



# POLITICAL PLURALISM IN THE SERB COMMUNITY IN KOSOVO AND POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE DIALOGUE ON NORMALISATION OF RELATIONS

# **Political Pluralism in the Serb Community in Kosovo and Possible Consequences for the Dialogue on Normalisation of Relations**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of the complex political and ethnic relations in Kosovo, the issue of political pluralism among the Serbian community gains special importance. This policy paper aims to analyze the key obstacles that stand in the way of greater political pluralism among Serbs, particularly in relation to political activity outside the framework of the dominant political party, the “Serb List.” Pluralism within the Serbian community is particularly addressed from the aspect of its impact on the further course of the dialogue on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina.

In the preparation of this text, original documents were used and interviews were conducted with key political actors outside the Serb List and representatives of civil society from northern Kosovo, providing a deeper insight into the current political dynamics.

The analysis also examines the relationship of the Serb political community in Kosovo with Belgrade, exploring whether all Serb political options should consult with the authorities in Belgrade regarding their activities in Kosovo. Relations with Pristina will be another key point of the research, with a particular focus on opportunities for enhancing cooperation to achieve coexistence between Serbs and Albanians.

A special segment of the analysis is dedicated to the inclusion of Serb representatives in the Brussels dialogue, assessing how their participation can influence outcomes that directly affect the quality of life of the Serb community in Kosovo. The paper also considers the possible role of the Association of Serbian Municipalities (ZSO) in promoting political pluralism, with the analysis of how its formation could influence the political landscape among Serbs in Kosovo.

Through comprehensive analysis and expert recommendations, this text aims to contribute to a better understanding of the political challenges and opportunities for the Serb community in Kosovo, offering perspectives for enhancing their political participation and representation in the broader

socio-political context. The emphasis is primarily placed on northern Kosovo based on the author's assumption that future political activities are predominantly determined by developments in this region.

## **CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 was not welcomed by the Serbian community, which sees Kosovo as an inseparable part of Serbia's territory. Although some Serbian representatives were ready to operate within the emerging institutions at that time, this political framework created a complex environment for the political participation of the Serbian community. Their representation in Kosovo's institutions, from local to central levels, often encounters criticism primarily from Belgrade. On the other hand, with the signing of the Brussels Agreement, Belgrade agreed to the full integration of Serb communities, especially the municipalities with a Serb majority north of the Ibar, into the unified political and legal space of Kosovo. However, issues related to the realization of rights, education, economic development, and cultural protection within the Serbian community are also deeply connected to the lack of adequate political representation and the unwillingness of the authorities in Pristina to implement both the rights guaranteed by Kosovo's legislation to communities and the agreements they have committed to.

The Framework Agreement and the Annex from Ohrid in 2023 represent a new momentum in the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, insisting on defining self-governance for Serbs in Kosovo and mechanisms for protecting Serbian religious and cultural heritage. However, the question remains, what role the political representatives of Serbs in Kosovo will play in the entire process, especially under the conditions of an institutional vacuum created by the withdrawal of Serbs from institutions in the north following a series of discriminatory measures taken by Pristina. On the other hand, the party monism expressed through the dominance of the Serbian List has threatened not only the possibility of competition but also the participation of various representatives in the socio-political life of Serbs in Kosovo.

## **CHALLENGES OF THE SERB COMMUNITY AND THE POLITICAL PLURALISM AMONG SERBS IN KOSOVO**

### TRANSPARENCY OF THE AGREEMENT

One of the key challenges in improving the position of the Serb community in Kosovo is the lack of transparency in the process of normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Agreements such as the Brussels Agreement or Ohrid Annex are often negotiated at a high political level, while the specific details and implications of these agreements remain unclear or inaccessible to the public. This lack of transparency creates distrust and a sense of exclusion among Serbs in Kosovo, who feel like passive observers rather than active participants in processes that directly affect their lives. Serbs in Kosovo often face pressure to implement agreements and decisions they are not fully informed about or do not agree with. This pressure can come from the international community, Kosovo authorities, and Belgrade, creating additional tension and resistance to changes perceived as imposed and unjust.

### NO PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Representatives of the Serb community are often not adequately represented or included in decision-making processes concerning the status and rights of Serbs. This leads to a situation where decisions that have a direct impact on the Serb community are made without their actual participation or consent, which reinforces the feeling of marginalization and helplessness.

### FACING THE REALITY – DEPENDING ON PRIŠTINA

The reality on the ground is often significantly different from the perception of Serbs and their representatives. The rights of Serbs are viewed only through the relationship with Belgrade, ignoring the fact that socio-political life can only be achieved through participation in local and



central institutions in Kosovo and minimal cooperation with the authorities in Priština. Problems such as Priština's lack of political will, bureaucratic obstacles, and a general lack of trust make it difficult for the Serb community to realize these rights.

