

Comment: Kosovo: Why Serbs Need Self-Government

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By Dusan Prorokovic in Belgrade (BCR No 490, 02-Apr-04)

This is only possible if areas with sizeable minority populations are given powers of local self-government.

The recent violence in Kosovo has demonstrated that the Albanian majority is not only reluctant to look after non-Albanians but determined to expel them by force.

The proposed new units of local self-government, formed in areas with a substantial Serbian and other non-Albanian population, would receive powers through a new institutional framework enabling them to look after themselves.

Take the Kosovsko Pomoravlje area, for example. This area in northern Kosovo lies on the borders of the three municipalities of Vitina, Kamenica and Gnjilane and is home to 15,000 to 18,000 Serbs. Yet in all three municipalities Serbs are a small minority.

This means that Serb representatives are always outvoted by the Albanians in their local assemblies and have no real say.

Serbs in this area need a single municipality that can protect their basic interests, with powers over security and police and responsibility for accommodating internally displaced persons.

The Serbian government is convinced that the Kosovo police service, KPS, provided logistical support to the people who recently attacked Serbian villages, along with the parts of the Kosovo Protection Corps, KPC.

In some areas, KPS members, the government says, were personally involved in the incidents, which was the case in Prizren.

It would be hypocrisy to say that Albanian policemen, who gave their vehicles, communication equipment and provided intelligence information to extremists attacking the Serbs, would ever make a real effort to protect in a professional manner the victims of these same extremists.

Local Serbs could do this job more honestly and more professionally and would be able to establish law and order in areas with local Serb self-government in agreement with the representatives of the international community.

This would help step up the process of providing appropriate accommodation for internally displaced persons. If displaced Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija, now scattered throughout Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, are to return to the province at the current rate, it will take 50 more years to complete the repatriation process.

None of us have any illusions that all internally displaced persons can return home. Many have settled

down and earn a living in Belgrade, Podgorica or Skopje. But a large number of displaced Kosovo Serbs will return as they have nowhere else to go. They live now on welfare and humanitarian aid in collective centres. Nonetheless, it is vital that their return to Kosovo and Metohija be feasible and sustainable.

There is such a thing as unsustainable return. How can three Serbian families return to a building in Pristina now holding 39 Albanian families in 39 apartments? Who will guarantee either their safety or their jobs in such difficult economic and social circumstances?

As it is unrealistic for such families to return to Pristina, they might go instead to the newly founded municipality in Kosovsko Pomoravlje, where security and jobs could be guaranteed, as Serbia would invest in Kosovo Serb self-governing municipalities.

If the political will exists to solve the problems of the internally displaced persons in this manner, we should all be able to reach an agreement on how such families should be compensated, as they cannot return to their apartments in Pristina.

The new areas of local self-government could contribute to this process and ultimately relieve international institutions of some of this burden, leaving the internationals to monitor the process, while the municipality carries out the practical tasks at hand.

In this way, non-Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija would have a guaranteed institutional framework for their safety and survival. So far, the total number of the returnees in the past five years has been insignificant. Only 3 per cent of exiled Kosovo Serbs have returned home since 1999.

Mediaeval cultural monuments, which are Europe's common heritage, would be also be protected under the new scheme from further acts of arson and destruction. In this manner, further ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Serbs and other non-Albanians would be prevented.

At present, the situation in Kosovo and Metohija looks bleak. Water and power are frequently cut off. Public utilities operate poorly. How can they work when few people pay their water, electricity and sewerage bills? Salaries for health and educational workers and public servants average between 75 and 150 euro, while pensions are around 35 euro.

Seething discontent reigns. Unofficial figures suggest the black economy accounts for about 60 per cent of economic activity, while the remaining 40 per cent directly depends on international organisations operating in Kosovo and Metohija.

It all constitutes an ideal breeding ground for the kind of political, ideological and religious extremism that seems to be mushrooming in Kosovo and Metohija. This is happening with abundant aid from Albanian political leaders who find it easier to channel popular discontent over the economic and social situation towards a political goal – an independent Kosovo - instead of explaining to the public why the unemployment rate is so high, why salaries are so low, why living standards are so poor and why corruption is rife.

Under the slogan "Serbs are to blame for everything", Albanian politicians in Kosovo and Metohija offer this simple answer to all such questions.

The representatives of international institutions, who have tacitly approved of all of this, are partly responsible for this state of affairs. There is an impression that internationals working for UNMIK and KFOR have not come to the province to solve problems.

For them, everything was fine, at least, until March 17, when the violence broke out.

Voices like those of Kosovo ombudsman Marek Nowicki or UN special envoy on human rights Jiri Dienstbier, who dared in public to describe the reality in Kosovo and Metohija, were rare. When they spoke out, their statements were immediately dismissed.

The international administration supplied excuses for all Kosovo's pressing problems, ranging from its dysfunctional electric supply, to its economy and flourishing organised crime and remained silent about the increasingly frequent acts of terror waged against the remaining Serbs in their isolated enclaves.

No one has been convicted for any of these attacks. Not one investigation has been carried out seriously. Allegedly, there has been no solid evidence.

The question is how we can improve this bleak picture, introduce European standards to Kosovo and Metohija and ensure all its citizens – Serbs, Albanians and Turks – enjoy their rights irrespective of their nationality.

Creating new local units of self-government would help stabilise the political situation in Kosovo and Metohija, as the problems in relations between Serbs and Albanians can only be solved if each side can live in peace.

Only then can we improve the difficult economic situation in which Albanians, Serbs, Turks and other minorities all find themselves. The local economy will not grow until the rightful owners of the province's companies are allowed to manage their own property. Everyone must return to his or her home and be given back their belongings.

Serbia has a strong interest in regaining the management of government property in Kosovo and Metohija, which was usurped five years ago. Serbia wants also to regain the right to run the companies it both founded and funded for years, to provide jobs for people in Kosovo and Metohija so they can make a living, thus preventing them from falling prey to extremism.

Serbia wants to encourage businessmen to invest in Kosovo and Metohija to help reduce unemployment and improve living standards.

Once we have curtailed the spread of extremism, we can all focus on the vital issues affecting the lives of each citizen, so that Kosovo and Metohija can have regular electric power and water.

Serbia wants to help. It could be an important partner for the international community in solving all the contentious issues through an open dialogue with Pristina.

Without Serbia's participation, however, the Kosovo problem cannot be solved. Some sort of solution without Serbia may be found, but if one is, one must take into account all sorts of threats to regional stability and security. They would certainly not serve the interests of either Serbs or the Albanians.

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