

Dynamics within Serb Community Political Establishment Ahead of Snap Elections in Kosovo

Adrian H. Zeqiri and Aleksandar Arsić

In the upcoming snap election of June 11, the Serb community in Kosovo will for the first time compete with six political parties and citizen initiatives. The Serb political representatives are among the most important caucuses in the Assembly of Kosovo and there is currently heavy competition among parties on winning these seats. The following is a short summary of underlying issues, the dynamics of involvement of Republic of Serbia within the Serb political establishment in Kosovo and of the parties and initiatives competing in elections.

Constitutional Arrangements

According to Kosovo constitutional arrangements, the Serb community is assigned 10 guaranteed seats in the Assembly of Kosovo. Additional 10 seats are assigned to other minority communities, out of overall 120 seats. In addition to holding roughly 9 % of the seats in the Assembly, the Kosovo Serb representatives are required to be part of the government and hold a sway of ministerial and deputy ministerial positions, including the powerful positions of Deputy Prime Minister. However, one of the most powerful tools within the Assembly, are the Vital Interest Procedures. According to these procedures all decisions that require the 2/3 majority in the Assembly should also have the majority of the non-majority community members, including the majority of the representatives of the Serb community. The other aspect of the Vital Interest Procedures is that it also applies for an extensive list of laws which cannot be amended or approved unless a majority of community representatives, including those of the Serb community, vote for them. These laws tackle areas related to education, health, security (including possible transformation of Kosovo Protection Corps to a Kosovo Army), language rights etc. The Serb representatives in the Assembly have a standing before the Constitutional Court and together with other arrangements in the Kosovo multi-faceted legal protection system for its non-majority communities, makes the Serb representatives in the Kosovo Assembly an important caucus and one that hold the keys to any major developments in Kosovo.

Involvement of Serbia and the current fierce campaign

Republic of Serbia, both political parties and government institutions, have always had an extensive reach within the Serb community. Usually, all of Serbia's political parties have their branches in different areas where Kosovo Serb lives. When Serb national elections are held, the campaign covers Kosovo and usually there are MPs from among Kosovo Serb who are elected to the Serbian Parliament. However, up to the year 2013, before the Brussels dialogue, Serbia did not directly involve itself with the Kosovo Serb political representatives. In 2013 and 2014, a coalition of Serb parties was arranged under a unified list and backed by the government of the Republic of Serbia in Kosovo. The resulting Srpska lista emerged victoriously from within the Serb community, both at Municipal elections in 2013 where they gained all Serb majority municipalities, and at the central election in 2014, where they won nine out of ten guaranteed seats for the Serb community in the Kosovo Assembly. This victory was decisive. Although a clear support of the party from Serbia had been foreseen, it marked a drastic shift in the Kosovo Serb political scene which up to then had been led by Serb leaders who came to prominence by way of engaging with Kosovo institutions and were largely independent from Belgrade control.

Representatives of Srpska, who were under direct tutorship of the governing coalition in Serbia, had a relationship, at times hostile, with their Albanian counterparts in the Kosovo Government. Two Ministers

were discharged from duties over their controversial statements and their participation in the work of the Government was frozen over their last period in office. Many times they aligned completely with the Government of Serbia and had frequent meetings in Belgrade. (For more information of this difficult relationship, please read a full overview of ECMI Kosovo online: <https://goo.gl/A4d4kc>).

The effect of having Kosovo Serb political representatives responsive only to Belgrade created great grievances within the local Serb community who found themselves completely marginalized and without a real voice. Disputes over the management of public funds and the direction of investment projects by international community, created different factions and alienations within the Serb community, causing great political disparities. While Srpska continues to be the only party receiving backing from Belgrade, there are other serious parties and leaders who are competing in these elections and who tend to strike a more independent stance from that of Belgrade.

There is a fierce campaign being fought right now over winning the votes of the Serb community. It has been reported that Srpska representatives and Belgrade officials exercise pressure on the local Serb population to vote for Srpska. The Republic of Serbia holds a large network of institutions that operate in Kosovo, wherein the majority of Kosovo Serbs are employed. According to the reports, their employees are obliged to vote for Srpska candidates only. This has led to a joint statement from OSCE and US Embassy to call upon all sides to stop all forms of political intimidation. (The full statement can be read at this link: <https://goo.gl/1bmhQb>).

