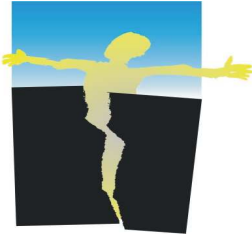


# HELSINKI Bulletin



*Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia*

Rige od Fere str. #20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia  
tel./fax +381 11 30 32 408; e-mail office@helsinki.org.rs ;  
www.helsinki.org.rs

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## **Kosovo Elections: A Test of Maturity**

Local elections in Kosovo of November 15, 2009 – the first elections organized by Kosovo authorities after independence declaration – resulted in a new, major quality in the overall situation. Despite the pressure from Belgrade, a part of the Serb community in Central Kosovo – considerable beyond all expectations – participated in the elections and won authority over some of the municipalities in which Serbs are in majority.

By casting a ballot the Serbs in Central Kosovo manifested political maturity. They also showed that they were aware of the necessity to take upon themselves the responsibility for their own future. And for the first time ever they sent a clear signal to Belgrade authorities – saying they would no longer be hostage of manipulative, political-diplomatic games Belgrade has been playing ever since Kosovo's independence declaration. Regardless of all the difficulties of its socioeconomic situation, the Serb community has thus confirmed its readiness to sustain and remain in Kosovo and, as a politically legitimate factor, work towards establishment of a multiethnic, democratic and prosperous society in partnership with Albanians.

The fact that the Serbs in Northern Mitrovica boycotted the elections testified of Serbia's interest to keep insisting on Kosovo's partition. In this context, the Serb community in

Kosovo has been divided through the criminalized group eager to maintain status quo – the only status that secures it profit, notably at border crossings. Notwithstanding all, readiness to partake in the elections has been present even among Serbs in Northern Kosovo. However, they have been under stronger pressure from Belgrade and groups in Kosovska Mitrovica than their compatriots south of the Ibar River.



Generally speaking, these elections mark the beginning of a new phase in the establishment of Kosovo's full independence. There were no incidents at polls and the electoral procedure was strictly respected. Only the topics dealing with everyday life dominated the election campaign. Discourse of all the candidates was up to the task. Citizens voted for local self-governments and mayors. The 45 percent turnout was nevertheless higher than in 2007. Representatives of 36 municipalities were voted for – and everyone got something, including Serbs. The elections placed the

Ahtisaari plan in a new context for all the communities in Kosovo and opened major prospects for all. Since the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have admitted Kosovo in their membership in the meantime, considerable financial assistance will surely augment those prospects.

Though it manifested a high level of political maturity in these elections, the Serb community has not become fully independent from Belgrade yet. Had Belgrade sent a positive signal, Serbs' turnout would have been by far higher. These elections verified the true relations between Albanian and Serb communities that have been in place for rather long time.

### **Belgrade's Position**

In the attempt to dissuade as many Serbs as possible from participating in local elections Belgrade has resorted to its usual channels. And yet, it refrained from staging an aggressive counter-campaign in the media. Representatives of Kosovo Serbs were given equal opportunity to voice their pros or cons. Minister for Kosovo and Metohija Goran Bogdanovic and his State Secretary Oliver Ivanovic were agitating against Serbs' participation in the elections.

Belgrade's more rational behavior reflects the overall more pragmatic attitude Serbia's leadership, government and the President had to take under the pressure of financial and economic difficulties and consequently restore Serbia's movement towards EU as a priority of their public discourse. The agreement signed between Serbian Ministry of the Interior and EULEX (September 2009) was an indicator of the gradual change in the tough attitude towards Kosovo, marking the former cabinet of Vojislav Kostunica. Besides, over the past year Belgrade has cut down its financial support to parallel institutions, made personnel rearrangements (mostly replaced the officials from the Serb Radical Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia), closed down the RTS desk in Northern Mitrovica and dismissed 200 employees of this media house. The

fact is that the said parallel institutions were more fictitious than real – actually, only those dislocated to Nis, Kraljevo and Krusevac were functional. This segment of Kosovo (Serb) administration lives on the documents it issues to Kosovo Albanians at unreasonable costs.

