

CIG

**COUNCIL FOR
INCLUSIVE
GOVERNANCE**

THE SERB COMMUNITY IN KOSOVO
Challenges and Opportunities

Council for Inclusive Governance

New York, July 2010

Introduction

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) began a policy-oriented initiative on the sustainability of the Serb community in Kosovo. The program includes a series of discussions of Kosovo Serb political leaders and Serbian government officials responsible for policies on Kosovo. The goal of the initiative is to trigger innovative thinking and explore new ways to improve the political and economic situation of the Serb community. The initiative is funded by a generous grant from the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland.

CIG began the initiative with a series of individual and roundtable discussions with government officials, policymakers, academics, and analysts in Pristina and Belgrade, held from June 22 to July 5, 2010. The objective of this activity was to conduct an analytical examination of the current situation of the Serb community and outline a course of action for the initiative. The participants contributed to the discussions in their personal capacities. The report reflects the opinions and positions of the participants but it does not offer a complete overview of the discussions. The report is prepared by the CIG vice president and CIG is solely responsible for its content.

Broad consensus exists among Kosovo Serb politicians and Serbian government officials that political and economic realities of the Serb community are improving steadily. Security, access to services, the system of education, and relations with other communities have improved substantially. However, the participants concurred that less urgent but critical issues remain: Kosovo Serb political leadership needs to be developed and reformed; policies and strategies supporting human and economic development need to be revised; and political and economic support should be increased in order to build a self-sustaining community.

Political Leadership

Though moving steadily towards consolidation, the Kosovo Serb political parties are still in transition: politicians continue to move from one party to another, new parties and civic initiatives are being formed, and internal party debate is increasing. Kosovo Serb political parties, however, are no different from the parties of other communities in Kosovo. Political parties and alliances of other communities also continue to split and regroup. Former foes ally and forge fluid, and sometimes, strange political and government coalitions while former allies and friends become adversaries. Many believe these splits are primarily based on personal and partisan gains rather than on ideological and policy differences.

Although the public political debate is about policies and strategies, voters of all communities in Kosovo, according to various surveys and analyses, believe that their political representatives are striving to prolong their stay in power to maximize their own private gains at the expense of their constituencies. The population is growing cynical, viewing the bickering within and between parties and party leaders as petty, selfish, and far removed from their needs. Confidence in parties and political institutions is plummeting. Voter turnout, especially among the Albanian community, has been decreasing substantially.

The politics of the Kosovo Serb political parties, however, is not only about power; it is also about political choices: to join the institutions of Kosovo or continue to boycott them and strengthen the Serb institutions, also known as parallel institutions.¹ Some Serb parties have opted to take part in Kosovo's parliamentary elections and to join the government of Kosovo; others have helped establish their own Serb institutions and build a parallel system, providing education, healthcare, issuing of documents, and distribute pensions for members of the Serb community. And there is a third camp arguing that Serbs should boycott the central institutions but take part in the municipal institutions. The question is whether these political divisions within the Serb politics harm the interests of the Serb community or whether they contribute in building a pluralist and democratic political entity. Depending on the answer to this question, the Serb political parties should either uniform their policies and unify as a single political alliance or continue with capacity building of their existing parties.

The majority opinion is that the political efforts and resources should be directed at developing capacities of – rather than at unifying – the Serb political parties. The argument in support of this position is that political differences produce innovative approaches and contribute to building healthy democratic parties. Politicians of the entire political spectrum believe that the Kosovo Serb leadership needs to be revived and strengthened at a faster pace in order to be able to address the accumulating of the problems during the past ten years. However, they agree that there is a need to harmonize – not necessarily uniform – their policies and strategies but there is no agreement yet about which specific policies and actions to harmonize. Many emphasized that this could only be achieved with greater flexibility and pragmatism and increased debate among Serb political and non-political entities.

During our discussions, three plausible scenarios were sketched out for the Serb political leadership in the near term.

One scenario is premised on the notion that a robust political participation of the Serb community in elections in Kosovo is necessary to secure and protect the long-term interests of the community. Such participation, is argued, would produce strong and accountable political and institutional leadership that will be able to enhance the economic, political, and social interests of the community. Participation in Kosovo elections as a coalition will allow the Kosovo Serbs to become the third, or even the second, largest political entity in the parliament, and some suggested, this political bloc could be a kingmaker in the usually difficult government making process in Kosovo. However, many predict that such a scenario is unlikely in the short term given the status dispute between Belgrade and Pristina.

The second scenario predicts the continuation of the Serb boycott of Kosovo's central institutions by the overwhelming majority but stronger Serb participation at the local level. The high turnout of Serb voters in the June 2010 local election in the newly established municipality of Partes is characterized as the beginning of this strategy. The official turnout in Partes was 65 percent, 20 percent higher than the average turnout of Kosovo Albanians in the local elections six months before. The turnout in the Serb-majority municipalities of Strpce and Gracanica in

¹ These institutions were established in Kosovo after the declaration of Kosovo's independence through elections of May 2007 organized by Serbia. Kosovo institutions and the international institutions in Kosovo refer to them as 'parallel institutions.'

November 2009 was also solid. Many stated that participation in elections in these municipalities was a pragmatic decision: had the Serbs boycotted the local elections in Strpce and Gracanica, these two Serb-majority municipalities would have elected Albanian mayors.

A third scenario foresees the continuation of the current situation: the overwhelming majority of the Serbs continue to boycott Kosovo's institutions while a minority remains engaged in the process. There was one point that all the participants agreed: the Serb political leadership does not have the privilege to sit back and reflect on what options to choose: the time to take decision and make choices is now.

