

Kosovo: Rexhepi Offers Serbs Olive Branch

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Premier attempts to build bridges between Kosovo's rival communities in an effort to gain favour with the international community.

Kosovo's prime minister, Bajram Rexhepi, is working hard to reconcile Albanians and Serbs in a bid to advance the region's bid for independence.

In recent weeks, the premier has made several high profile overtures towards the minority community. He's visited Strpce, an isolated Serb enclave, attended Easter mass at the Peja Patriarchate Orthodox church and delivered a speech in Serbian at the opening of a youth centre in Kamenica, an eastern town held up as an example of Serb-Albanian coexistence.

Rexhepi began his political career as mayor of Mitrovica between June 1999 and October 2000. During his term in office he frequently met Oliver Ivanovic, one of the key Serb players in the north of Kosovo. This provided the future premier with vital experience in inter-ethnic dialogue.

About 100 000 Serbs remain in Kosovo, living in isolated KFOR-protected enclaves in mainly rural areas. Their freedom of movement has been drastically reduced by Albanian extremists, who've targeted them repeatedly.

Analysts in Pristina believe the international community, keen to see the integration of the estranged minority, is behind Rexhepi's initiative. This perception has been reinforced by Michael Steiner, the new head of the international administration, UNMIK, who has made it clear that there will be no independence for Kosovo without a prior reconciliation with the Serb minority.

To date, Albanian politicians have not worked hard enough to prevent violence against the minority, while Kosovo Serbs have maintained their connections with Belgrade.

The overthrow of Milosevic prompted UNMIK to get Belgrade to encourage the Kosovo Serbs to participate in the local political process. Indeed, they contested last November's assembly elections and won significant number of seats. At the same time, the international officials have pressured the new government into agreeing to dialogue with the minority.

A testing ground for Rexhepi's policy is his home town of Mitrovica, which is currently split along ethnic lines. The northern half is populated largely by Serbs displaced from other parts of Kosovo; the southern half is mainly Albanian. In order to thwart Belgrade's plans for the ethnic separation of the town, the premier has stepped up his campaign for Serb residents to be allowed to return to their original homes. The plan would suit Mitrovica's Albanians, as they would be able to reclaim homes they lost in the north.

For all Rexhepi's efforts, however, a question remains over whether the two communities are ready to live together. In interviews broadcast on the Kosovo public TV station, RTK, most Albanians disapproved of the premier's attendance at the Orthodox Easter ceremony. Meanwhile, influential Kosovo Serb nationalists depicted Rexhepi's visit to Peja Patriarchate and Strpce as attempts to downplay Serbian interests.

Indeed, even those who sympathise with Rexhepi's new policy say he'd better be a good marathon runner because reconciliation between Albanians and Serbs will be the longest and hardest race he will ever have to run.

Arben Qirezi is a regular IWPR contributor.

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