

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MINORITY ISSUES – ECMI KOSOVO

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ECMI Kosovo Conference: ‘Decentralisation and Civil Society Involvement’

On 10 September 2009 ECMI Kosovo organised a conference on ‘*Decentralisation and Civil Society Involvement*’. The event took place at restaurant Markov Konak in the future municipality of Gračanica/Graçanicë. The conference was part of ECMI Kosovo’s project on ‘*Support to Minority Communities in the Decentralisation Process*’ financed by the Ministry for Foreign affairs of Finland. The conference was aimed at facilitating dialogue on the decentralisation process and particularly the role civil society can play in this process. The event was attended by representatives from civil society operating in the new municipalities, representatives of the Ministry of Local Government Administration, and representatives of international organisations engaged in or interested in the decentralisation process.

Minister of Local Government Administration, Mr. Sadri Ferati



The conference was opened by ECMI Kosovo representative Mr. Lars Burema, who welcomed the participants and gave the floor to Minister of Local Government Administration, Mr. Sadri Ferati, who gave a brief introductory speech on decentralisation, setting its basic principles and the benefits it offers to communities. Minister Ferati explained that decentralisation is the transfer of competencies from the central to the local level and that it is a process that is common across Europe. Moreover, he ensured the participants that with extra competencies would come additional financial resources. He recognised that decentralisation is an immensely complex and difficult program and that the Ministry will inevitably face many challenges in the implementation. Yet, it can be successful if all of society takes its responsibility. Finally, Minister Ferati stressed the important role civil society has already played so far and expressed the hope that civil society would continue to provide its support to the process.

Following the introduction speech Minister Ferati took the time to answer several questions dealing with the lack of trust of the Serb community and property and infrastructure issues. In response Minister Ferati explained that he himself and his Ministry have been very active in reaching out to communities and have always been open to talk to anyone with questions or comments. At the same time he stressed that he could not solve all of Kosovo’s problems and that right now we should focus on specific problems concerning the decentralisation process.

Decentralisation can only succeed if all of society takes a part in the process

MLGA - Minister Ferati

MLGA Representative Mr. Arban Abrashi

Mr. Burema thanked Minister Ferati for his informative speech, shortly explained the agenda and then gave the floor to MLGA representative Mr. Arban Abrashi, who went into more details regarding the current developments of the decentralisation process, particularly concerning the establishment of the Municipal Preparation Teams (MPTs). Mr. Abrashi explained the long road the MLGA travelled down to get where it is now. In the beginning the MLGA had limited knowledge about and few contacts in the new municipalities. Today, with a lot of help from civil society, the MLGA has an established network in the new municipalities and over 300 citizens applied to become members of MPTs, this is great progress. At the same time he recognised the lack of information on decentralisation that is still prevalent in the

new municipalities and stressed that the MLGA with partners are continuing to work on this issue and that UNDP has developed a new media campaign that will start soon. On the MPTs Mr. Abrashi stated that currently the MPTs for Graçanicë/Gracanica, Ranillug/Ranilug, Partesh/Parteš and Klokott/Vrbovac – Kllokot/Vërboç have been successfully established and that the MLGA was working hard on establishing the MPTs for Novobërdë/Novo Brdo and Mitrovica/Mitrovicë North. Currently, the MLGA together with partners, especially USAID, is assisting and training the MPTs and action plans for all MPTs are being developed. To support the MPTs the ministry has a fund available of around 3.3 million. This money can and has also been used for small projects in the new municipalities.



Mr. Abrashi made a point of stressing the technical nature of the MPTs. The fact that someone is currently a MPT member in no way has to mean that they will also have a position in the future municipality. The new municipality will be established through local elections and it will be elected officials that will carry the responsibility of establishing a municipal government. For now it is the responsibility of the MPTs to arrange all technical preparations to make the establishment of new municipalities possible and to encourage the local community to participate in the upcoming elections. If MPT members perform well this can lead to recommendations to the new municipality, but it offers no guarantees.

The MPTs are technical teams and will not run the municipality, this will be done by elected officials

MLGA – Mr. Abrashi

In reaction to Mr. Abrashi's presentation several questions were raised by the participants, regarding the consequences of the decentralisation process for the RAE communities and the detailed layout of the decentralisation process. Mr. Abrashi explained that decentralisation offers opportunities for the RAE communities, however it is necessary that these communities take a more pro-active stance in the process

and therefore he commended the RAE participants for their participation in the conference. On the layout of the decentralisation process, Mr. Abrashi made it clear that the details of the type of decentralisation Kosovo would experience were set out in the Ahtisaari Proposal and had been arrived at after intensive political discussions. Therefore, the technical aspects of what decentralisation should look like are not under discussion, it is rather how the decentralisation plan, as described in the Ahtisaari Proposal, is implemented that is under discussion. He also admitted that there is indeed a lack of knowledge on these details, but that the MLGA is working hard to remedy this.