Strategies and Policies

In transitional political contexts, such as the situation of the Serb community, it is often hard to frame long-term coherent and cohesive policies. The context of the Serbs in Kosovo is so volatile – a single interethnic incident may lead to major clashes, undermining in a day what had been achieved in one year – and thus hard to formulate and implement policies coherently. Furthermore, the effects are not usually visible unless policies have been in place for a longer time or unless several preconditions are present. The current Serb policies have been in place for only over two years and the situation in the ground has volatile. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether the strategies and policies of the Serb community have been effective or not, and whether a set of alternative policies would have produced better results.

The process of identification of problems is always easier than the formulation and implementation of policies to address them. The Serb politicians easily identify problems and challenges facing their community but the matter becomes complicated when it comes to generating propositions to resolve them. They are also faced with an absence of detailed description of policy objectives and of the role of the institutions put in place to protect the interests of the Serb community. The objectives of these policies and institutions are sometimes ambiguous. It was suggested that more new people who understand this complicated political context, including those that disagree with the mainstream view, should be involved in policy debate and policymaking.

A first step in determining which policies would be best is to conduct a 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 an exercise is to, if necessary, modify certain policies and improve the effectiveness of institutions.

Policies should also be adjusted to specific political contexts. Serbs in the north and Serbs in the south live under different circumstances and thus the inevitability of tailoring policies to their specific situations. The determining factor of these different circumstances is geography. While Serbs in the north have direct access to Serbia and have their own independent institutions that run the region, the Serb enclaves in the south are surrounded by Albanian population and rely for services not only on Serb institutions but also on the international community and Kosovo's institutions. As a result of this geographic factor, the Serb institutions in the south have not been as efficient as those in the north in resolving daily problems, such as the electricity supply. Last

year's electricity cuts to Serb villages in the south exposed the vulnerability of the Serb community in this part of Kosovo. Left without electricity for weeks, Serbs in the south had no other option but to discuss the issue with the Kosovo Energy Corporation to find a solution. The Serbian government has recently reviewed the role of the Serb institutions, suspending local institutions in several municipalities in the south that have no substantial Serb population. Most of the Serb politicians in Kosovo welcomed the decision, arguing that these funds could be allocated for development projects.

Therefore, what problems you face as a Serb in Kosovo depends largely on where you live: Serbs in Strpce face different problems than Serbs in north Mitrovica. This makes it difficult to generalize the issues facing the Serb community as a whole. In this context, policies should be tailored to the specific problems facing each locality. This situation calls for the inclusion of local leaders in the process of policymaking to obtain their input and feedback.

While the internal engagement of a wide spectrum of Kosovo Serbs is a prerequisite for structuring adequate strategies and policies, political and financial assistance from Belgrade is needed. Belgrade's role is indispensable in resolving the issue of political 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 unwritten 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. As a temporary solution, it is suggested the cooperation of these institutions in providing services and even working together on small infrastructure projects, such as building local roads or sewage systems, by combining their funds. However, this could only serve as a temporary solution. Participants agree that a long-term solution should reflect the interest of the people of these municipalities.

Political and Economic Self-Sustainability

Self-sustainability of the Serb community in Kosovo should be considered within the wider economic context in Kosovo. Looking at it in isolation will produce a flawed analysis. Not only the Serb community but also the entire Kosovo society heavily relies on handouts, be it remittances of the Albanian Diaspora for the Albanian community, or social payments from the Serbian government for the Serb community. Official unemployment in Kosovo is over 45 percent. Although no separate data exist for the Serb community, it is likely that similar unemployment rate exists for the Serb community. Any community with 45 percent could be defined as unsustainable in the long run, regardless of ethnicity.

Although little could be done to improve the overall economic situation without political stability and substantial investment, there is sufficient room to activate the economic potential of the Serb community. An economic activation of the community will pay multiple dividends: it will spur growth by utilizing the underused human resources and gradually eliminate the "brain drain." Most of our participants noted that young educated Serbs are moving to Serbia for lack of employment opportunities in their areas. If no incentives are produced to discourage this trend, it may have disastrous long-term consequences for the Serb community. The Albanian community is also vulnerable to brain drain syndrome, but for them the long-term effects will be less severe

given the current demographics and the inability of Kosovo inhabitants to travel and work in Western countries.

Until an economic production base is established, social payments for the Serbs in Kosovo from the Serbian government are crucial for their existence and they should continue. But the Serbs in Kosovo together with the Serbian government need to devise strategies that support economic activity aimed at engaging and harnessing the intellectual and economic potential of the Serb community.

Ideas to subsidize business ventures were put forth by Serb politicians in Belgrade and Pristina. One example was to subsidize a milk-processing factory in the Serb-majority municipality of Partes. However, subsidizing for-profit-ventures is not sustainable in the long term. Instead, providing low or zero-interest loans to small and medium enterprises and helping them to access markets is an approach that both improves the economic situation of the Serb community and activates its human potential.

Conclusion

The nationalistic euphoria and rhetoric among the communities in Kosovo is fading at a faster rate than ever before and bread-and-butter issues are making their way to the top of the priority list. Politicians aside, the public reactions to the so-called national issues are not as strong, and for the first time we see farmers and labor unions organizing protests in Pristina demanding better working conditions. According to various polls, the list of priorities is the same for both Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo: both communities list employment and economic welfare as their top priorities. Therefore, it is imperative necessary to intensify the political activity to produce effective policies and ensure their implementation with the aim of addressing the bread-and-butter issues.