

South Serbia Albanians Seek Consensus on Region's Future

Author: Skender Latifi

Most locals remain wary of the militants who promise union with Kosovo.

South Serbia's ethnic Albanians this week formed a new council aimed at uniting supporters of secession and pragmatists who accept integration in Serbia, but it remains unclear whether the new body will help them overcome their differences.

The Consensus Council was formally inaugurated on May 10 in the Albanian bastion of Presevo, with a flurry of press statements.

According to some, the body is only a first step towards the formation of a more formal "National Council" of Albanian parties in the region, which it is hoped would be less symbolic and have real authority.

However, moves towards forming coordinating structures in the region have so far not bridged the divide between local Albanians, many of whom hold diametrically opposing views of their long-term future.

While moderates advocate integration into the Serbian mainstream, uncompromising militants still hanker for secession from Serbia and union with neighbouring Kosovo.

The south Serbia area, known also as the Presevo Valley, comprises three municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja. About 60,000 Albanians markedly outnumber around 30,000 Serbs and in Presevo and Bujanovac Albanian parties dominate local government.

The region has already seen armed conflict in 2000, when an Albanian guerrilla force, the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, UCPBM, staged a revolt. Though peace was restored with the help of international mediation, many local Albanians still see an independent Kosovo as their future homeland.

"It is only natural that Albanians today say this region should be united with Kosovo," said Saip Kamberi, a leader of the Party for Democratic Action, PDD, one of the larger Albanian parties in the south Serbia region.

But Kamberi added that this remains a distant dream without foreign support. "Like the Serbs, the Albanians do not have the strength to unite within a single state without support from the international community," he said.

At the same time, Kamberi blamed Belgrade for alienating local Albanians, saying the government had failed to show willingness to integrate them into state structures.

Skender Destani, head of the Democratic Union for the Valley, DUD, is equally dismissive about talk of secession. The solution to local problems lies in autonomy under international supervision, he said, in a statement for IWPR.

"The international community has made it clear that it will not accept any border changes effected by force," Destani said.

Moderates like Kamberi and Destani represent the majority opinion among local Albanians in this border territory. But there is still an active minority who talk a different language.

Jonuz Musliu, leader of the Movement for Democratic Progress, PDP, which unites the disbanded UCPBM's former fighters, told IWPR that local Albanians only remained in Serbia against their will. "We want to unite with Kosovo, and we shall never give up," Musliu said.

Hard-liners like Musliu tap into popular discontent with the grim state of the region, characterised by a poor economy and a high unemployment rate.

"The current situation is unbearable," one 28-year-old local told IWPR. "There are no prospects for prosperity and peace is fragile. We would be better off if Serbs and Albanians were to be divided forever."

Local Serbian leaders, needless to say, remain adamantly opposed to any notion that Kosovo's future status has a bearing on the future of their own region.

"Even if Kosovo gains independence, local Albanians [in south Serbia] will not be able to determine their future on their own without the Serbian state and the international community," said Stojadin Ivanovic, head of the local branch of the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO.

"We should not expect any deterioration in the situation in south Serbia either. There are no prerequisites for that."

Nenad Manic, head of the Democratic Party, DS, in Presevo, endorses that view. Local Albanians are already integrated into state structures, he insisted, adding that Kosovo's independence would not involve border changes in the Presevo Valley.

Many local Albanians - if only subconsciously - have tacitly accepted this. In the 1990s, they used to call the area "eastern Kosovo", but since the end of the armed struggle in 2001, more of them have started using the term Presevo Valley.

The 1990s saw the heyday of the movement to unite the valley with Kosovo. In March 1992, over 90 per cent of local Albanians in south Serbia voted in a referendum for political and territorial autonomy and the right to unite with Kosovo.

The government of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade declared the referendum illegal but in the spring of 2001, after the fall of Milosevic and while the revolt was still active, there were more calls for a referendum on the subject - though it never took place.

The Milosevic years were the most difficult period for ethnic Albanians in south Serbia. During the 1999 Kosovo war and over the next two years, 11 Albanians were killed in south Serbia, while about 6,000 were driven from their homes.

The UCPBM revolt started after NATO troops arrived in Kosovo and the redeployment of Serbian armed forces in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, which brought tension in the area to boiling point.

The conflict only ended after over 100 persons had died, and as a result of direct talks between Serbs and local Albanians mediated by the international community, since when a multiethnic police has patrolled the region in a bid to regain the trust of the Albanians.

Though an uneasy peace has prevailed since then, the turbulence in Kosovo continues to send ripples into the neighbouring Presevo Valley, raising questions about where it ultimately belongs. Whether the valley should follow the path of integration or secession from Serbia remains a question to which locals have no simple, straightforward answer.

Skender Latifi is an IWPR contributor in southern Serbia.

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