

**CIG**

**COUNCIL FOR  
INCLUSIVE  
GOVERNANCE**

# **BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE SERB COMMUNITY IN KOSOVO**

**Conference Report  
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**Council for Inclusive Governance**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a roundtable discussion on the sustainability of the Serb community in Kosovo held in Vienna, Austria, on July 30 - 31, 2010. The objective of the meeting was to analyze current strategies and policies of the Kosovo Serb political leadership and of the Serbian government and to formulate additional policy recommendations. Serb political party and civil society representatives from Belgrade and Kosovo multiethnic municipalities participated. The meeting was part of a program on the future of the Serb community in Kosovo funded by a generous grant from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

The discussants analyzed the effects of the current policies and debated a set of critical issues facing the Serbs Kosovo. Discussions focused on the pragmatic details of these policies and ways to adjust policies to the changing situation on the ground. In terms of sustainability, the participants recommended *consolidation of the Kosovo Serb political forces; resolution of the issue of parallel institutions in Serb-majority municipalities; and modification of Belgrade's policies towards Kosovo Serbs and decentralization of its policymaking process, giving Kosovo Serbs a bigger role in the formulation of policies*. Other more general issues such as education, employment, political participation in Kosovo's public life, and cooperation with the international organizations in Kosovo were also discussed.

There was wide agreement that the policies of the Serbian government and of most Kosovo Serb parties are concentrated in protecting the higher national interests, Serbia's territorial integrity, and only secondarily address the problems affecting the lives of the Serbs in Kosovo. The Serbian government should continue its political fight against Kosovo's declaration of independence, but it should also formulate policies and strategies that specifically address issues that are key for the future of the Serbs in Kosovo. The political situation following the declaration of independence has been volatile, making it impossible to formulate long-term policies. Some participants considered that Belgrade's actions on Kosovo in the past two years were ad hoc responses to certain problems rather than strategic policies to support the development of the Serb community. They suggested that, now that the situation has somewhat stabilized, the Serbian government as well as the Serb parties in Kosovo should modify their policies, focusing largely on the needs of the Serb local population. These policies should also clearly distinguish between Serbia's national interests and the Kosovo Serbs' local interests.

Inevitably, the relations of Kosovo Serbs with Kosovo's institutions and the international organizations in Kosovo were also discussed. While the cooperation of Kosovo Serb with Kosovo's central institutions was considered less urgent, many discussants appealed to the Serbian government to urgently support cooperation with local institutions. A strategy of "accepting but not recognizing" the institutions of Kosovo was proposed as a compromise solution to improve the political situation of Kosovo Serbs without harming Serbia's fight against the declaration of independence. Cooperation with the international organizations, including those that recognize Kosovo's independence, such as the International Civilian Office and many foreign embassies, was considered equally important.

The discussions indicated that the Kosovo Serbs are concerned that in the shadow of the status dispute – the opinion of the International Court of Justice, the resolution to the United Nations General Assembly, and debates on a special status for the north of Kosovo – the attention to their situation by Belgrade, Pristina, and the international community will further decline.

The report reflects the opinions and positions of the discussants, although it does not offer a complete overview of the discussions. CIG is solely responsible for its content.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Leadership development**

*Create an authentic Serb political leadership to articulate and advance the goals of the Serb community and, when possible, integrate into the institutions of Kosovo to protect the interests of the Serbs from the inside.*

Substantial gains have been achieved in the political development of the Kosovo Serbs, but much remains to be done in consolidating political party structures and ensuring that the elected representatives are able to effect change. Most of the Kosovo Serb parties are branches, without any real decision-making power, of the political parties in Belgrade. Those with headquarters in Kosovo, such as the Independent Liberal Party, received few votes in a series of elections largely boycotted by the Serb community, making it difficult for it to claim wide voter legitimacy. The rather large number of political parties and their aggressive competition for a relatively small number of votes, coupled by their policy and ideological differences, has resulted in the fragmentation of the Kosovo Serb political spectrum.

The process of political development of the Serb community has not followed a linear course. While the Kosovo Serbs managed to form a wide political coalition, Povratak, in the first post-conflict election and become the third largest political force in Kosovo's Assembly, they were later splintered into several smaller political parties with conflicting objectives and personal grievances. In addition, the animosities between Albanians and Serbs, and especially the 2004 unrest, led to the complete boycott of the Kosovo institutions by the Serb representatives. This 'deactivation' of the Serbs from the political process was one of the main factors that contributed to the weakening and splintering of the Serb political forces.

After the political boycott and 'deactivation' of the Povratak, Serbs in Kosovo were mostly represented by branches of political parties of Serbia, dominated by the Serbian Radical Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia. Despite several attempts by various Serb politicians, they have not been able to restore the umbrella leadership once represented by the Povratak. Competing political interests and conflicts between these branches have often been blamed for the inability of the Kosovo Serbs to consolidate a representative and legitimate Kosovo Serb political coalition. Even Povratak had never become a homogeneous body due to these existing factions. Major disputes between parties in Belgrade were often transferred to their branches in Kosovo.

