needs to be implemented by the current government. It would be difficult for Kosovo Serbs to take part in the new elections without the Association/Community.
- Serbs in the north remain disappointed and disoriented. Everyone talks and decides about them, but nobody asks them about anything.
- More time should be spent on bringing on board the unconverted, more consultation even at the cost of slower decision-making, like the Swiss model which may seem inefficient but is sustainable.
- Normalization between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and between Belgrade and Pristina are different processes. An internal dialogue to address the former is necessary.
- The tone of communication between Serbs and Albanians should become more professional.
- A lot of progress has been achieved, but the process is still far from the desired target, which is full normalization, and Serbs and Albanians should not spend another 17 years to reach this target.

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. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule.

Participants

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