

## **Local Government Offer Fails to Enthuse Kosovo Serbs**

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Serbs are hesitating over whether to accept a scheme they say is ungenerous.

Kosovo Serbs have until the end of the week to decide whether to accept a government offer of municipal self-government, known as Plan B of a decentralisation pilot scheme for the region.

Friction between both sides is likely to continue over what Albanians feel is a generous and final offer but which Serbs say stops short of letting them dominate any of the proposed pilot municipalities.

Under the pilot scheme, which if successful will be applied elsewhere, five new municipalities will receive the same powers over health, education, urban planning and civil services that existing local authorities enjoy.

The UN Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, established the borders of the new municipalities on August 12.

The initiative follows criticism of the Kosovo government by its western backers for dragging its feet on decentralisation, only a few weeks before the UN envoy, Kai Eide, is due to submit a report on whether final status talks should begin, possibly in October.

The deputies of the Serb List for Kosovo and Metohija, SLKM, rejected the previous decentralisation draft on August 10.

They complained that it offered them only small, isolated clusters based around Gračanica, a Serb village eight kilometres southeast of Pristina and Partes, a mainly Serb community near Gjiilan/Gnjilane.

The Kosovo government responded with a revised plan. This joined the four villages of Ajvali, Llaplje Selo, Preoce and Shuchicë to the Gračanica pilot municipality and the villages of Cernice and Budrige to Partes, to form larger municipal units.

But although many agree the changes improved the offer, the almost equal ratio between Albanians and Serbs in the two pilot municipalities remains a problem for the Serbs.

Vesna Jovanovic, a teacher and SLKM member from Partes, said, "The whole point of this process was to allow minority communities more local power by becoming distinctive majorities in new municipal units."

She added, "The Kosovo government has not shown a serious political will to let this happen."

However, Lutfi Haziri, minister for local government in Kosovo, says the scheme was never intended to set up specifically Serbian local government units.

"We don't want to create new municipalities on an ethnic basis as this would clearly encourage ethnic divisions," he said.

Although no official census has been carried out in Kosovo since 1981, the current figures used by Serbs and the Kosovo government suggest Serbs will have only a narrow majority in the Gracanica and Partes pilot councils of 3 to 10 per cent.

A comparison between the fast-expanding Albanian village of Ajvali, with its many several-storied homes, and nearby Gracanica, helps to explain why Serbs fear current population trends will soon erode their current narrow majority.

Randel Nojkic, a leading SLKM deputy who lives in Gracanica, says uniting the two villages would soon leave the Serbs in a minority in a joint administration.

“Joining Ajvali to Gracanica in a municipal unit makes it likely that the Albanians will be in the majority by the next [2006] local elections,” he said.

Riza Llapashtica, a community leader in Ajvali, is also unenthusiastic about the proposed merger, though for different reasons.

From his three-story house, he has a clear view of Gracanica.

Llapashtica isn't keen about the prospect of sharing services with Gracanica instead of Pristina.

“Many people here feel it is too soon after the war to have to negotiate local services with neighbouring Serbs, which is why I am not terribly happy about it,” he said.

“We fear that the Serbs may start to block crucial link roads and traffic that run through their municipality.”

Llapashtica says the solution is Albanian population growth in his village, which will then overwhelm the Serbs in neighbouring Gracanica.

“On the rate that Albanians are buying land and moving in we will soon overrun the Serbs numerically, so there is less reason to fear the new municipality,” he concluded.

Llapashtica's neighbour Randel Nojkic agrees that time is not on the side of the Serbs.

“The offer is not as good as we would like but we mustn't reject it,” he said, “as we would miss the opportunity to fight for our rights in a year when crucial decisions are going to be made.”

Nojkic says many Kosovo Serbs feel frustrated by their current limited room for manoeuvre – trapped between “ungenerous offers from Pristina” and Belgrade's insistence on a policy of “categoric non-participation”.

He added, “I feel critical of the Pristina government's fear of giving Serbs even one wholly Serb dominated

municipality in a place that is so overwhelmingly Albanian, but I'm also frustrated with [Serbian prime minister Vojislav] Kostunica's government, which differs little from [Slobodan] Milosevic in its thinking on Kosovo."

Nojkic concluded that Belgrade would not be doing the Kosovo Serbs a favour if it urges them to automatically reject the plan.

If that was the outcome, he warned, Serbs will simply lose one more of the opportunities that they have left to fight for their rights in Kosovo.

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