The political parties in Serbia need to review the roles of their branches in Kosovo. In order to move towards the formation of a Kosovo-based leadership, these branches need to have more independence in making decisions at the local level that mostly reflect the needs of the Kosovo Serbs. The party branches have been involved mostly in protecting Serbia's national interests and have only secondarily dealt, often unsuccessfully, with the local issues. Many participants asserted that there also exists a lack of coordination and understanding between the party headquarters and Kosovo party branches. The leaders of political parties in Serbia have often stated that they want their representatives in Kosovo to deal with "local, not global, problems."

The consolidation of the Kosovo Serb political parties is difficult without a commitment of political parties in Belgrade and their branches in Kosovo, Kosovo Serb parties, and Serbian governmental representatives responsible for Kosovo to harmonize their policy objectives and move towards forming a Kosovo-based political coalition that would represent only the interests of the Kosovo Serbs. The steps towards achieving this objective are to modify the role and mission of Belgrade party branches, to specifically deal with local problems in their localities; launch a debate among all Serb political stakeholders in Kosovo to formulate a common strategy; and in the last phase form a political alliance that would run in elections and represent the Serbs in institutions.

Serbia's political parties in principle should not be against a joint review of policies and strategies of their party branches in Kosovo, but few expect them to take the initiative. The initiative should come from the Kosovo Serbs themselves. The Kosovo Serb parties should first agree on a cooperation framework, draft their joint objectives and goals, and then go to Belgrade to present their colleagues with the agreed agenda and ask for their support. Both Belgrade party headquarters and Kosovo Serbs will benefit from a Kosovo Serb political coalition: Belgrade parties will benefit from policy input of the Kosovo Serbs while the Kosovo Serbs will become an active political factor in Kosovo.

Improvement of party structures and interparty relations are preconditions for a successful political alliance. Insufficient communication between parties and the perception that Belgrade decides about everything have contributed to a feeling of helplessness, ultimately discouraging serious home-based initiatives. Many Kosovo Serb politicians admitted that they have not tried enough to work with each other, and that no formal policy modifications have ever been suggested to Belgrade.

The international community could also help in consolidating the political structures of the Kosovo Serbs. The international organizations in Kosovo should provide trainings to Serb political parties, assist them in the formulation of political party platforms and policy-making process, and, when possible, facilitate the formation of a Serb political alliance. The international community could be an important ally of the Kosovo Serbs in making sure their voice is heard in Kosovo's political institutions and that they will not be outvoted and ignored on essential issues. Therefore, they should intensify cooperation with the international community and ask for more financial and technical assistance to improve the capacities of political parties and municipal institutions in Serb-majority municipalities.

The fundamentally different political circumstances of the Serbs in the south and those in the north make the establishment of an umbrella Kosovo Serb political leadership that would represent the entire Serb community a mission impossible. They face different problems and, therefore, they will be represented by separate leaderships for the time being. Many expect the interests of the north to be represented by Belgrade until a solution to the status dispute is found. Debates about potential division, exchange of territories, and special status for the north make the inclusion of the Serbs in the north in initiatives aimed to improve the sustainability of the Serb community in Kosovo less appealing. Therefore, any joint Kosovo Serb political force will most likely include only the Serbs in the south in the short term. But this is a good first step, concurred the participants.

### **Institutional development**

*Consolidate the local institutions in Serb-majority municipalities and search for a way to eliminate institutional duplication.*

The integration of the Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo's institutions of self-governance established after the conflict went through a bumpy process. The Serbs took part in elections and joined institutions, but they had not been able to actively take part in policy-making and policy-implementation, mostly due to post-conflict interethnic animosities. Nevertheless, they managed to play a crucial role in these institutions and improve the situation of their community. In the 2004 elections the overwhelming majority of the Serbs boycotted the elections and Kosovo's institutions in general, but they did not form parallel institutions. This all changed after Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008.

In May 2008, three months after the declaration, the Serbian government organized its own local elections in Kosovo and established Serb municipal institutions, known as parallel institutions, for the first time since the end of the conflict. Although these institutions served a purpose in the past two years by providing documents, education, health services, and distributing financial assistance to Kosovo Serbs, their existence, according to a number of participants, has become problematic in some Serb-majority municipalities in the south now that the Serbs have elected another pair of institutions through a solid turnout in Kosovo's elections.

