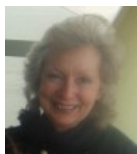


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The Association of Serbian Municipalities: “The Sum of all Fears”

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*Serbs in the North of Kosovo, whose status was at the centre of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, were not a part to the negotiations. Today, their still unclear position is causing “uncertainty, dissatisfaction, distrust and fear” among the community. A recent report has attempted to tell the story through their voices. **Joanna Hanson** runs through the key points.*



Mitrovica city centre: the town is divided by the Ibar river both geographically and politically. North Mitrovica is inhabited by 76.6% Serbs, 16.6% Albanians. Photo by Agron Beqiri, CC-BY-SA-3.0

For the Serbs in the north of Kosovo, their perceived indeterminate status is causing uncertainty, dissatisfaction, distrust and fear. The patience of the Serbian community is assessed as reaching tipping point. Instead, they desire a situation where an Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, ASM/CSM, could be an instrument in enabling successful integration and reducing inter-ethnic tensions. This is what the recent NGO *Aktiv* report [The Community/Association of Serbian Municipalities: “The Sum of all Fears”](#) says. It argues that these moods exist because of the failure to form the ASM/CSM foreseen in the Brussels agreement.

This report is valuable because, although it tells us what many of us already know and others are reluctant to hear, it tells much of it through the voice of the people in the north, who were not included in negotiations regarding the 2013 Brussels Normalization Agreement, which overwhelmingly affects them. The authors of the report used a process of focus-group research, engaging with the four northern-Kosovo municipalities. This voice is what needs to be focussed on.

The report is a call to find a solution in the general interest of Kosovo, not a mere political solution. It sees the outcome as one of a more integrated and ethnically congenial Kosovo, a more prosperous Kosovo which is likewise the objective of the normalisation process. It wants more talk about the spirit and not letter of the agreement. It postulates that a more open and diffuse approach, including some specific executive powers, as being a constructive and effective tool for both the Serbian community and Kosovo generally. Pristina is seen as having in the ASM/CSM a partner to work with and, therefore, there will be improved elite interaction and with time, con-socialisation, human and stable inter-ethnic relations.

Key points

There were three points I considered particularly important, two of which were only mentioned once, though they should have a far greater resonance. The first was the suggestion based on proposals by the Balkans Policy Research Group – not the only

advocates of this initiative – that **Belgrade should conduct a thorough audit of current public spending and employment in Serbian institutions in Kosovo**. There is no doubt this should be done, done speedily and with some form of monitoring.

Secondly, there is the suggestion that the ASM/CSM should somehow **adopt mechanisms to prevent "partisan-based control/domination"**. If such a mechanism can be created it should provide a basis for the equal voices of Serbs throughout Kosovo, the report argues. No suggestions are provided as to how to achieve this, however. This is a key requirement to allow for the ASM/CSM to be a truly representative institution, serving and accountable to its electorate.

This equal voice ambition is an articulation of the manner in which many local Serbs feel their views and even rights have been high-jacked and disregarded by Belgrade. This is an impression gained from many conversations but it is also a clear message to Pristina about the need to talk to everyone and crank up outreach to the north which was a key recommendation from the New Perspektiva/BIRN brainstorming in February this year.

And thirdly, one of the words which appears most frequently in this paper is **transparency**. Transparency related to talks on the ASM/CSM statute, related to funding, related to voting, related to executive powers, etc. This speaks volumes because once again a civil society script is highlighting this ubiquitous virus of the lack of transparency which poisons democratic and economic development in Kosovo and one, no one seems to address with real ownership and commitment.

An economic, not an ethnic, issue

These fears and uncertainties running through the document are seen to emanate from the economic issue of future employment and hence human security: an economic problem, not an ethnic one. It is accepted that people in the public sector will lose employment due to the different budget basis on which northern municipal government is being funded from Pristina. The hope of people north of the Ibar is that the ASM/CSM will provide alternative employment; again, it is the public sector that is expected to come to the rescue. It is difficult however to imagine that this new institution, whatever form it takes, will be a large job provider.

This is a message that ought to be heard by Belgrade, which has been the main actor that enabled a time warp of virtual lawlessness to develop in the north, by allowing public sector employees to keep their jobs and in certain instances even doubling their salaries and paying them more than their counterparts in central Serbia, while they knew that this was unsustainable. Belgrade appears to have turned a blind eye to abuse and illegality. Hence, people are now afraid of losing a situation they should never have been involved in. As one of the interviewees said "We've been sold down the drain". Yes, but they must have known they were in a pretty murky drain already.

Serbia's role

The paper makes it extremely clear that Belgrade's input should be by helping economic growth and investing in the north, thus generating sustainable and job-generating development. Belgrade has a historical burden of debt and responsibility to compensate for.

I hope these findings will provoke more debate around some of the life-changing issues the Serbian community will have to undergo when they lose their jobs, primarily in the public sector. It cannot be expected that another public sector institution will be able to pick up the cards, although some interim phasing-out solutions may have to be found. Priority should be given to investment, retraining, and innovation. People will have to be encouraged to take greater ownership of their own lives and to understand that the old historical dependencies are disappearing.

The report clearly highlighted that the process to establish the ASM/CSM has so far lacked any human dimension: to the citizens, it is not clear who 'owns' the agreement and who are its beneficiaries. It is surely in Pristina's interest to hear these voices and form an institution which will be democratic, locally owned, and a creative and engaging partner in the new Kosovo.

NGO Aktiv's full report can be accessed [here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe, nor of the London School of Economics.

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