## LACK OF PRIŠTINA'S INTEGRATION PLAN

One of the key problems is the perception that Priština does not have a clear and comprehensive plan for the integration of the Serb community. Moreover, there is an increasing impression that Priština has neither the will nor the intention to deal with this issue. This causes a feeling of uncertainty and skepticism among Serbs, as well as a difficult acceptance of Kosovo's institutions. The unwillingness of the government to accept various initiatives coming from local Serbs reinforces the feeling that only Belgrade can fight for their rights through the negotiation process.

The north of Kosovo, as a separate political entity that has had different specificities since 1999 after the conflict, requires a different approach from Priština in the process of integration and establishing trust in central institutions. At the moment, Priština does not have an adequate integration plan for the north of Kosovo, and this is often reflected in the political and police actions it carries out in the municipalities in the north of Kosovo, without the majority Serb population participating in the decision-making process that affects their lives, or their timely information about police actions that are carried out with excessive use of force. The conclusion of the conversation with the representatives of the Serb community is that the Serb community is exposed to harsh police interventions every day, or to repressive measures such as the establishment of fees, taxes and utility charges.

Apart from the huge police and military presence in the north of Kosovo, which is treated as a security problem of Kosovo, the majority Serb population is not able to feel socio-economic, economic, agricultural, or other programs that would leave the impression that the authorities from Priština want to get closer to the Serb community and re-establish a broken

trust between the authorities in Priština and the majority Serb community in the north of Kosovo. Capital investment interventions in the north of Kosovo were carried out by the government from Priština only in the places where the Albanian population lives in the north of Kosovo, thereby grossly neglecting the Serb community in the north of Kosovo.

## DISCRIMINATION THAT IS BECOMING SYSTEMATIC

Even though Ahtisaari's plan foresees a certain degree of legal protection and rights for the Serb community, there is a continuous challenge in its implementation. Issues of jurisdiction, law enforcement, and access to justice remain key obstacles to realizing these rights. Also, resolving the issue of the personal status of citizens, including issues of citizenship, ownership, and registration, is crucial for legal security and access to rights for the Serb community. The Serb community faces various forms of discrimination, from usurpation of property, unfounded expropriation of land, ineffective court processes, non-respect of the right to use the language to economic marginalization and limited access to services and the market. For now, there are also evident problems with extracting personal documents for the Serb community in Kosovo, the problem of verifying education documents that are not notarized by notaries in Kosovo, the problem of using Serbian language in the police, the Kosovo court system, the Kosovo cadastre, as well as municipal services in municipalities with Albanian majority, and the problem of easier access to employment in Kosovo institutions where Serbs have a guaranteed 10% of jobs, which is not applied in practice. This creates a deep sense of injustice and increases tensions within the community and in relations with the Albanian majority.

## THE PARTY AS A REQUIREMENT FOR EXISTENCE

Most of the members of the Serb community depend on their source of income, which in the vast majority is provided by employment in the public sector financed by the institutions of Serbia. The possibility of conditioning and blackmail over time has created a sign of equality

between political engagement and the need to ensure a normal economic status. Voting in groups, the “mobilisation” system of collecting safe votes are examples of continuous humiliation of people who already face systemic discrimination. At the same time, all those who differ politically face additional threats and pressures, which prevents the development of political pluralism in the Serb community.

## DEPOPULATION OF THE SERB COMMUNITY

The depopulation of the Serb community in Kosovo is an acute problem. The young and educated often leave in search of a better life, leaving behind an older and less mobile population. This trend is alarming and requires urgent measures to be stopped, because in the long term it leads to a weaker vitality and sustainability of the Serb community. The results of several studies show that security, unstable political situation, and economic reasons are decisive in the decision of members of the Serb community to leave Kosovo permanently.

## **THE PARTIES IN THE SERB COMMUNITY IN KOSOVO**

Out of a total of 52 political parties duly registered in the Central Election Commission, only 4 represent the interests of the Serb community. Of the remaining 48, 28 belong to the Kosovo Albanian community, 3 to the Turkish community, 7 to the Bosniak community, 2 to the Egyptian community, 3 to the Ashkali community, 2 to the Roma community, and 3 to the Gorani community. Bearing in mind that all political parties of Serbs opposed participation in the recently held population census, it is difficult to establish a precise ratio between the number of inhabitants, on the one hand, and the quantitative expression of political representation through political parties, on the other hand. However, even if we take the results of the census from 2011 (when there were about 25,000 Serbs officially, and according to unofficial data many times more), it is clear that compared to the political parties of other communities, the Serbs are at a very low level of party pluralism.