The Serb-majority municipalities are too small to have two pairs of local institutions. The relatively high participation of Serbs in local elections in Partes, Strpce, Klokot, Ranilug, and Gračanica attests to the increasing level of legitimacy of the Kosovo elected local institutions and declining influence of the parallel institutions. But simply eliminating the parallel institutions is not recommended since they continue to play a role in providing assistance to the Serbs. A potential temporary solution is to replace the parallel institutions with offices staffed with unelected professionals who would be responsible for carrying out the services.

Some participants also suggested the inclusion of the representatives of parallel institutions in the Kosovo local institutions. This will be a win-win situation. The representatives of the parallel institutions would continue to serve their community, although in another set of institutions, and this will be especially important now that the effective functioning of the parallel institutions in the south is becoming increasingly difficult. The Kosovo-elected municipal institutions will also

benefit from the institutional experience of representatives of the parallel structures and become more effective in responding to the needs of their community. There was general agreement that the ultimate beneficiaries of such arrangements will be the local residents.

Belgrade's support for such an initiative is crucial. Belgrade officials together with representatives of the local institutions should discuss together to find a way to combine the capacities of these institutions. The Serbs in these municipalities should also launch such discussion themselves to find some acceptable models.

The parallel service institutions in the south, such as clinics, are having difficulties in their operations. Some form of integration into Kosovo's larger healthcare system was suggested. At present, when almost every issue is politicized, such integration is not possible but debates about the costs and benefits of such integration should no longer be taboo. Lack of trust in Kosovo's healthcare system was mentioned as a major obstacle. Discussions between representatives of Kosovo's healthcare institutions and representatives of Serb community's clinics should take place to find ways to build trust among their populations and make the services of their clinics and hospitals available to all residents. Some participants mentioned that Serbs in the Gjilan/Gnjilane region needed to drive for hours to clinics in towns in Serbia for simple services, instead of driving a few minutes to the hospital in Gjilan/Gnjilane.

Education is the most difficult issue: there are no higher education institutions for the Serbs in the south. The closest Serbian-language college is in Mitrovica. Most of the Serb students go to colleges outside Kosovo and, some participants explained, they never return. "They have many reasons not to return." Unless some appealing incentives are created now, the brain drain syndrome will damage the Serb community. Gracanica was mentioned as a viable municipality to serve as an urban center for the Serbs in the south. Establishing a number of college departments is a possibility, but it requires the commitment of Pristina and the international community as well. However, in the long run, when education becomes less politicized, conditions could be created for Serb students to attend studies in Kosovo's private and public universities, especially in those where the language of instruction is English. There is an ongoing debate among the Serbs about education, several ideas have been put forth, but no strategy has been drafted yet. Return of refugees was mentioned as a factor that would contribute to improving educational human resources.

Institutional development is crucial for the sustainability of the Serb community. Kosovo Serbs cannot rely on social benefits from Serbia for too long. This is not sustainable either for Kosovo Serbs or for Serbia. These funds should be used to strengthen institutions that create business and employment opportunities and incentives for Serbs to stay and build lives in Kosovo.

### **Belgrade's policy**

*The expected modification of Kosovo policies by Belgrade should reflect the pragmatic thinking of Kosovo Serbs.*

Policymaking in democratic and democratizing societies reflects to a considerable degree the public opinion preferences. The tough position of Belgrade towards Kosovo after the declaration

of independence reflected the mood of the Serbian public opinion and of the Serbs in Kosovo. But now there are indications that the opinion of the Kosovo Serbs is shifting towards addressing issues in a more pragmatic way, especially in dealing with issues that are essential for their sustainability. The rather large turnout of the Kosovo Serbs in the recent local elections in Partes, Strpce, and Gračanica indicates that the Serbs south of Ibar River favor more pragmatic policies. But those in the north also support the establishment of rule of law and institutions that implement it.

Beggars can't be choosers. This cliché illustrates the relationship between Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs. Kosovo Serbs rely on Belgrade for their existential issues and believe that this relation prevents them from being open and frank with Belgrade politicians on what needs to be done. In such situations, telling your 'provider' what he likes to hear is a better bet than being frank. In addition to this dependent relationship, the emotional loyalty to Belgrade is also strong. A participant stated that even though he has joined the institutions of Kosovo, he will always think of Serbia as his own country. The majority of participants stated that pragmatism should be applied when addressing local issues.

The policy change should start with the management of funds: better fund management and transparency is required. And more funds should go towards education and institutional development. Belgrade's decision to abolish the mayors of Kosovo municipalities that have no substantial Serb population was, according to several participants, welcomed by the Serb population.

Kosovo Serb participants stated that Belgrade should actively involve them in the process of making policies on Kosovo. "We only receive recommendations and instructions and we become executors of these instructions. We should also be involved in articulating these recommendations and instructions." There was general agreement that Serbia should not recognize the independence of Kosovo but agree to the integration of Serbs in Kosovo's institutions, at least in the local ones. Some stated that, unlike for the Serbs in the north, for the Serbs in the south cooperation with Kosovo's institutions is indispensable and in the long run inevitable. But the sooner it happens, the better.

