

Kosovo Elections and Serbian Divisions

Before the official start of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, expected since September, Serbia and Serbs living in Kosovo will face an extra temptation - whether to participate in early parliamentary elections on Kosovo scheduled for December 12?

Early elections on Kosovo were called after the resignation of Kosovo's President **Fatmir Sejdiu** and the collapse of the ruling coalition led by the Kosovo Prime Minister **Hashim Thaci**. It is believed that the main reason for the coalition breakup is the announced negotiations with Serbia. Regular elections on Kosovo were to be held next year, so Sejdiu and Thaci did not want to enter negotiations with Serbia in an election year. Talks with Belgrade are not popular among the Albanian population, and politicians in power are afraid to make that it might reflect badly on their election result. This is particularly true of former Kosovo President, Fatmir Sejdiu, who is the chairman of the Democratic League of Kosovo - once the most popular party among Kosovo Albanians - which is slowly losing its position among voters. The international community, which couldn't prevent the collapse of the ruling coalition in Kosovo, managed to impose elections to be held very soon. Hence the elections are scheduled for December 12, so that Kosovo can start 2011 year with the new government that is willing to start a dialogue with Serbia.

In the last decade Kosovo Serbs largely boycotted elections. It can be said that the boycott is a kind of tradition in Kosovo, because in the decade before the NATO intervention in 1999, the Kosovo Albanians boycotted the elections organized by Serbia. In a "telephone conference" held on Wednesday November 10, the Serbian government declared that "the conditions haven't been met for Kosovo Serbs to vote in early elections".

The fact that the session was held "by telephone", a day before the deadline for submission of candidate lists, says that the authorities in Serbia had a dilemma whether to invite Kosovo Serbs to vote in the elections or not. Truly speaking, such a dilemma Serbia also had in 2001, 2004, as in 2007, when elections were held on Kosovo, but the result was the same, no matter how Serbia behaved - most Kosovo Serbs boycotted the elections.

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The greatest success of the Kosovo Serbs occurred in the November 2001 elections. Then, for the first and only time the Serbian government urged Kosovo Serbs to vote. The same thing did and then-President of Yugoslavia (the common state of Serbia and Montenegro formed after the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia in 1992) Vojislav Kostunica. Kosovo Serb leaders boycotted the elections and that was the reason of poor turnout of Serbs. However, the Serbian coalition "Return" ("Povratak") won 11.34 percent of the vote and 22 deputies and became the third strongest party in parliament immediately after the Democratic League of Kosovo that won 47 delegates (party led by the first President of Kosovo **Ibrahim Rugova**, and after his death Fatmir Sejdiu) and the Democratic Party of Kosovo lead by Hashim Thaci, which won 26 deputies. This election was organized by United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo, UNMIK, and it is estimated that the Kosovo Serbs, provided that the majority of them voted, could have won about 30 seats, by which they would become the second party in parliament.

Serbs then entered into the government and the current Serbian Minister for Kosovo and Metohija, Goran Bogdanovic, was at that time the Kosovo Minister. Experiences of Serbian deputies in the Kosovo parliament were not good and they were often outvoted by the national criteria.

The next election, held in 2004, organized by the OSCE, had a lower turnout of Serbs. One reason for this was the fact that the new Serbian President Boris Tadic invited Kosovo Serbs to vote, while the Serbian government led by Vojislav Kostunica call to boycott. Thus, the Kosovo elections have become a topic of confrontation of political parties in Serbia. Serb turnout in these elections was very small, so that the Serbian deputies elected in the elections actually had no legitimacy.

The 2007 election, first organized by the Kosovo institutions, recorded a very low turnout of Kosovo Serbs, and Serbian authorities (President Tadic and Prime Minister Kostunica), this time urged Serbs not to vote. In this election for the first time appeared the Serbian political parties in Kosovo that neglected the call of the official Belgrade and participated in the elections. One of these parties was the Independent Liberal Party which later joined the Kosovo government. Serbian parties that participated in the election won almost no votes in the north Kosovo (part of Kosovo inhabited by Serbs, and is situated on the border with Serbia), but they have achieved relative success in Serbian enclaves scattered around Kosovo (municipalities and villages throughout Kosovo inhabited by Serbs, which are surrounded by Albanian people). In elections three years ago, it became obvious for the first time that Kosovo Serbs living near the north border with Serbia have other interests than Serbs living in isolated enclaves. Simply, the Serbs living in the Albanian environment have more interest to have representatives in local and regional institutions in Pristina in order to solve practical problems they face.