Today we can talk about only 4 political parties that represent the interests of the Serb community. Looking at the official data of the Central Election Commission, we notice that all political options are institutionalized within the political and legal system in the period from 2017 to 2024:

- Serb List (Srpska lista), registered in May 2017, authorised person Zlatan Elek, based in Mitrovica

Originally created as a civic initiative, in accordance with active action towards the integration of Serbs into the system of Kosovo institutions in accordance with the provisions of internationally assumed obligations through the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, it is the only political option that has mandates at all levels of political representation. The unreserved support of official Belgrade helps it maintain its dominant role in the fragmented and underdeveloped party system within the Serb community. It successfully overcame the dissonant tones that existed regarding the intensity of Serb participation in the functioning of Kosovo's institutions (which was a result of the activities of the Independent Liberal

Party) and in a series of election cycles proved its hegemonic position by winning over 90% of the votes of the Serb community. The creation of the Community of Serb Municipalities is the primary goal of this political party, along with all the accompanying conditions related to the quality of life, safety, and the return of Serbs to Kosovo and Metohija.

- The Party of Kosovo Serbs (Partija kosovskih Srba), registered in May 2017, authorised person Aleksandar Jablanović, based in Leposavić

Although registered only in May 2017, this political option was created 2 years earlier. The personnel base of the party's leaders was part of the Serb List, but due to personal and ideological disagreements, there was a split and the formation of a new political party. Although the results of the elections so far have proven modest ranges, apart from individual successes in Leposavić, its existence indicates the need to articulate the political views of the Serb community through multiple channels.

- Serbian Democracy (Srpska demokratija), registered in December 2023, authorised person Aleksandar Arsenijević, based in Mitrovica

It was created from the Civic Initiative Serbian Survival and nurtures the achievements of the “struggle for bare survival and improvement of living conditions in the Serb communities”.<sup>1</sup> The activities of this political party are not clearly ideologically profiled, but it can be said based on their appearances in public that they will, in the broadest sense, deal with the spectrum of social, economic and general social problems of the Serb community.

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<sup>1</sup> „Srpska demokratija zvanično registrovana kao nova stranka na Kosovu“, *KoSSev*, 6/12/2023, dostupno na: <https://kossev.info/srpska-demokratija-zvanicno-registrovana-kao-nova-stranka-na-kosovu/>, pristupljeno: 6/5/2024.

- Serbian People's Movement (Srpski narodni pokret), registered in March 2024, authorised person Milija Biševac, based in Gračanica

When announcing the registration of the political party, the leaders stated that they would try to project their activities on the territory of the entire Kosovo and Metohija, which would challenge the primacy of the Serb List. According to their own testimony, they arise as a reaction to the current situation and an attempt to uniquely channel dissatisfaction with the politics that represents the interests of the Serb community. The focus of their political activities is the fight against corruption, as well as advocacy for freedom of thought, speech, and protection of those who represent positions contrary to those in power.<sup>2</sup>

However, since 2013, the monopoly of the political representation of the Serb community has been initially, and today it is completely consolidated in the hands of the Serb List. Both in the local elections (2013 and 2017) and in the parliamentary elections in the given period, the Serb List dominates with the largest number of votes needed to monopolize the representation of Serbs at all levels. The previously stated fact that the number of political parties doubled to 4 in the period from the end of 2023 to March 2024 indicates that in the previous period party monism was at work among the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, and that it is justified to analyze the latest political activities towards the pluralization of the party system, at least when it comes to the Serb community. Of course, it is in no way possible to observe it with the analogy to the period 2001-2013, when the political parties of Serbs were ideologically, programmatically, and financially almost entirely the branches of political parties from central Serbia. The exception was the Independent Liberal Party, which, despite the boycott of the Kosovo political system, participated in the elections on behalf of the Serb community and was the only political actor that won mandates. But without the much-needed legitimacy for representing the interests of the entire Serb community.

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<sup>2</sup> "SNP predao dokumenta za registraciju nove političke stranke", *KoSSev*, 31/1/2024, dostupno na: <https://kossev.info/snp-dokumenta-registracija-nova-politicka-stranka/>, pristupljeno 15/5/2024.

Several reasons have led to the current state of a kind of atrophy of political pluralism among Serbs in Kosovo and the creation of a party system (at least in the Serb community) characterized by the existence of a hegemonic party and apparent plurality. We can divide them, according to the origin, into internal and external. Kosovo's political system undoubtedly suffers from a democratic deficit in numerous segments. Particularly important for the political organization of the Serb community is the absence of trust in institutions, but also a very low level of the rule of law in relations to the Serbs. Hence, any political organization is directed towards already established actors who over time tried to consolidate the Serb political scene and unite the interests of the entire community, speaking with a single voice towards Kosovo's institutions and external actors.

