

Uncertain and Vulnerable

Kosovo's north in the context of the Pristina-Belgrade negotiations

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) and the North Mitrovica-based New Social Initiative (NSI) convened on May 15, 2019 in North Mitrovica a group of Kosovo's civil society experts to assess the implications of a future Pristina-Belgrade agreement for the Kosovo's Serb-majority municipalities in the north. The four Serb-majority municipalities in the north have been among the main items on the table of the negotiations in the Brussels dialogue and the main item in the semi-secret negotiations between presidents Thaci and Vucic over a territory-based deal.

The north consists of about 1,000 km², about 12 percent of Kosovo's territory, inhabited by a predominantly Serb population of around 50,000 comprising about 40 percent of Kosovo's total ethnically Serb population and about 2 percent of Kosovo's total population. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has indicated that he would agree to a tacit recognition of Kosovo's independence in exchange for the north's incorporation into Serbia. The majority of Kosovo's leaders, however, are against border changes, insisting on the north's full integration into Kosovo's system. The international community is divided over the redrawing of borders, with the US supporting it, Germany opposing, and a number of other countries indifferent.

The Serbs in the north feel uncertain about their future and vulnerable to the negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade. Though polls show that the majority of the Serbs in the north favor the north's annexation by Serbia, the Serb population there is unhappy with the rationale for the "border adjustment": it is not to accommodate the Serb population in the north but rather to save face for the politicians in Belgrade and Pristina. In other words, the border adjustment idea is not about offering a long-term future for the north or for better relations between Kosovo and Serbia but rather a way out of the conflict for the Kosovo and Serbian leaders. "Being at the receiving end of the conflict for two decades is exhausting." In these conditions, it is difficult to plan for a long-term future in the north. "People are just looking for a way out."

The north remains isolated. According to a recent poll, only one in eight inhabitants knows someone from the Albanian community. The communication and interactions with the rest of Kosovo is almost non-existent. "The only communication we have with Kosovo as a state is through the special police interventions, and that is a bad experience." Pristina should offer good experiences instead if it is interested to win support in the north for integration.

Communication at some level began in 2013, following the Brussels agreement, but little progress has been achieved since then. "We have a day of integration and two days of disintegration." The Serbs in the north distrust Kosovo's institutions. Though there has been some level of institutional integration since the Brussels 2013 agreement—elections have been

held, the police and judiciary have been integrated, local institutions have been established—but the level of trust towards Kosovo institutions remains just as low as in 2013.

The situation is frozen but the prospects for an escalation are low. There is no appetite in Pristina, Belgrade, and the north for conflict.

The north remains a hostage to the tribal politics of the Kosovo and Serbian leaders. The north is in turn keeping Kosovo's and Serbia's democratic development in turmoil. As long as the ethnic conflict continues, Pristina and Belgrade governments are not likely to turn their attention to the development of their rule of law institutions and support for economic development. "Ethnic politics offers enough fuel to keep their propaganda engines running." Populist leaders in Kosovo and Serbia will preserve their 'external' enemies and create 'internal' enemies to prolong and strengthen their stay in power. But conflicts and divisions along ethnic lines are a high burden for a healthy democratic society. Thousands of Albanians and Serbs are seeking a better life in non-conflict states such as Germany or Switzerland. This is a clear message for the leaders about what people want, but they "just do not get it, or get it but do not care, or, worse, it is what they want, empty their countries from potential opponents."

In this context of 'tribal politics,' liberal and civic solutions based on development and reconciliation rarely happen. Negotiations in Brussels were based more on myths and local traditions of local leaders than on liberal norms and principles.

The north's integration into Kosovo's legal and political system in line with the Ahtisaari Plan and the Brussels Agreement has made some inroads, but it remains far from complete. Though not in a position to secede, the Serbs in the north have shown to have the capacity and determination to reject integration. The future of the north would be decided at the negotiation table, most likely without them present.

In the meantime, the stakeholders can help create a more stable and normal situation in the north.

Pristina should become more transparent in eventual police operations and hold accountable the police officers violating human rights. The special police consist almost exclusively of Albanians. People in the north believe that the police officers were violent and arrogant. "If they represent the state of Kosovo, we do not like what we see." There should preferably be more contacts between civilians: civil society organizations and interests groups. Albanian politicians keep saying that Serbs have 'too many rights,' but they do not. Particularly Serbs in the south have limited access to collective benefits, such as jobs, education, and healthcare. It is not all discrimination. There is also a lot of incompetence in the system. The system does not meet the expectations of the majority community either, let alone of the 'unwanted community.'

Belgrade should become more transparent about its ideas and vision of the north. It should explain the border adjustment option to the people there. It should also have a plan about what to do with the north if its preferred border change option does not happen.

The international community should find and impose a solution, and also guarantee the agreement's implementation.

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