The specificity of Serbian voters in Kosovo is not only a division between the north and enclaves. There is another category of the voters - Serbian refugees from Kosovo living in Serbia. Namely, on Kosovo there are about 180 thousand registered Serbian voters. The estimate is that only about 70 thousand live in Kosovo while others are waiting to return to their homes and villages burned and destroyed by Albanian extremists after the arrival of NATO troops in June 1999.

Over a hundred thousand Serbs living in exile in Serbia is heavily influenced by the Government in Belgrade, while most Serbs living in the north are under the influence of their local leaders. Local Serb leaders, with Marko Jaksic among them, who is a member of the Presidency of Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, are independent and the incumbent government in Belgrade has almost no power over them. Given the stand of the government in Belgrade, the Kosovo elections will not be organized on the territory of Serbia, as was the case in 2001, and polling stations won't be opened in the north either. It was announced that "mobile polling stations" will be organized in the north of Kosovo on trucks, which calls into question the credibility of the election, due to almost no possibility to control voters and voter lists. Therefore, the Serbian parties that stand for Kosovo election can run election campaign only in the Serbian enclaves.

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Accordingly, a strange situation is being created regarding the Serbian electorate on Kosovo. The government in Belgrade has no influence on northern Kosovo Serbian leaders who are closely linked with nationally oriented opposition. At the same time, Belgrade avoids establishing contact with leaders of the Serbian parties that participated in the elections, such as the Independent Liberal Party, which has representatives in the Kosovo parliament, and Ministers in the Kosovo Government. This is a very inconvenient situation for the government which has the Kosovo issue as a priority while also, almost certainly, the issue is a precondition for European integration.

Early parliamentary elections in Kosovo scheduled for December 12 number 29 lists, among which 10 come from the Serbian community. Serbian parties that submitted lists are Civic Initiative "Unique Serbian List", Serbian Kosovo-Metohija Party, Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, Serbian Democratic Party of Kosovo and Metohija, Independent Liberal Party, New Democratic Party, Serbian People's Party, Civic Initiative "Wing of the People" and Serbian Social Democratic Party.

Other minorities in Kosovo also applied for the elections. Lists were submitted by Montenegrin Democratic Party and Civic Initiative of Gora and the Social Democratic Party of Gora. Bosniaks will be represented by the coalition "Vakat" which consists of four political parties. Electoral lists have also been submitted by the representatives of the Turks, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Among the Serbian lists, the favorite is the Independent Liberal Party led by Slobodan Petrovic. On the other hand, status of the Unified Serbian List is unclear as, according to some unofficial information, it is composed of members of the ruling coalition in Serbia. Is their participation in the elections a consequence of insufficiently clear position of the Government in Belgrade on participation in elections or some other strategy is in question - the time will show.

The Serbian government hasn't invited Kosovo Serbs to participate in the elections, but also it hasn't urged them to boycott the ballot. President of the Serbian Parliament, **Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic**, said that **"the state should not suggest to the Serbs whether to participate in the Kosovo elections, but that they should be left to decide themselves"**. **"People who live there know best how they feel; they are responsible for their families and they make decisions. I cannot say what the Serbian government should do, but people who live there know best what is good for them"**, said Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic. The head of MP group of Democratic Party of President Tadic, **Nada Kolundzija**, was more specific. She stated that there were no conditions that **"guarantee that the Serbs will improve their lives by participating in Kosovo institutions"**. One party of the ruling coalition - the Serbian Renewal Movement (Srpski pokret obnove) - and one opposition party - Liberal Democratic Party - support the participation in Kosovo elections. On the other hand, the party of former Prime Minister Kostunica, Democratic Party of Serbia, has publicly threatened its members that they would be expelled from the party if they voted in Kosovo elections.

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The authorities in Serbia have attempted to reach a compromise between the desire not to invite Serbs in Kosovo elections and the need that international community understands this move as a cooperative. That is why the formula was found of not inviting people to either participate or boycott the ballot. Naturally, as in life, even in politics, partial solutions are never good.