For all those reasons it seemed only logical that this time Belgrade would give its support to Kosovo Serbs' participation in the elections. After all, this was what influential community leaders (such as Rada Trajkovic for instance) have expected from it. As it seems, Belgrade has given some thought to such a course at the beginning.<sup>1</sup> However, in early summer of 2009, President Tadic stated, "There are no conditions for Serbs' participation in the elections in Kosovo." The Serbian government and the Synod of the Serb Orthodox Church reiterated his stand, without expanding it any further. Whenever asked about the issue, other officials were providing more or less same answer till the election day.



Rada Trajkovic

Though negational in its tone, the wording is actually rather ambivalent. No "tough" allegations were used against Kosovo Serbs willing to go to the polls. They were not accused of, say, "recognizing the false state of Kosovo" or undermining Belgrade's prospects before the International Court of Justice. The

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<sup>1</sup> „Kosovo Serbs and Belgrade officials were discussing conditions for participation in the elections until June when Belgrade changed its mind all of a sudden and, without consulting Kosovo Serbs, decided there were no conditions for their participation in the elections," Dusan Janjic, coordinator of the Forum for Ethnic Relations, told *Politika*; *Politika*, November 11, 2009.

Belgrade-seated media were not campaigning for the boycott of Kosovo elections and actually reported on the topic sporadically and in a rather balanced way when it came to pros and cons.

It was only on the eve of the elections that Belgrade's rhetoric became notably stronger. But just two "relevant" public servants – Minister Goran Bogdanovic and State Secretary in the Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija Oliver Ivanovic – were active in this brief election counter-campaign. Their main arguments boiled down to the statements such as "Serbs cannot have to employers, Belgrade and Prishtina," (Goran Bogdanovic), "Participation in the elections will sharply divide the Serb community," "invest 'illegal' Kosovo authorities with legitimacy" and "jeopardize the process Serbia has initiated before the International Court of Justice." Oliver Ivanovic was stressing, "Establishment of new municipalities has been imposed on Ahtisaari's plan, which preconditions decentralization within an unacceptable political frame: supervised independence of Kosovo." "And this has been turn down with one voice and is not negotiable any more," he added.<sup>2</sup> As for Goran Bogdanovic, he said, "The democratic right to free choice should not be exercised to the detriment of national and state interests."<sup>3</sup> At some point he even overtly threatened by saying, "All those working under the auspices of Kosovo institutions will be taken off Serbia's payroll."<sup>4</sup> To be more precise, he added that "some 80,000 people were being paid from the budget of the state of Serbia."<sup>5</sup>



Goran Bogdanovic

<sup>2</sup> *Danas*, October 31 – November 1, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Danas*, November 14-15, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *Vecernje Novosti*, November 12, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

These statements, however, did not exactly found much echo. As a rule, they were backed just by a handful of tabloids (*Kurir*, *Glas Javnosti*, *Pravda*) also mostly preoccupied with possible disputes among Serbs themselves. Under a dramatic headline "Serbs in Fear of Mutual Conflicts" *Glas Javnosti* quotes an anonymous source saying, "Tensions among local Serbs are growing...many of them are in fear of possible conflicts between those 'for' and those 'against' the elections."<sup>6</sup>

However, the dilemma whether Bogdanovic's and Ivanovic's threats had the support from the Serbian government or they "acted solo" remained. Namely, a day before the elections Goran Bogdanovic considerably smoothed his earlier threats and promised that "no acts of revenge or demonization will be taken against those participating in the elections."<sup>7</sup> According to him, the electoral counter-campaigning was deliberately not marked by "tough" patriotic rhetoric because that was what representatives of the international community had expected to use as "a pretext for any violent and illegal action."<sup>8</sup>

One of Oliver Ivanovic's statements indicates that while appealing for boycott he felt himself rather isolated from the state leadership. "It is most important that top officials take a clearer stand towards elections because ordinary citizens whose fates are at stake do not always understand diplomatic jargon."<sup>9</sup>

### Kosovo Serbs

Kosovo Serbs' turnout in the elections would have been by far higher had the government taken a clear-cut stand on the issue. Actually, some Kosovo Serb leaders have looked forward to such a signal from Belgrade. Notwithstanding all, other influential community leaders have advocated the need for Serbs to participate in the elections by using convincing arguments. Stating that she expected neither the government nor the President to give their explicit support to Serbs' participation in the elections, Rada Trajkovic, president of the

<sup>6</sup> *Glas javnosti*, November 12, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> *Danas*, November 14-15, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Danas*, October 31 – November 1, 2009.