The Kosovo voters list contains all Serb inhabitants that lived in Kosovo pre-1999, and who are now displaced in Serbia. The voting can be cast via post. In the last elections, there were 23% of votes for the Serb parties that were cast via post mostly from Serbia. It is expected that the Kosovo Serb votes from Serbia will be aligned with the Government of Serbia's instruction to vote for Srpska lista – which might be crucial in tipping the balance in favor of Srpska in the coming election.

Lastly, traditionally, the Kosovo Serb community was not that motivated to take part in elections, especially north of the Ibar River, despite tremendous efforts to encourage the Kosovo Serb community to take part in Kosovo elections. It does seem that this time around, there is a clear intention to participate fully in elections, which is a positive sign. Whether diversified political options contribute to a larger turnout, however, remains to be seen.

The parties and citizen initiatives competing

The following is a short overview of parties and the list of candidates from the Serb community which are registered at the CEC-Central Election Commission. As this report was prepared, however, there were ongoing reports that candidates are withdrawing from the list due to pressure and intimidation.

1. "Srpska Lista"/The Serbian List is headed by Slavko Simić. Mr. Simić was Chief of the Serb Caucus of the last mandate and recently became member of the ruling party SNS of the Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić in the Republic of Serbia. The list contains major prominent politicians from both the northern and southern part of Kosovo, including Branimir Stojanović, the Deputy Prime Minister. The list has full support of the ruling SNS party in Serbia and by far, it is the most likely to win most of the seats assigned to the Serb community in the Assembly.
2. Napredne snage Kosova (Advanced forces of Kosovo), led by Aleksandar Grujić from Kosovo Polje, who until recently has been vice president of Nova partija Kosova/New Party of Kosova. As announced by the newly formed party the "central core of this political party is located in the

heart of the Anamorava e Kosovës/Kosovsko Pomoravlje, in Ranilug". He resigned from the position of vice president of the Nova partija Kosova in early May of 2017 it then announcement he said because of disagreements with close associates.

3. "Progresivna Demokratska Stranka"/Progressive Democratic Party of Nenad Rašić. The two-term Minister of Labor and Social welfare in the Government of Kosovo and the only representative of the Serb community outside Srpska lista in the last Assembly term. As reported by the media, most of the candidates of Progresivno Demokratska Stranka/Progressive Democratic Party have withdrawn from the list of candidates for MPs in the Kosovo Assembly, including the Deputy Mayor of the Party, Mrs. Biserka Kostić and General Secretary Mr. Milan Kostić. In the statement of withdrawal they have said they are doing this for the best interests of Serb community members in Kosovo by supporting a single alternative for the realization of the rights of Serb community in Kosovo.
4. "Samostalna Liberlana Stranka"/Independent Liberal Party, Slobodan Petrović, Deputy President of Kosovo's parliament, previously the Minister for Local Government. Mr. Petrović was an MP in the previous mandate of the Assembly. He has worked closely with the Kosovo representatives on occasions and declared as someone who wants to sell Serbian interests. Petrović, the founder of Samostalna liberalana stranka, was recently joined by the former Mayor of Gračanica, Bojan Stojanović, along with his civic initiative Savez Kosovskih Srba/ the Alliance of Kosovo Serbs, making this political formation much stronger for the coming election.
5. "Partija Kosovskih Srba"/Party of Kosovo Serbs headed by Aleksandar Jablanović, the deposed former Minister for Returns and Communities in the last Kosovo Government. They are running together with Aktivna Građanska Inicijativa/Active Citizens Initiative. Mr. Jablanović, whose father is the current mayor of Municipality of Leposavić, has lost the chairmanship of Srpska lista to Slavko Simić, the latter being supported by SNS. According to the latest reports, the Activite Citizens Initiative has withdrawn from the coalition with Mr. Jablanovic's PKS, without citing reasons of leaving the alliance and decision to pull out from the election process.