

New Government, Old Problems

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized a roundtable on July 6, 2021, in Pristina, Kosovo, for a number of members of the Kosovo parliament, government and political party officials, and civil society representatives. The roundtable focused on interethnic relations in Kosovo, problems facing the Kosovo Serb community, and their resolution by Kosovo's new government. The discussion, held under the Chatham House Rule, is part of a larger project on Kosovo's democratic development funded the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). This report does not necessarily represent the participants' individual views, of CIG or FDFA but rather reflects the discussion as a whole. CIG prepared the report and assumes responsibility for its content.

The election of a new government in Kosovo, which enjoys a solid support and has an institutional stability, was welcomed by many in the Serb community. All in Kosovo, regardless of ethnicity, share the government's stated most important priority: the fight against corruption. The resumption of the EU facilitated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue was also viewed with optimism. Despite an important and notable progress achieved in integrating the Serb community in Kosovo, however, currently the relations between the ruling Self-Determination Movement (LVV) and the Serb List (SL) which holds all ten Serb seats in the Kosovo parliament are uneasy.

Though dealing with persistent problems affecting the Kosovo Serb community is seen as a complex process, it was agreed that most issues can be overcome through joint efforts, good cooperation, implementation of the existing Kosovo laws, and dialogue. In this regard, already before the election, LVV's leaders have proposed an internal dialogue with the Serb community. There is an uneasy perception about such a dialogue.

A representative of the Serb civil society said that there is a problematic tendency of the new government to renegotiate topics that have been previously agreed on. The government's 'procrastination' in implementing the language legislation is being perceived as an 'intentional' step back similarly to its selective implementation of laws regarding the Serb community. However, a government official argued that this was a consequence of the excessive bureaucracy and a price the current government is paying due to former 'legislative but non-executive governments.' A government official said that she is committed to working toward increasing the proportional employment of minorities in the public sector to reach the mandated 10%.

The Serb integration in Kosovo is now about rights, not territory which is positive. The government should realize that giving more rights to minorities does not hurt the majority.

Lack of communication and information was considered as one of the main obstacles to the normalization of relations between the Albanian and the Serb communities and completing the integration of the latter into Kosovo's society. A participant pointed out that the Albanians lack

information on developments within Serb-majority municipalities and vice versa. The reciprocal use of negative connotations by the Albanian and Serbian-language mainstream media was criticized, while it was agreed that such narratives should change on both ends.

The government needs to speak more to the Serbs community. “The problem is the narrative that we [the Serbs] see.” There is a widespread lack of an official reaction to incidents. What matters is not only how the Prime Minister or the President address (or do not address) the Serbs but also how they address the Albanians about the Serbs.

The mistrust between the Albanian and Serb communities is considered reciprocal. There is an impression that the government views the dialogue with the Serbs as equal to a dialogue with Serbia, while the Serb community feels excluded by Kosovo’s government and thus looks exclusively to Belgrade. Some participants agreed that Prime Minister Albin Kurti should view the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and Serb community’s integration as two independent processes, in order to improve the latter’s trust in the government and feeling of being included in the society.

Kosovo’s lack of investment in social infrastructure in the Serb-majority municipalities was considered to have contributed to the Kosovo Serbs perceiving the government as ‘estranged.’ The Serb community’s equipment with Kosovo documents is seen as a ‘technical integration’ into the Kosovo society while maintaining the gap in connecting the two communities.

While a participant proposed reaching out to the Serb community through Kosovo’s parliament, a member of parliament said that such an attempt has been blocked by the SL representatives through boycotting joint activities of the parliamentary committees. SL, on the other hand, complains that their government nominees are not being appointed. How do you build a joint Kosovo identity and establish cooperation when a part of the population does not favor an independent Kosovo? Perhaps establishing the Association of the Serb-Majority Municipalities could be a vehicle in that regard.

Public space in the Serb community was an important topic of discussion by the Serb representatives. They highlighted the spiritual and religious importance of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the Serbs and therefore called on the Kosovo authorities to respect the Constitutional Court’s decision on the Decani Monastery. While one of the participants encouraged the establishment of the Association, a governing party representative said that the establishment of monoethnic associations “does more harm than good,” pointing out that the integration of minority communities can be achieved through a socio-economic integration. “Equal rights and employment, equal access to education and services are part of the new government’s approach for a sustainable socio-economic development and for non-majority communities’ integration.” The internal dialogue is seen as a tool for achieving economic development and ensuring social well-being for all Kosovo citizens regardless of ethnicity.

While the Serbs should actively take part in embracing their rights and ensure the laws are implemented, the lion share of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the majority and the government. A participant encouraged the Serb community’s involvement at the local level through civic initiatives, while another added that the initiative for ‘a local dialogue’ should be undertaken by the central institutions through public discussions. Shifting from a political to a socio-economic dialogue was considered as the only way to continue building trust between Kosovo’s communities.

Participants

English Alphabetical Order

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