Executive Council of the Serb National Council of Kosovo, said that, in her opinion, casting a ballot was “not contrary to the position of Serbia’s government.” “It is through decentralization that we work for Serbs’ survival. The government tries to restore sovereignty, but of what avail is sovereignty without Serbs?”<sup>10</sup>

Momcilo Trajkovic was pointing out that Serbs in Central Kosovo only logically resorted to Kosovo institutions – courts or registries – had Kosovo IDs, paid their electricity bills and taxes to Albanian institutions and – for all that – traveled to Prishtina. Decentralization and participation in the elections provide them with the opportunity to get these institutions as “their own” and have them “at home.” On the eve of the elections, he said, “If Serbs boycott the elections, people without experience, knowledge or good intentions will come to power.”<sup>11</sup>



Campaign by HCHRS

A couple of days before the election day representatives of the Helsinki Committee visited Serb communities in Central Kosovo and saw for themselves how hard it was for enclave people to cope with the dilemma the Serb governance has faced them with. Most of them were under strain and, as they put it, “between the hammer and the anvil.” Solidarity with Belgrade had a price tag – a modest pay from Serbia’s budget. That was the main reason why some of them decided to abstain from the elections despite that fact that they all acknowledged the benefits they would get otherwise – concrete mechanisms for decision-making to meet their everyday needs

<sup>10</sup> *Politika*, August 11, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Blic*, November 2009.

in living conditions, education, healthcare, etc. At the meeting with the representatives of the Helsinki Committee a resident of the Grace village said with a heavy heart, “I have to denounce my civil right to vote or else I will lose those 150 Euros I am getting as a salary from Serbia.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Campaign by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia**

For two years now the Helsinki Committee has been in permanent contact with the Serb community in Kosovo<sup>13</sup> and in the position to observe its changes of heart since Kosovo’s independence declaration. Namely, once the Serbs in South decided not to leave their homesteads they started to gradually accept realities in Kosovo (they applied for Kosovo IDs, turned to Kosovo institutions to solve whatever problems they had, etc.). With this in mind, the Helsinki Committee decided to join the campaign for Kosovo Serbs’ participation in the local elections. It publicly appealed to Serbs not to miss the opportunity they were given. One hundred public figures from Serbia put their signature under the *Appeal to the Kosovo Serb Community*, the first of the sort in many years. The Committee was campaigning in the media and on the terrain some ten days before the election day. It publicized the Appeal in three high-circulation newspapers (*Vecernje Novosti*, *Kurir* and *Blic*) that have readership in Kosovo. All the media in Kosovo – Serb and Albanian alike – reported on the press conference it held in Caglavica (Kosovo). TV stations daily hosted people on the team. All in all, both Serb and Albanian community welcomed the campaign.



Campaign by HCHRS

<sup>12</sup> Meeting in Grace, November 9, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> *Forgotten World: Kosovo Enclaves* ([www.helsinki.org.rs](http://www.helsinki.org.rs))

### Albanians' Attitude

Albanians were aware of the significance of Serbs' participation in these elections. Practically all their leaders – including the President and the Premier – appealed to Serbs to register their vote, promising them equality, opportunities for return and normal living, and a partnership relation. In fact, they knew that Serbs' participation in the election would legitimize all the efforts they were making to advance Kosovo's independence. Twenty-one election lists submitted by Serb received equal treatment in the media and no one tried to undermine any of election campaign meetings.

### Advantages of Elections

Above all, the local elections were significant for the opportunity they offered to Serbs to truly influence the decisions vital to their everyday life. Since the elections were closely connected with decentralization – implying decision-making at the level of local self-governance – the Serb community was given a unique chance to improve its overall position by having its representatives elected in municipal assemblies, mayors included. This was the more so important since decentralization resulted in three new municipalities in Central Kosovo, where Serbs are in majority – Gračanica, Klokot and Ranilug, and since three Serb villages were included in the Novo Brdo municipality.



Campaign by HCHRS

Decentralization in Kosovo is implemented in accordance with Martii Ahtisaari plan providing political organization and much concerned with protection of minority communities, particularly the Serb. In

addition to territorial arrangement, decentralization is significant as it implies reform of local self-government and emphasizes accountability, transparency and strengthening of capacities of public affairs.

