

Kosovo Albanians Coy About Dialogue

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Neither main party wants to be seen taking the first step towards talks with Serbia.

Kosovo's Albanian leaders are largely unprepared for vital upcoming talks with Serbia, as they are wary of losing votes if they are seen to be pandering to Belgrade.

The historic negotiations, expected to take place in Vienna next month, will deal with practical issues such as the return of people displaced by the 1999 conflict, and new travel documents and vehicle license plates.

But Albanian politicians are worried that discussing even minor points like these might lose them votes in next year's elections, since hardliners could portray dialogue with Belgrade as tantamount to treason.

On September 22, the Contact Group - comprising representatives from the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom - agreed that the first direct talks between Belgrade and Pristina should begin in the middle of next month.

Few in Pristina believe that this meeting will amount to much more than a show of handshakes in front of the television cameras, to please the international community.

While the big issue - the final status of the protectorate - will not be raised at the meeting, the beginning of dialogue is expected to clear the way for more detailed talks at a later date.

Kosovo Albanian parties have so far made independence their most important selling point for their electorate, and they are neither ready or eager to take part in the forthcoming talks. Talking to Belgrade, even on practical matters, could be seen as pandering to the former enemy and might cost them dear in the elections.

As a result, Albanian politicians have not yet reached a consensus on whether a dialogue with Belgrade should begin, or what it should be about.

Kosovo president Ibrahim Rugova and assembly speaker Nexhat Daci have so far appeared reluctant to join Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi's government in drafting a strategy for dialogue with Serbia.

The parliament is dominated by Rugova's Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, while the prime minister comes from the second most powerful party, Democratic Party of Kosovo, PDK, led by former Kosovo Liberation Army commander Hashim Thaci.

So far neither PDK nor LDK has shown itself willing to be the first to make a move towards talks. Each seems to be nudging the other towards taking the key decisions, in the hope of capitalising on its discomfort later on.

Rugova has yet to clearly enunciate the role that Kosovo institutions will play in the negotiating process.

"We will see whether dialogue is possible or not. We are waiting," the president said after his first meeting with UN administrator Harri Holkeri last week.

Ramush Tahiri, chief advisor to the Kosovo assembly's speaker and a member of Rugova's LDK, said the government should start preparing for the talks without parliament being involved. "There is no need for the assembly to discuss technical issues," Tahiri told IWPR.

For his part, Rexhepi has underlined the need for parliamentary consent before the dialogue can go ahead. During a recent session of the Kosovo assembly he said, "We, as a government, cannot start negotiations on these practical issues without [it]".

One senior PDK official, who wished to remain anonymous, told IWPR that it is difficult for the prime minister to take a lead on negotiations, since the perception that his party was working with Belgrade would be a vote-loser.

"Practical negotiations will require cooperation on some issues, and compromising with Belgrade is still a taboo issue in Kosovo. where we have many missing persons from the war," he said.

Fear of seeming to compromise with Belgrade also haunts the LDK, whose image was greatly damaged in 1999 when Rugova met Slobodan Milosevic, then president of Yugoslavia, during NATO's bombing campaign.

Most Albanian leaders agree that despite the international community's claim that only "practical matters" are on the agenda, the question of Kosovo's final status will come up in the end. They do not want to negotiate this with Belgrade, as they think it should be decided by the people of Kosovo and the international community. And until this central issue is resolved, they do not want to negotiate with Serbia even on practical matters.

Continuing diplomatic pressure means that this approach is unlikely to succeed. Addressing the Kosovo assembly on September 11, European Union foreign affairs representative Chris Patten called for swifter preparations for negotiations with Belgrade.

But it appears that his plea may have fallen on deaf ears. After his meeting with Holkeri last week, Rexhepi blamed recent social unrest, such as a wave of industrial action and protests from pensioners groups, for Pristina's hesitancy on the talks.

"Solving miners', teachers' and pensioners' requests for a better life and continuing with the privatisation process are the government's priorities - not just dialogue with Serbia," the prime minister said.

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