

## **Comment: Kosovo Serbs Pay Price For Boycott**

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The Serbs have shot themselves in the foot by excluding themselves from Kosovo institutions at a critical time.

As the talks leading to Kosovo's final status approach fast, Kosovo's Serbs appeared to have scored a political own goal.

Their recent boycott of parliamentary elections here has starkly revealed the lack of a strategy on Kosovo, both in Serbia itself and among the Kosovo Serbs.

With a policy based on a denial of Kosovo's present status, Serbia's leadership has experienced difficulty in coming up with a meaningful, effective negotiation strategy.

On October 23, Kosovo Serbs heeded the call of Serbia's prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica, and the Serbian Orthodox Church, to boycott the polls organised under the province's international administration.

In doing so, they defied the counter-appeal of Serbian president Boris Tadic that they should exercise their democratic rights and vote, whatever the difficulty of their circumstances there.

The result is the self-exclusion of the Serbs from Kosovo's institutions, even though these are the crucial instruments with which they could fight for improvements to their position.

The issue of participation in the elections has also revealed a rift in the Serbian leadership, between those close to Kostunica who advocate a confrontational negotiating posture, and those around Tadic who want to cooperate with the international community as a key partner in deciding the fate of Kosovo and its Serbs.

That split is reflected among the Kosovo Serbs, who are confused about whom to side with in Belgrade. Though the number of Serbs who actually voted was small, the political divisions among the Serb community were considerable.

The rift in Serbia's leadership obscured the fact that most Serbs are in fact united in their basic aims over Kosovo. Both prime minister and president want to see institutional guarantees for the Serbs and to prevent Kosovo from becoming independent.

Out of fears for their political survival, neither Kostunica nor Tadic dare to publicly admit the fact that the Serbian state no longer exists in Kosovo, and that Belgrade lost its sovereignty there in June 1999. This was poignantly illustrated earlier this year, when Serbia was unable to protect Serb civilians from violence unleashed by Albanian extremists.

Kostunica and Tadic keep referring to the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - now Serbia and Montenegro - under United Nations Resolution 1244, as if these words on paper alter the fact that Serbia can no longer directly influence affairs in Kosovo.

At the same time, both men overlook the fact that the same UN resolution could prove to be a minefield for the Serbs, for it also refers to the Rambouillet accords as a basis for a final solution, and this could be used to open up the possibility of applying the principle of self-determination to Kosovo

The position of the minorities in Kosovo will be the main benchmark against which the territory's readiness for final status will be measured. International circles agree that protection of these minorities should be achieved through decentralisation.

Theoretically, the Serbian leadership and the international community ought to be on the same side on this issue. But thanks to the electoral boycott, the lines of cooperation are not clear, for Serbia has used its decentralisation plan as a bargaining chip rather than a negotiating tool.

After the international community declined to endorse Serbia's decentralisation plan, the government tried to "punish" it by calling on Kosovo Serbs not to vote in the election that the international community cared about so much.

While the international community is keen to go ahead with talks on decentralisation, it faces a row of empty Serb chairs in the Kosovo parliament.

Now that the United Nations Mission in Kosovo has rejected giving Belgrade a direct role in decentralisation talks, except in an advisory capacity, the Serbs appear to have shot themselves in the foot with their boycott.

At the same time, the Serbian government has divorced the question of decentralisation from the negotiations on Kosovo's final status.

According to Kostunica's advisor, Aleksandar Simic, it is vital that the Serbian government plan should be applied. Yet it is only by linking the two issues that Belgrade could have gained a say in determining Kosovo's future.

Even then, Belgrade would have had to display more flexibility over its decentralisation proposal than it has done so far, instead of insisting that its plan constitutes the sole possible framework for action.

The election boycott should stand as a warning that Belgrade has the capacity to actually worsen the position of its co-nationals in the disputed territory, for instead of underscoring the problems that Serbs face in Kosovo, it recalled the counterproductive, obstructive and spiteful methods of Milosevic-era politics.

The boycott has highlighted Belgrade's lack of political vision. By so rigidly defining its aims, the Serbian leadership has failed to explore other possibilities that might have fulfilled its "goal" of preventing Kosovo's independence.

The European experience of divided countries offers other precedents. In Northern Ireland, for example, the principle of sharing sovereignty instituted by the Good Friday Agreement, helped overcome what looked like intransigent positions in this divided community. This week, the Ulster model was advocated for Kosovo by Predrag Simic, advisor to Serbia and Montenegro foreign minister Vuk Draskovic, although there are no indications yet that this could become Serbia's official position.

Even more importantly, Serbia has not seriously explored the process of European integration and the

possibilities this offers, not just for Kosovo but also for Serbia generally.

Lastly, the boycott has revealed divisions in the Serbian camp. Proverbially, the Serbs blame their historic defeats on disunity. However, this time, the disagreement between Tadic and Draskovic, on the one hand, and Kostunica on the other, may have a silver lining, for it is this disunity that is keeping open channels with the international partners who will ultimately determine the status of Kosovo.

While no one in Serbia can explain to the public why the Kosovo Serb boycott of the elections was so beneficial, it is becoming increasingly clear that it was no such thing.

As political master of the Kosovo Serbs, Belgrade must undertake some painful soul-searching. First and foremost, it needs to recognise its weaknesses, for only then will it be able to strengthen its position and develop a feasible strategy ahead of the talks on Kosovo's status.

Only then, in fact, will it stand a chance of fulfilling its goal of truly helping the Serbs in Kosovo.

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