Namely, the process of transfer of authority enables municipalities to manage their own budgets and sources of incomes, as well as to establish mutually beneficial partnership relations with other municipalities. Municipalities are invested with scores of new competences such as control over elementary and secondary education, planning of local economic development and management of primary healthcare. "Most Kosovo Serbs' municipalities would be invested with more responsibilities, including authority over hospitals and protection and development in the domains of culture and religion, among other things."<sup>14</sup>

### Electoral Results and Belgrade's Response

Serbs won the elections in the three newly formed municipalities – and that is surely a new, major quality in the political life of Kosovo. Voter turnout in these municipalities was higher than expected and even two times higher than in 2007. More precisely, the turnout in Gračanica was 23.62 percent, in Ranilug 13.89 and in Klokot 25.32 percent. As for Novo Brdo and Srpci, Serbs who are in majority lost the elections as their turnout was insufficient when compared with total voter turnout in these two municipalities. However, in the second round they stand the chance of winning the office of the Mayor.

Boycott was fully successful in North Kosovo predominated by the Serbs whose financial interests rest on Belgrade and who still believe in the possibility of Kosovo's partition. The differences in Serbs' attitude towards the local elections made it possible for Belgrade-seated media to present them according to their editorial policies and (un)patriotic angles. Whereas *Blic* headlined its election brief with the name of a new mayor, *Vecernje Novosti* opted for the headline "Poor Voter Turnout of

<sup>14</sup> Publikacija USAID „Kosovski mozaik, javne usluge i lokalne vlasti u fokusu“, avgust 2009.

Serbs” and *Kurir* for “Serbs Ignored Elections.” *Pravda* singled out a statement by American Ambassador Christopher Dahl and headlined its brief with “Kosovo Is as Sovereign as Serbia.”



Campaign by HCHRS

Analysts are unanimous about division within the Serb community. Serbs (south of the Ibar River) made the first step towards recognition of realities and sent a clear signal to Belgrade that their expectation that Serbia and its elites could help them to solve their everyday problems was melting away. State Secretary in the Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija Oliver Ivanovic was openly disappointed with the failure of boycott in Central Kosovo. He said that the Serbs in Central Kosovo had more ear for “someone else’s suggestions,” which created a gap between the Serbs (in Kosovo) and Belgrade authorities. “This means that there are no longer a sufficient authority for them,” he concluded.<sup>15</sup>

The official Belgrade refrained from commenting electoral results and the media featured them only briefly. The media were mostly preoccupied with the status of Vojvodina. Commenting the elections, Oliver Ivanovic said he saw Serbs participation as “a personal failure.” He announced that results would be subsequently analyzed and added, “They need to know that certain measures will follow.”<sup>16</sup> Minister Goran Bogdanovic, however, made no bones about the actual outcome – “The time of Belgrade’s directives is gone,” he said.<sup>17</sup> Having placed Kosovo realities in a new context, Major Elect of Gračanica Bojan Stojanovic (Liberal

<sup>15</sup> Radio B92, November 16, 2009; *Glas Javnosti*, November 17, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> *Politika*, November 18, 2009.

Party) said, “Anyone hoping Serbs would boycott the elections and lose yet another mechanism for the protection of their interests could not be a serious person, be he an analyst or a politician.”<sup>18</sup>

**By participating in the elections Serbs legitimized themselves as political factors in Kosovo – and Belgrade will have to recognize this fact. New municipalities and Serbs in power at local level open new prospects. The success in these elections will encourage Serbs to go to the polls in three newly formed elections next spring.**

**Kosovo Albanians got a major political partner they needed as a corrective in the democratization process. As a political factor, Serbs invest Kosovo political scene with full legitimacy. Actual implementation of Ahtisaari plan will depend of the potential of all communities in Kosovo.**

**The outcome of the elections calls upon the international community to get more involved notably in creating preconditions for economic development and thus make it possible for all to start coping with basic, everyday problems.**

**Implementation of the agreement on cooperation between EULEX and Serbian Ministry of the Interior will neutralize criminalized groups in North, particularly arms and drugs smuggling, human trafficking, etc. The influence of these groups on the Serb community in North Kosovo will thus considerably decrease.**

**Since the Serb community has been outside the system for almost ten years and bearing in mind capacities of newly elected deputies, only political education could make them qualified for coping with accumulated problems.**

**What is also necessary are educational programs for younger generations from all the communities, aimed at creating future leaders in Kosovo.**

<sup>18</sup> *Danas*, November 17, 2009.