The personnel potential for starting, building and maintaining the party infrastructure within the Serb community is limited in many ways. The trend of emigration of the Serb population and political apathy has been present for a long period of time. Also, the weakening of universities and the limited opportunities for intellectual and academic training of personnel for institutional political action caused the existence of a very narrow base of people who show tendencies towards the formation of a political party and political activism in general. We believe that this is precisely why political parties mostly develop from already existing initiatives or movements. Thus, *Serbian Democracy* is formed from the *Serbian Survival* initiative, or at least partially, the *Serbian People's Movement* is created from the *Civic Initiative for Zubin Potok*. Of course, we should not lose sight of the fact that the *Serb List*, before its official registration in 2017, existed as the *Civic Initiative Serb List*.

Relevant surveys of public opinion and earlier analyses that dealt with this topic also identified a relatively low level of trust and satisfaction of citizens in the quality of representation and realization of the interests of the Serb community through institutions in which the existing political

parties participate.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, we conclude on the basis of the synthesis of the results of such sources that the level of information the citizens have about the status of representation of their interests within the institutions of the system was significantly low, which indicates weak performance in performing the functions of the existing parties.

On the other hand, there is a strong incentive coming from the outside in terms of the need for a higher level of involvement of various actors. It is possible to identify, both verbally and in practice, numerous initiatives of external stakeholders that encourage the engagement of individuals, civil society organizations, and initiatives/movements for participation in political life, especially in the context of the mediated dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. Of course, as a so called external group of factors, we can also observe the signals coming from Belgrade. At the given moment, they are primarily aimed at uniting all political forces into one option that would uniquely represent the interests of the Serb community before the Kosovo institutions. If we add to that a kind of economic (but also safety) dependence of the Serb community in the north of Kosovo from Belgrade, then the power of this leverage to influence the final outcome in terms of party monism is clear. In addition, the creation of an atmosphere in which any attempt to build new, ideologically different political options in relation to the Serb List is stigmatized discourages actors from embarking on projects to form political parties and expand the range of political options that represent the interests of the Serb community.

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<sup>3</sup> Jovana Radosavljević, Budimir Ničić, “Političke partije kosovskih Srba u političkom sistemu Kosova: od pluralizma do monizma“, Inicijativa OPEN, April 2021, dostupno na: <https://kfos.org/storage/app/uploads/public/609/3e0/06a/6093e006abdfa664574589.pdf>, pristupljeno 10/6/2024.



## **MAIN OBSTACLES FOR A LARGER POLITICAL PLURALISM AMONG SERBS**

The central theme in the discussion of obstacles relates to the role and influence of the Serb List, a political organization that, with the support of Belgrade, has dominated the political scene of Kosovo in Serb communities for many years. The Serb list is criticized for its monopolization of the political space and manipulation of the electoral processes, which left other political options on the margins of the political life of Serbs in Kosovo.

The president of the Serbian People's Movement, Milija Biševac<sup>4</sup>, sees the main obstacle to political pluralism in the actions of the Serb List so far. "After the long-term explicit dominance of a political organization that gathered Kosovo Serbs under the name "Serb List" and its cruel treatment of political dissidents belonging to the Serb people, it was very difficult to develop political pluralism in Kosovo. "The Serb List is the only political organization that has had the support of official Belgrade since its foundation, and it used the institutions of the Republic of Serbia as a means of manipulating the population in order to turn the electoral will of the voters to its side and deny other political parties the right to be part of the institutions," Biševac points out.

The president of the Serbian Democracy, Aleksandar Arsenijević, agrees with this position<sup>5</sup>, emphasizing the extent of "pressure in the field through the network of members of the Serb List and the related elitist approach of Belgrade, in which support is provided only to a selected group of people." Arsenijević also adds the role of the media, stressing that "the regime media do not give space for a different voice and that there is a general impossibility of speaking outside of a few local media that support independent reporting".

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<sup>4</sup> Intervju sa Milijom Biševcom, sproveden za potrebe ove analize

<sup>5</sup> Intervju sa Aleksandrom Arsenijevićem, sproveden za potrebe ove analize

Political activist and owner of RTV Mir television, Nenad Radosavljević<sup>6</sup> points out that “the government structures from Belgrade continue to manage the lives and fate of Kosovo Serbs through the salaries of teachers, health workers, and employees in public services and temporary body” and that in this way they control political life within the Serb community. It further highlights the unequal position, since the dominant political option has much more resources at its disposal. “That group of people became enormously rich during their 12-year reign so that now they can easily run election campaigns and in all other ways influence the will of the citizens in the sense that 99 percent of the citizens cannot even think of self-organizing into some other political options”.

