

Building a Sustainable Serb Community in Kosovo

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) organized on October 4, 2021 a discussion in Belgrade between several Serbia's government officials and members of parliament and a number of Serb civil society representatives from Kosovo. Civil society representatives from Serbia also took part in the discussions. The discussion focused on what is needed for a sustainable Serb community in Kosovo. The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution. This report, prepared by CIG, does not necessarily represent the views of individual participants or CIG but rather reflects the discussion as a whole. The meeting was a part of a larger project supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The Balkan Trust for Democracy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States provided additional funding.

Participants offered several conclusions and recommendations, which are not based on consensus.

- Belgrade argues that Pristina is largely responsible for the recent car license plate dispute. A speaker said that Pristina avoided the topic in the dialogue. Belgrade believes the dialogue in Brussels represents the only venue for solving open issues. Serbian representatives criticized the “unilateral actions,” suggesting they should not be repeated again.
- Some participants said that the ‘sticker solution’ for the license plates is not ideal as the stickers would indicate that the cars come from Kosovo and could be attacked by ‘angry’ individuals in Serbia. The temporary “*proba*” plates (which were applied by Belgrade for the RKS plates since 2016) provide, according to some participants, more security for drivers, as they do not necessarily identify the vehicle’s country of origin.
- The license plate crisis was just an introduction to a crisis spiral between Belgrade and Pristina, as the next crisis is “looming around the corner.” “The next potential crisis is related to the energy issue, as the two Serb companies still have not been licensed for operating in Kosovo as agreed in Brussels.” “The electricity supply in the north is now entirely in the hands of Pristina, and it could be used as leverage against the Kosovo Serbs.”
- The government in Pristina wants a direct dialogue with the Kosovo Serbs and their CSOs. Most Kosovo Serbs do not see a genuine will of the Kosovo government to get engaged with the Serb community. The last call for a meeting with Kosovo Serb CSOs came during the license plate crisis, and many of those who took part did not find the meeting productive.
- For Belgrade, the internal dialogue in Kosovo between the government and the Serbs is unacceptable. The government claims that Belgrade is the only authentic representative of the Kosovo Serb interests in the dialogue. Hence, the only place to discuss the interests and needs of the Serbs in Kosovo is in Brussels. The Kosovo Serbs do not contest that Belgrade should defend their interests in Brussels, but many insist that there must be direct communication between the Serbs and the Albanians in Kosovo about everyday issues. “It is absurd that we are going to Brussels and Berlin to talk about our communal issues.” Some said that the dialogue is about Serbia’s claim to Kosovo and not about the future of the Kosovo Serbs.

“The Kosovo Serbs are just a bargaining chip.” Also, the additional problem is that the Kosovo Serb CSOs do not have access to Belgrade and to the Serb List representatives. Hence, the Serbs are the object of the bargain without having the possibility to express their needs and concerns to Pristina, Belgrade, the Serb List, or Brussels.

- Some participants criticized Belgrade and the Serb List, saying that “the destinies of the Kosovo Serbs are in the hands of those who do not live Kosovo or those who are only interested in personal material gains.” “Due to their lack of interest, the critical aspects needed for the sustainability of the Serb community, e.g., the education and health system, are falling apart.” Also, the inflammatory rhetoric that the representatives use strengthens the negative attitude of the Kosovo Albanians towards the Kosovo Serbs.
- There is a need to establish a format for communication between Belgrade, the Serb List, and the Serb CSOs from Kosovo. It is not productive for the Serb List to have such a high level of responsibility without even attempting to share it with the broader population.
- A speaker said the attacks on the Serb List are unproductive and that the party has legitimacy “as it proved itself in elections.” “Anyone who wants to challenge its legitimacy should run in an election. The Serb List is a project of national importance.”
- Another serious challenge for the Kosovo Serbs will be the upcoming Kosovo census, as the government of Serbia does not have a strategy regarding it. “The Serbs already lost a lot as they boycotted the previous census.” Instead of the current “numb approach,” the government of Serbia should create a clear strategy regarding the census, documents, property rights, and other issues that would improve the status of the Kosovo Serbs.”
- The key to resolving the problems of the Serbs in the southern municipalities is their cooperation with Pristina and Belgrade’s constructive approach and tolerance of such a cooperation. They are in a problem when Belgrade cannot deliver on their needs but blames them for integration (for example, driving with the RKS license plates) instead of being flexible to allow them to deal with everyday problems themselves. Pristina does not care about the Kosovo Serbs in the south, and any hiccup between Serbia and Kosovo immediately reflects in how Pristina treats them. When the Kosovo institutions apply reciprocity measures involving the Kosovo Serbs (for example, on textbooks), they punish their own citizens.
- The south shows all of the challenges related to integration. Several participants claimed that despite the Serbian language being an official language in Kosovo, many officials and institutions at the local and central levels refuse to use it according to the law. Laws are written in poor Serbian. To entice the integration of the Serb community, educated people who could speak and teach both Serbian and Albanian are needed. This is the only way to introduce both languages in the educational system. The Kosovo Serb community needs to have a department of Albanian language at Mitrovica University. Pristina University has established a few years ago a department of Balkan Studies.

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