The impression is that the government was closer to the decision not to invite Serbs to vote, but that, in fear of the reaction of the international community, it opted for a half-solution that can be variously interpreted. That it is the case was confirmed by nervous reaction of **Pieter Feith**, the European Union Civilian Administrator in Kosovo, who, in discussion on Kosovo at the European Parliament said he had been **"quite surprised by the statement of Serbian President Boris Tadic at the OSCE summit in Astana, that will any change in the real current situation on Kosovo will disrupt the dialogue with Pristina"**. Serbian Foreign Minister **Vuk Jeremic** immediately reacted to Feith's statement although he has not long publicly spoken on issues related to the region. According to him, what Feith said can be interpreted as incitement to violence. **"This is yet another disturbing Feith's statement that could be interpreted as a call for violence. International representatives in Kosovo, especially in times like this, ought to take care of the statements they give, as they can seriously destabilize the already fragile situation on Kosovo"**, Jeremic said. Pieter Feith invited minority communities to participate in early Kosovo elections. He gave assurances that elections would be free, fair and democratic, supervised by international observers. However, Feith also knows that the Kosovo elections will never be complete without the full participation of the Serbian community in them. For two years as the EU resident representative in Pristina, Feith failed to win the confidence of the Serbian community, so that the failure of elections among Serbian voters is also his personal failure.

Viewed from the perspective of Serbia, there are arguments for and against Serbian participation in Kosovo elections.

The arguments **against** are that two years after the declaration of independence of Kosovo, Serbs are second class citizens and, above all, the Kosovo authorities haven't made efforts to provide full guarantees for the safety of Serbian citizens.

Serbs do not have access to employment, a negligible number of them is employed in government administration and public sector, the return of refugees and reconstruction of destroyed houses almost doesn't exist. It is obvious that the Kosovo authorities are not sincere when they say they want full integration of Serbs into Kosovo society and are tolerant only because the international community, under whose supervision is Kosovo, expects that from them.

Serbs in Kosovo are diminishing, as the young move out to Serbia in search of jobs, more peaceful and safer life. Kosovo Serb leaders know that everyone in the international community wants Serbs to participate in Kosovo elections and that the day will come when they will have to negotiate on that. Then, they expect to be able to get better conditions for the Serbian community.

The arguments **for** are that the situation in Kosovo and Metohija cannot be changed without the participation of the institutions. Given the division of Kosovo voters, or the lack of a dominant political party, a small turnout due to the large number of younger voters and voters who live outside the borders of Kosovo - a mass Serbian turnout in the elections would allow the Serbian list to get about 30 MPs, which means that it would be the second, and by some estimates perhaps the first political force in the Kosovo parliament. This would mean that without Serbs there wouldn't be the Kosovo Government, which would give them the opportunity to strongly influence political events in Kosovo and to change their own status. In this case, the Serbs would be able to seek the office of President of Kosovo, since the present Prime Minister belongs to the strongest party, the proportional number of ambassadorial seats including those in Washington or Brussels, the proportional number of ministers in the Government. Otherwise, the Constitution of Kosovo, written by the United Nations representative, former Finnish President **Martti Ahtisaari**, even now allows for such a small number of Serbian deputies to block all decisions that affect the rights of minorities - from the privatization to major national issues, as well as participation in all decisions about education, health, safety ... This Constitution enables local communities to both horizontally and vertically associate with whomever they want, even with states to manage the police, health, judiciary, and even to bring some laws.

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However, the biggest issue for the Serbs in Kosovo is whether the participation in elections is the recognition of self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo? **Marko Jaksic**, a political leader of Serbs in northern Kosovo, spoke about this **“Serbs do not need to appear in the upcoming parliamentary elections. In this way, they would legalize and favor the formation of yet one more Albanian state in the Balkans”**. However, the question remains, if the representatives of the government in Belgrade have no problem in sharing the same table with the government in Pristina without recognizing the independence of Kosovo, why would that be a problem to the Serbs living on Kosovo?

The impression remains that the authorities in Belgrade are missing an opportunity to use all potentials that are momentarily on its disposal. Perhaps, for the position of the Government in Belgrade in the expected talks with Pristina, it would be better to have Serbian representatives in the Kosovo delegation, and that they have power in the Kosovo government to affect the Kosovo negotiation platform? It is possible that the government in Belgrade expects that one of the results of negotiations with Pristina will be new elections in which Serbs will participate. In any case, it might be time to take this opportunity and opt for a more rational decision as in September when Belgrade made a compromise with the EU and filed a joint resolution on Kosovo. It soon turned out that national interests of Serbia and the rights of its citizens can be better and more efficiently protected that way.