Finally, Aleksandar Stojanović<sup>7</sup>, the director of the Centre for the Development of Local Communities, who has organized educational seminars for political activists from Kosovo on several occasions, points out two key problems when it comes to political pluralism among Serbs in Kosovo. “The first is that in the past 10 years under the rule of the Serb List, there has been a great pressure to stifle any kind of political engagement, with threats to people, with dismissals... So all of this has left a mark and fear among people to get involved in any way.” He adds that although there are now slightly easier conditions for political organizing, “the conditions are still difficult because people who are willing to participate do not have enough capacity.” It is necessary to work on their education, permanent financing of their activities, etc. which is not at all easy in an environment that is almost merciless.”

The presented problems point to deep-rooted challenges in realizing political pluralism among Serbs in Kosovo. The key is to develop strategies that will enable greater inclusiveness and fairness in the political process. This implies systemic support for political pluralism, free access to the media and freedom from the fear that possible political involvement

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<sup>6</sup> Intervju sa Nenadom Radosavljevićem, sproveden za potrebe ove analize

<sup>7</sup> Intervju sa Aleksandrom Stojanovićem, sproveden za potrebe ove analize

could have consequences. Finally, capacity building is needed, which is unthinkable without institutional support.

## **THE RELATIONS OF SERB REPRESENTATIVES FROM KOSOVO TO THE OFFICIAL BELGRADE**

While Belgrade remains the key economic and political support for Serbs in Kosovo, the adequacy of its role and the way it manages its influence are questioned. For most of the actors interviewed, each political option should have consultations with Belgrade, but there are serious reservations about favoring only one political option.

Aleksandar Arsenijević points out that he certainly sees Belgrade as a partner, regardless of whether the Community of Serb Municipalities will be formed or not. “People’s existence is primarily conditioned by budget subsidies from Belgrade, and it is enough to suspend these funds for a few days and send a message to anyone who is in local government in the Serb communities in Kosovo, that they are unsuitable political actors” says Arsenijević. In particular, he mentions the possibility of the Community of Serb Municipalities establishing different relations between Belgrade and the Serb community in Kosovo. “It would be much better if there was a formed Community of Serb Municipalities, where a system of decision-making and redistribution of dedicated funds would be established that would not depend on the arbitrary will of Belgrade, which is the largest employer in Serb communities. Therefore, Belgrade is certainly a permanent partner with any Serb political option in Kosovo, but that partnership does not imply a submissive relationship and the patron-slave system that is currently in force,” says Arsenijević.

Nenad Radosavljević believes that cooperation with Belgrade is desirable and reasonable, but not with the current government, which he blames for “handing over all its competences to the government structures of Kosovo and personally contributing to the deprivation of all important human rights from its citizens by those structures”. He adds that “the government

did not make an effort to at least preserve the status of Serbs in terms of dual citizenship, with two sets of personal documents, or, for example, extraterritoriality of the Serbian Orthodox Church.”

In Milija Biševac’s opinion, “the majority of Serbs living in Kosovo and Metohija still see Serbia as their mother country”. He points out that “it is absolutely normal that there are consultations with Belgrade regarding some political issues because joint action can improve a very difficult position of our people in Kosovo and Metohija.” However, Biševac also emphasizes that this relationship “should be at the level of mutual understanding and definition, that is, the level of solving problems, but not absolute dominance of Belgrade in decision-making”. For him, “the problem is that the current government in Belgrade does not want to consult with local Serbs and other political factors, except the Serb List, which never defended our interests, but only personal ones, and gathered people who are known for various scandals including corruption.”

Aleksandar Stojanović also points out that the Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija look at any government in Belgrade as representatives of their country. “Although there were talks with representatives of Belgrade, the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, they were interrupted despite some initial agreements. The way of communication is exclusively through the party, their representatives with the representatives in Kosovo, but within the party structures, and not through the entire wider network of Serb representatives.” Stojanović emphasizes the crucial role of civil society in critical moments. “In this interregnum, representatives of civil society have assumed the role of representing Serbs and their demands in Kosovo. I think that the Serb List (SL) has an outdated approach in communication, they have brought themselves to a dead end and could not act politically anymore. In those circumstances where SL simply withdrew, the international community began to talk to representatives of civil society who reluctantly took responsibility, but in conditions of general insecurity they had to be the voice of protection as much as they could and pointed out the violation of the human rights of Serbs”.

In addition to the complex social atmosphere, the reality on the ground involved the civil sector in political processes. This indicates the need for the pluralization of political life within the Serb community as soon as possible and the strengthening of the capacity of new parties and movements, which is not possible without the consent and support of the official Belgrade.