Belgrade's official policy is against communication and cooperation with Kosovo's institutions. Some participants stated that the major and the most visible casualty of the policy of non-cooperation with Pristina is the Kosovo Serb community south of the Ibar River. "Kosovo Serbs in the south are caught up in the crossfire between Belgrade and Pristina." It is possible for the Serbs to work with the Kosovo institutions on existential issues without compromising Belgrade's official policy on Kosovo. A strategy allowing Serbs to take part in Kosovo institutions without undermining and compromising Serbia's fight for Kosovo should be formulated. And this issue does not have to wait until a resolution between Belgrade and Pristina is found. "The Kosovo Serbs will be a minority even if Kosovo remains part of Serbia. Therefore, the issue of Serb integration or non-integration does not have to wait until a solution between Belgrade and Pristina is found."

There are indications that Belgrade is responding to these pragmatic preferences of Kosovo Serbs. Although Belgrade did not support the participation of Serbs in local election in Partes, it

did not take any actions against the newly elected local officials. Some stated that they are in communication with various Belgrade officials to find ways for Belgrade to support them. Another suggestion was to build new communication channels between political elites in Serbia and Kosovo to share and analyze information. “To make good decisions, you need to have good information and input, and Kosovo Serbs are the best partner for Serbia to provide such information and policy input.”

Belgrade can also help in narrowing political differences between Serbs in the north and those in the south. The Serbs in the north need to better understand that the situation of the Serbs in the south is more complicated, and that Serbs there rely on the Kosovo government for many services, including electricity, registration plates, and security. The issue of potential partition also needs to be clarified: Serbs in the south believe that partition is not a good option as it leaves more than half of the Kosovo Serbs within “the state of Kosovo.” It is believed that about sixty percent of the Kosovo Serbs live south of the Ibar River. They fear that partition could also lead to a massive displacement of the Serbs in the south.

## **CONCLUSION**

While the internal engagement of a wide spectrum of Kosovo Serbs is a prerequisite for consolidating political leadership and strengthening institutions, political assistance from Belgrade remains crucial. Belgrade’s role is indispensable especially in resolving the issue of the parallel institutions in Serb-majority municipalities in the south. The municipalities of Gracanica, Strpce, and Partes have two pairs of institutions, both claiming the legitimacy of the people. Although some temporary agreements have been achieved between the two not to impede on each other’s work, the potential for future disputes at the expense of the Serb population remain. Participants recommended that a long-term solution should reflect the interest of the people of these municipalities. The interest of the municipalities is to have the pair of institutions that are better positioned to advance the interests of the population.

Kosovo Serbs suggested that taking into account the fact that Belgrade does not have control over the territory of Kosovo would help in formulating pragmatic and possible to implement policies. Many policies of the Serbian government in the past two years did not take into account this fact and, as a result, proved impossible to be implemented. In determining which policies would best address the needs of the Serb community, Belgrade officials and Kosovo Serbs should conduct a joint cost-benefit analysis of the policies and political choices made so far, examine the obstacles encountered in the implementation process, and measure the performance of the institutions in charge of implementing these policies. The goal of such a policy review is to modify certain policies and improve the effectiveness of institutions.

Participants agreed that Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs should work closer together to formulate a clear and consistent strategy to support the sustainability of the Kosovo Serb community. Their definition of sustainability is a politically and institutionally strong Serb community that is capable of defending its interests on its own.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

**Nenad Cvetkovic**, Citizens Initiative Zavicaj, Partes  
**Oliver Ivanovic**, Government of Serbia, Belgrade  
**Dusan Janjic**, Forum for Ethnic Relations, Belgrade  
**Vesna Jovanovic**, Social Democratic Party, Partes  
**Bratislav Nikolic**, Independent Liberal Party, Strpce  
**Nebojsa Peric**, Citizens Group Vidovdan, Gracanica  
**Vesna Pesic**, Liberal Democratic Party, Belgrade  
**Slobodan Petrovic**, Independent Liberal Party, Pristina  
**Nenad Radosavljevic**, Radio/TV Most, Leposavic  
**Zivojin Rakocevic**, Journalist, Caglavica  
**Bojan Stojanovic**, Independent Liberal Party, Gracanica  
**Momcilo Trajkovic**, Serbian Resistance Movement, Gracanica  
**Rada Trajkovic**, European Movement of Serbs, Gracanica  
**Ivan Vejvoda**, Balkan Trust for Democracy, Belgrade  
**Lukas Beglinger**, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs  
**Shpetim Gashi**, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Alex Grigorev**, Council for Inclusive Governance  
**Norbert Ruetsche**, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs  
**Caroline Tissot**, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs