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Elections and Minorities
**Small Steps for Minorities Significant Steps for Kosovo**By Alexandra George

As Kosovo-wide elections approach, UNMIK wants all Kosovo communities to accept that the time for adjustment is at hand-that the international community's insistence on progress in building a multi-ethnic democratic society be broadly recognized. The problem is equally a Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb one. Signs are that, despite serious difficulties, Kosovo Serbs are beginning to accommodate to the idea of a Kosovo with a future different from the past.

In the aftermath of war and a decade of discrimination and monolithic control, reconciliation and integration of Kosovo's ethnic communities was never expected to be a quick affair. Today, two years down the line since the end of the conflict, some in UNMIK believe they see the first signs that attitudes are changing. Every day more Albanians recognize the need to be integrated and to co-operate with the Serbs, a Gjilan/Gnjilane international administrator has recently told reporters. Equally important is the growing number of Kosovo Serbs  who recognize the new reality created in Kosovo.

UNMIK believes that the changing attitude of Kosovo Serbs in the Serb enclaves is an outcome of the FRY elections last year. Their representatives in municipal administrations seem more ready to co-operate, officials say. They hope that this reflects a new mood among the majority of Kosovo Serbs who hitherto recognized neither UNMIK nor the need to co-operate with Kosovo Albanians. "They are becoming conscious of the need to take part in the integration process, and the number of people integrating is large," the Gjilan/Gnjilane official enthused.

At the grass roots level, on the other hand, many practical as well attitudinal problems remain to be solved. "The main problem for the Serbs in the 13 villages around Gjilan/Gnjilane, which this office serves, is access to public services," says the head of the Gornje Kusce Local Community Office. He himself has no problem liaising with the municipality Board of Directors, largely Albanians, to try and remedy the situation. The biggest problems are PTK's failure to restore phone lines to Gornje Kusce, despite promises, and the electricity shortages. In addition, "no-one can pay the backlog of bills as most Serbs are unemployed," he says.

Mirjana D., who lives in a spacious, well-furnished house down the street, agrees.  If she had a phone line in her shop it would be easier to do business. The frequent power cuts spoil food products.

The Gornje Kusce Local Community Office (LCO) is one of 23 (three are for Albanians living in North Mitrovica) established under Regulation 2000/45 of 28 October 2000 to assist minorities in resolving such problems as access to public services, to enhance their security and improve UNMIK's presence in minority areas. The LCO's also help improve living conditions by co-ordinating work in education, health, social welfare, public services, agriculture etc.

LCOs therefore have a key role in countering Kosovo Serb marginalization from the political mainstream. For example, it took until last week for the Gjilan/Gnjilane Municipal Assembly to appoint members of the Communities and Mediation Committees, and it was not until then that minorities were appointed to the Municipal Assembly's eight committees.

Apart from reluctance on the part of the majority representatives to share political power, even when different political parties are in the Assemblies, "Kosovo Serbs don't have any hope that these committees will help solve their problems as without internationals we cannot do anything," according to a local official.  In meetings with villagers it is apparent that no one knows about the municipal assemblies or their workings.   Thus, to date, the UNMIK Local Community Officer (LCO), an international based in the UNMIK Gjilan/Gnjilane office and the LCO oversees in Gornje Kusce (a second one is soon to open) are the principal institutional mechanism where minorities can address their concerns.

Freedom of movement eases
Although freedom of movement remains a major problem, some improvements are evident. Since last November, State Kosovotrans has run a daily bus service from four villages to bring 15 Gjilan/Gnjilane Serb municipal workers to and from work- accompanied, however, by UNMIK Police or KFOR.  Every Tuesday and Thursday KFOR increases its presence along the main Gjilan/Gnjilane street near the Serbian church so that Kosovo Serbs can make their weekly purchases.  According to the Local Co-ordinator for Gornje Kusce: "KFOR and the Kosovo Police Service have done a lot to improve security. Even movement to Gracanica has improved."
But not everyone is reassured. The Grbic family remains afraid: they use the UNHCR bus (from July 5 the Department of Transport took over the service) that runs three times a week to buy food in Gjilan/Gnjilane.  Their 64-year old mother complains: "We cannot go anywhere by ourselves.  We're scared."

Unemployment rife
With unemployment as high as 97 per cent in some places, the trials of daily life loom even larger in the Kosovo Serb than in other communities. Gornje Kusce used to have 550 employed before the war - now only handful work, some in schools, some in mining.  In Silovo, out of 1,500 people at most 30 people, or 2 per cent, are working: for the past six to seven months 10 men are employed in the KPS. Some 15 people were hired by the construction company, Binacka Morava, a socially-owned enterprise; a few others work as teachers.  The remainder survive from social assistance or agriculture.  According to one resident, Sucica  Dejkovic:  "People can't sell their produce any more because the Serbs who lived in Gjilane have gone and the market is dominated by Albanians, who consume their own products."

Everyone agrees that KFOR plays a key role in helping Kosovo Serbs find jobs.   Major Steven Katz, CIMIC, USKFOR, Gjilan, is in charge of four teams in his unit - North and South Gjilan/Gnjilane city, Kamenica, Novo Brdo. They all aim to help all communities economically and in job creation.
Two weeks back CIMIC donated three garbage trucks to the local sanitation company in Gjilan/Gnjilane, making the hiring of five Kosovo Serbs a condition. As a result, Serb villages now have garbage collection.  "It's the first time Serbs have worked in the sanitation company since the war's end," says Katz. KFOR pressure also led to the hiring of 75 Kosovo Serbs out of 800 employees at Binacka Morova, where they are mostly engaged in construction. Other USKFOR projects involving hand-made rug and textile production will soon lead to the hiring of 18 Serb village women.

Elections: a step towards political participation
With little social interaction, trading contacts inside Kosovo are tentatively growing: "Albanians buy our milk and we buy vegetables in Gjilan/Gnjilane," acknowledges Mirjana D., who runs the shop in Gornje Kusce. But since the Ground Safety Zone (GSZ) opened she has been there twice to visit her daughter and stock up on products for her shop.  However, many Albanians also go to the GSZ to trade.

Will people like Mirjana vote in the forthcoming elections? She voices one widely-held view: Kosovo Serbs will register, but their  voting in November will depend on FRY President Kostunica's counsel. "We cannot live without Serbia," she says. However, such views irritate many Kosovo Albanians.  AAK international relations head, Blerim Burjani, underlines the point: " I think Serbs should shed the illusion that Serbia is their centre that directs them.  They should integrate into civil society.  It's good if they participate in forthcoming elections and recognize Kosovo as their state."

Important for UNMIK as Kosovo's administrator, and for the majority community of Kosovo Albanians is another prevailing Serb view: "If freedom of movement does not improve considerably many Serbs won't register no matter what Kostunica says," says Mitar D.,

Note for editors
The full document may be consulted online in English at <http://www.unmik.org/>. Albanian and Serbian versions can be provided.

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