## **RELATIONS OF SERBIAN REPRESENTATIVES FROM KOSOVO TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONS IN PRIŠTINA**

Relations between Serbian representatives in Kosovo and institutions in Priština remain challenging and complex. Representatives of the Serb community express frustration due to the lack of cooperation and responsiveness to initiatives that would improve the life of Serbs in Kosovo. Attitudes vary from a complete rejection of the possibility of cooperation to an appeal for the necessity of inclusion in Kosovo's institutions for the protection of elementary rights. Interethnic cooperation and coexistence seem to be long-term goals that require changes both in political will and in the approach primarily of Kosovo's institutions.

Stojanović points out that the Government of Kosovo never wanted to respond to the calls of civil society to participate in talks and round tables, "so that it would not have the responsibility to implement what it would publicly commit to". He gives a graphic example of inaction: "We have been negotiating with Priština for two years to press a button on the Serbian channel RTK and turn on the translator from the Assembly of Kosovo so that citizens could follow the broadcast of the session in Serbian. It was about one button, but there was no political will for two years to do it." He also concludes that "they did not want to do anything serious and good for the Serb community. None of our initiatives have been answered. This is a denial of the existence of Serbs in Kosovo."

Radosavljević, on the other hand, points out that it is necessary to cooperate with the authorities from Priština "first of all through the talks

between Albanians and Serbs, but also through institutions”. He gives an example that “you will hardly find anyone, among Serbs, who believes that Serb children should compete in sports with Albanian children, that Serbs should be allowed to participate in leagues in Serbia, but that they should also be included in leagues in Kosovo and that Albanian athletes should be allowed to participate in competitions in Serbia and vice versa. The same applies to culture and youth activism. That and many other things cannot be realized without the consent of the authorities from Priština, so in addition to good will from Belgrade, it is also necessary to ensure good will and support from Pristina...”

Biševac points out that communication with the current Government is “absolutely impossible”. “Relations between the current government in Priština and the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija are quite strained at the moment, the unilateral moves made by Priština are absolutely wrong and disastrous for our people. That the situation is very bad is shown by the fact that Serbs are leaving Kosovo and Metohija every day because they cannot tolerate institutional repression,” concludes Biševac. Nevertheless, he states that cooperation is necessary in the future: “After the recent events and the abandonment of the institutions of the Serbs from the north, and later with the Government’s decision to replace their places with people belonging to other minorities or Albanian representatives and thereby continue the operation of the system, it clearly shows how Serbs need to be part of that system as well. In the situation the Serbs currently are and with the shutdown of Serb institutions in Kosovo by the authorities in Belgrade, I think that the Serbs must be part of the Kosovo system in order to succeed in fighting for their basic rights”.

Arsenijević has a similar view. He points out that since he has been in politics for a short time, and he is still not disappointed in inter-ethnic harmony, “but we currently live in two separate societies”. He continues, “the proclaimed Kosovo society that is presented to foreigners essentially does not exist. Right now, I do not see the possibility of cooperation with Priština because I do not see any political option that has the support of citizens of Albanian nationality, and that is interested in the multi-ethnic

concept. As political actors, we have no one to work with for coexistence in the future. This government has radicalized this society so much that it will probably take decades to sort out what was destroyed in a short period of time.”

## **INVOLVING THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SERB COMMUNITY IN THE DIALOGUE ON THE NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS**

The dialogue on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština has been going on for more than a decade, with varying degrees of success and visible results. One of the key criticisms of the current approach is the insufficient involvement of the representatives of Kosovo Serbs in the negotiations. The Serb community in Kosovo, which directly feels the consequences of the agreement and failure in implementation, has not had adequate representation until now, which leads to questions about the efficiency and fairness of the entire process.

Arsenijević supports the idea that Serbs from Kosovo should join the dialogue, even to be the main negotiators “because the people in the field know the situation best”. He states that “the past practice of over ten years has shown that Belgrade has not been able to fully complete any agreed arrangement, because they do not see on the ground whether it is applicable or how it is applied.” He also underlines the issue of responsibility for the outcome of the negotiations: “We have big problems that directly affect people’s quality of life.” The inclusion of politicians from Kosovo would also mean the establishment of responsibility for the success or failure of what was agreed in Brussels, because the process so far has mainly been reduced to transferring responsibility primarily to the international community”.

Biševac also believes that the representatives of the Serbs living in Kosovo and Metohija should have been included in the dialogue process from the first day “as a third party, separate from Belgrade and Priština”. He points

out that “the process itself was not transparent, and that is also how it was carried out.” Various decisions were imposed on us by representatives of Belgrade and Priština behind closed doors in Brussels, without us having the right to give our opinion or choose something from it.”

For Nenad Radosavljević, a possible inclusion of Serbs from Kosovo in the dialogue would not mean any change if they were representatives of the Serb List. For him, “pluralism, which must be supported by some new authorities from Belgrade and Priština and international institutions and organizations, could ensure, in a few years, quality representatives for such inclusion in the dialogue, because there are many life issues that quality representatives of the Kosovo Serbs could solve in Brussels, regardless of the fact that the key ones “at the highest level” have already been solved, starting from July 2022 until now.

