

Chaotic Kosovo Poll Preparations

Author: [Fron Nazi](#)

Serious hitches in the registration of Kosovo voters could undermine the credibility of forthcoming municipal elections

Technical and logistical problems have marred voter registration in Kosovo, putting into question the legitimacy of forthcoming municipal elections.

The start last week of the UNMIK-sponsored registration process coincided with a visit by American lawmakers, who urged the UN to proceed with elections as soon as possible.

The US representatives' hope is that the sooner the poll - currently scheduled for October - is held the sooner American troops may be able to return home.

The body overseeing the process, the Joint Registration Taskforce, JRT, run by the OSCE and UNMIK, aims to have 450 centres registering 88 people a day - a process expected to end on July 15, but, in reality, it is likely to take longer.

By mid-afternoon on the opening day of registration on April 19, the Mirash Centre, responsible for eight villages with a total population of 5,133, had only processed 19 people. Officials attributed the low turn out to poor advertising.

The group the JRT has tasked with conducting the registration, International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), a US-based organization which has worked polls in Bosnia and other transitional countries, has inherited a series of political and logistical problems which may cause serious delays.

Belgrade has vetoed attempts by The International Organisation for Migration, IOM, to establish registration centers in Serbia. It has also urged Serbs in Kosovo to boycott the process. A pilot election center in the Serb village of Paralovo has not registered a single voter so far.

Many Albanians do not possess the documentation necessary to satisfy the numerous criteria for registration, such as birth certificates and proof of residence in Kosovo.

JRT estimates the number is between eight and 18 per cent of the population. Human rights groups put the figure as high as 40 per cent, based solely on the number of Albanians forced to leave their homes during the war. According to the UNHCR, 825,000 ethnic Albanians were expelled from the province, the majority of which had their identity papers confiscated and destroyed by Serb forces.

Voter forms have been translated into Albanian, Serbian and Turkish, but five thousand copies of the latter had to be scrapped after it was discovered that the translation was incomprehensible.

Only 220 units of registration equipment were purchased from the French company SAGEM Thomson for the network of 450 sites. At the time of writing, the equipment has yet to arrive in Kosovo. The first significant shipment of units is expected on April 26.

The JRT has, meanwhile, proposed reducing the number of permanent registration sites and relying instead on mobile centers to travel to more remote villages.

Some international officials involved in the process have noted that there is not enough time to properly register everyone for the October elections, especially those who do not have identification papers.

At this rate both the credibility of the elections and the international officials overseeing the process would be in question.

Complicating registration even further is a row between the Europeans and the Americans over the process.

The Americans have criticised the OSCE for the snail-like pace of its efforts to prepare Kosovo for elections, while the Europeans feel the US is overly determined to hold elections in October, at any cost.

"The Americans have taken over the entire process and are not looking for free and fair elections, but rather, as they (the US) noted in a closed door meeting with the OSCE top brass, 'credible' elections," said an OSCE representative familiar with the registration process, who preferred not to be named.

The Europeans in the OSCE have criticised Jeff Fischer, the American operational chief of JRT, for keeping them in the dark about the elections.

According to many OSCE workers, the US controls the key in-house decision-making positions while the Europeans are responsible for field implementation. Therefore, if the registration process fails, blame would most likely be transferred to the Europeans due to their more transparent role.

Fron Nazi is a regular contributor to IWPR from Kosovo.

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