Presentations by Representatives of Civil Society

After a short coffee break representatives of NGOs currently active in supporting the decentralisation process were given the floor in order to briefly explain their activities and answer questions regarding these activities. Representatives from Fractal, the Center for Peace and Tolerance (CPT), UNDP and ECMI Kosovo all provided short presentations



The Center for Peace and Tolerance: Mr. Sasa Ilic provided a short presentation on behalf of CPT. Mr. Ilic clarified that CPT is currently executing two projects on decentralisation, both ongoing. One project is financed by the SOROS Foundation and one by the ICO. The SOROS project focuses on outreach in the Gjilan area, while the ICO project is aimed at creating a series of documentaries on decentralisation, with the aim of answering common questions of the Serb community on decentralisation.

Fractal: Mr Milos Milovanovic spoke on behalf of the Serbian NGO Fractal. He explained that Fractal is currently also executing a project aimed at increasing the awareness of the Serb community on the

decentralisation process. Their activities are focussed on the municipalities of Graçanicë/Gracanica, Ranillug/Ranilug, Partesh/Parteš, however they are also planning to organise a public debate in Serbia for displaced Kosovo Serbs. They attempt to reach the Serb community and answer their questions through public events like debates and theatre performances.

UNDP: Mrs. Rreze Duli addressed the conference on behalf of UNDP. She explained that UNDP is committed to supporting the decentralisation process and has been an active partner of the MLGA. Recently, UNDP has supported the development of a new information campaign and also they will soon make available small grants for projects which support projects on themes such as decentralisation, peace-building and the strengthening of civil society. The project has a total budget of 80 000 Euros and proposals can be up to 10 000 Euros.

ECMI Kosovo: Mr. Burema spoke on behalf of ECMI Kosovo and briefly described its project, which is aimed at involving and informing community members in the decentralisation process and providing targeted capacity building support. As such, ECMI Kosovo has organised over 20 round tables in all new municipalities. ECMI Kosovo is always ready to support relevant proposals from organisations or individuals on the ground and encourages people with ideas to contact the organisation.

Following the presentations several participants took the opportunity to ask questions and raise comments on the lack of information of the Serb community on decentralisation, the possible role of civil society and the role of MPTs in elections. With regards to elections Mr. Abrashi explained that the local elections ultimately are the responsibility of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the Municipal Election Official, however he explained that the MPTs will play an important role in supporting the CEC in the organisation of the elections and in the spreading of information on the elections.

Working Group Recommendations

Following the lunch break the participants were divided into two working groups in order to identify the main challenges facing the decentralisation process and develop recommendations on decentralisation, particularly relating to the role civil society could play in this process.

Main challenges identified:

- A lack of information on the decentralisation process in the Serb community: Even though several organisations have been active in spreading information on the decentralisation process, most community members still have next to no knowledge on the details of this process;
- A lack of trust between communities: There is a fundamental lack of trust in the Serb community with regards to the Kosovo government. Consequently, there is a great deal of scepticism within this community regarding
- A lack of capacity of the communities in the new municipalities: Within the Serb community in the new municipality there is very limited knowhow on how to run a municipality;
- The negative position of Belgrade towards the decentralisation process: Belgrade still has great influence over the Serb community in Kosovo and due to its negative stance many people are unwilling to participate in the process or even to be informed on the process;
- Poor infrastructure, feelings of insecurity, and high unemployment rates: The new municipalities have dealt with a period of neglect and the described areas problem areas in all these regions;
- The lack of competency in secondary health care in some new municipalities: Participants were concerned where community members would go for medical treatments that would require secondary health care;
- Raising sufficient money for the new municipalities to tackle all problems faced;

Proposed recommendations:

- Intensification of the current information campaign: The Serb community needs to be 'bombarded' with information, with great use of media and open dialogue with as many different actors as possible;
- Sharing the experience of civil society with the new municipalities: Civil society has been actively operating in the community for many years and has much experience to share in anything from culture to strategic planning to fund raising. This knowledge should be shared through, for example, expert groups;
- Establishing permanent forms of cooperation between civil society and the new municipality through the establishment of a socio-economic council or expert groups;
- Capacity building trainings need to be organised for the MPTs and new municipalities;
- Civil society should play a role in monitoring the new municipalities;
- It was also recognised the trust of the Serbian community in the Kosovo Government could only be gained through progress in all sectors, not just decentralisation.

Conclusion

ECMI Kosovo representative Mr. Burema concluded the conference stressing the three challenges in which ECMI Kosovo believes civil society can play a deciding role: lack of trust; lack of information; and lack of capacity. He paid attention to the difficulty of overcoming these challenges and the work that had already been done to address these issues. However, he expressed the hope that a difference can be made using the day's recommendations and the commitment of civil society.