Stojanović underlines the method and procedure of that involvement: “Belgrade has assumed all kinds of responsibility for success or failure. I am sure that there is room for their inclusion, and to create a mechanism to do it, a wider representation of Serbs and selection of requests is necessary. It means designing the whole process of inclusion, and not formal representation in the form of one or two people attending meetings.”

## **WHAT DOES A POSSIBLE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COMMUNITY OF SERB MUNICIPALITIES MEAN FOR POLITICAL PLURALISM WITHIN THE SERB COMMUNITY**

The establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities is one of the key elements in the dialogue on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština, with a focus on the political and administrative strengthening of the Serb community in Kosovo. Expectations of the Community differ significantly among leaders and analysts of the Serb



community in Kosovo, ranging from skepticism to optimism about its potential to improve political pluralism.

Milija Biševac believes that “the formation of the Community, which will certainly not happen in the near future, cannot change anything significantly on the political scene of Kosovo Serbs”. He expects greater pluralism that will develop regardless of the Community: “The very difficult position in which our people are now and the wrong politics of the Serb List lead to a drop in their rating and creates satisfaction for other people to take matters into their own hands.” So, in the future, we can certainly expect the formation of some new movements and political parties, which will be formed before the formation of the Community of Serb Municipalities.”

Aleksandar Arsenijević has a more optimistic attitude towards the Community of Serb Municipalities and does not think that “the Community of Serb Municipalities could mean the strengthening of monism in the form of the Serb List”. He points out that “the Serb List reached its peak in 2021, so I do not see any fear that the creation of new bodies within the Community would endanger it, but on the contrary, it would strengthen pluralism and democratic aspirations within the Serb community in Kosovo and give a chance to new political options.”

Aleksandar Stojanović expresses reservations, pointing out that “the Community of Serb Municipalities has become a complicated issue because many Serbs fear that its possible formation will mean the closure of the remaining Serb institutions.” However, he emphasizes: “since the closure of Serb institutions is carried out by Priština, practically unilaterally and brutally, the Community is now seen as a necessity or the last straw of salvation that will represent a socio-political organization of Serbs that will help in further action and preservation of vital interests.” Stojanović believes that in the Serb communities “there will be pluralism and that different options will win a number of votes, that it will not be only the Serb List and that the Community of Serb Municipalities will be

a gathering place of various political options, but not only of Serbs but also of Albanians living in the Serb-majority municipalities”.

In the current circumstances with the dominance of the Serb List, Nenad Radosavljević does not see any chance for the Community of Serb Municipalities to contribute to greater pluralism: “With its instruments and engineering, the Serb List would elect itself to key positions and thus forever capture the Serbs in Kosovo.” In the current circumstances, however, there are some political options that should be supported. The Serb List is currently marginalized on the ground, and such a trend should continue without the Community of Serb Municipalities, which is fundamentally needed, but democratically elected, and not imposed by force.”

Views about the formation of the Community of Serb Municipalities vary from pessimism to moderate optimism, but the common denominator is the possible impact on political pluralism within the Serb community in Kosovo. While some people, like Biševac, believe that the Community will not be decisive for political change and that pluralism will advance independently, others such as Arsenijević and Stojanović see the Community as a tool that can potentially strengthen democratic aspirations and support the development of different political options. However, there is also caution, as expressed in Radosavljević’s views, which emphasizes the risks of the dominance of one political party. Overall, the formation of the Community may be a key factor in reshaping the political landscape of Kosovo Serbs, but its true effect will depend on how it is implemented and includes a wide range of political voices.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL ACTORS TO IMPROVE THE POSITION OF THE SERB COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL PLURALISM IN KOSOVO**

CONTACTS WITH THE MEDIA

The Serb community should actively work on establishing and maintaining contacts with the media in order to ensure that their voice and perspective are adequately represented. Transparency and visibility in the media can help fight misinformation. In addition to the media in Serbian, the focus must also be on the Albanian media, which is dominated by the view that Serbs exercise all their rights, but that they are instrumentalized by Belgrade. In this sense, people who speak Albanian language and who could send concrete and direct messages are desirable.

## SUPPORT FROM INTERNATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

It is necessary to seek and strengthen the support of international stakeholders, diplomats and representatives of the civil sector through continuous meetings, conferences and round tables aimed at improving the position of Serbs in Kosovo. International pressure and support can be key in advocating for change, but constant pressure from the organized structures of local Serbs is needed.

## DEFINING DEMANDS FROM PRIŠTINA

The demands of the Serb community should be clearly defined, articulated and communicated to all relevant parties. This includes specific requirements for political, economic and social integration, as well as the protection of rights and freedoms. It is necessary to continuously pressure the government and institutions to respond to the initiatives and demands of the Serb community and to take concrete steps to prevent further discriminatory activities against the Serb community. Also, it is important to openly discuss the Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities and what it would mean in concrete terms for the Serb community in Kosovo. It is necessary to insist on continuous meetings with the representatives of the authorities in Priština.

## SERBIAN-ALBANIAN DIALOGUE

Active promotion and participation in the Serbian-Albanian dialogue where political representatives, the civil sector, and the academic community would participate can help in breaking prejudice and building bridges of understanding. Formalizing dialogue through the establishment of **Dialogue Council** can be a step forward in the ongoing debate and search for common language. It is necessary to create a plan and dynamics of the Serbian-Albanian dialogue, to design accompanying activities in support of the dialogue sessions (e.g. possible cooperation of Serbian and Albanian businesses, non-governmental organizations) and to implement accompanying project activities aimed at promoting joint work and life.

## SURVIVAL STRATEGY FOR SERBS IN KOSOVO

It is necessary to develop and clearly define a long-term survival strategy for the Serb community, which will include economic, social, educational, and cultural aspects of key national interests. This document could represent a way for the first mass gathering of Serbs regardless of political preferences.

## DELIBERATIVE ASSEMBLY OF SERBS IN KOSOVO

It is necessary to establish a body in which there will be a constant debate between different structures within the Serb community. This body should be inclusive of all political options and open to all members of the community who wish to present a specific proposal or issue. This body would not have the ambition of formal participation in politics, but it could help in articulating and solving common problems and encourage stifled pluralism within the community.

## DIVERSIFICATION OF RESOURCES AND SOURCES OF INCOME

Diversification of funding sources and resources, including international grants, projects, and investments, can help stabilize and pluralize the community. Institutions financed by Serbia are almost the only source of income. In practice, this proved to be a very simple form of manipulation

and blackmail in the context of political participation. Encouraging and supporting the participation of Serbs in institutions funded by Priština can help improve their political representation and influence on decisions concerning better living conditions. Strengthening the Serb community through participation and work in various organizations and institutions funded by Belgrade, Priština and the international community can remove the existential pressure on individuals and build the foundations for political pluralism.

Unlike the members of the Albanian community in Kosovo who have different opportunities for financing and development in different areas of life, the Serb community is deprived of such opportunities by setting high criteria when applying to the Government of Kosovo. The proposal is to expand the Regional Fund for the North of Kosovo, which is currently financed only from customs and taxes, with funding and competences from the Government of Kosovo, but also with additional funding from international funds. The Regional Fund, which is currently only for the north of Kosovo, could be turned into a development fund for areas where the Serb community lives, that is, for Serbs both north and south of the Ibar river. Such a Development Fund, as a long-term model for the development of the Serb community, should annually have the size of at least one ministry in the Government of Kosovo (such as the Ministry of Agriculture or Economy in the Government of Kosovo).

## EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR THE SERB COMMUNITY

It would mean a lot for the Serb community to have support in education and capacity building through additional extracurricular education, multi-annual political education programmes, capacity building of political entities in Kosovo, capacity building of Serbian small producers and small businesses, scholarships for master's studies abroad, etc. Such types of development support would contribute to the sustainable development and stay of Serbs in Kosovo.

## PRIŠTINA'S INTEGRATION PLAN FOR THE NORTH OF KOSOVO

The authorities in Priština, together with representatives of international organizations and civil and political actors from the Serb community in the north of Kosovo, must draw up a comprehensive plan that will have elements of economic, political, cultural and other social interventions and thus act in the north of Kosovo as a separate regional and political entity preserving the national identity of minorities in Kosovo.

## A COMMUNITY OR ASSOCIATION OF MUNICIPALITIES WITH A SERB MAJORITY

The question of establishing a Community with a Serb majority remains an open question for the Serb community. Expectations from the Community remain as the creation of additional mechanism for the protection of the rights and financing of the Serb community and an additional channel for establishing cooperation with the authorities in Priština. The Community model proposed by the Brussels Agreement remains the most comprehensive model, which has so far encountered obstacles in implementation. However, in spite of all the obstacles in the implementation of the Community as a form, a large part of the Serb community in Kosovo expect the establishment of a Community of Municipalities with a Serb majority, as a model that would also maintain the connection with Serbia, which the Serb community in Kosovo expects to continue cultural, economic, educational, health, social and pension measures, and to support the vulnerable and economically weak Serb community in its survival in the territory of Kosovo. It is important to emphasize, however, that some political actors and representatives of civil society express their fear that the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities will further marginalize the Serb community and reduce their rights and ties with Serbia.



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