

A time of decisive solutions for northern Kosovo?

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Since the end of May this year the NATO mission in Kosovo (KFOR) has been dismantling the barricades which prevent movement of the international forces through communication routes in the territory of four communes in the north of the country inhabited mostly by Serbs who do not recognise the authorities of the government in Pristina. At the same time KFOR is trying to prevent the use of alternative routes which made it possible to bypass official border crossings when crossing the border between Kosovo and Serbia.

The government in Pristina is trying to implement its own administrative institutions in Serbian communes in the north of the country. An administrative point with the competences equivalent to communal authorities will be opened in Mitrovica in Kosovo in the next few weeks. This point will replace the UN UNMIK representative office which was the only institution in this territory providing a connection between Serbs, who do not recognise the Pristina government, and the Kosovar government. This point would be the first institution in northern Kosovo totally subordinated to Pristina.

Commentary

- The four Serbian communes in northern Kosovo remain beyond the control of the government in Pristina. So far all attempts to establish institutions in this territory subordinated to the Kosovar government or at least the EU EULEX mission have been met with fierce protests from Serbs and ended in failure. The resistance from Serbs to being controlled by the government in Pristina is seen by the Kosovar government and international community as one of the main threats to the stability and security of this fledgling state
- Against the backdrop of the International Steering Group's (ISG, including among other countries the US and 20 EU countries) supervision of Kosovo's independence drawing to an end and of plans to reduce the NATO contingent, the settlement of the question of the Serbs from the north of the country is becoming an ever more potent issue. Operations run by KFOR are intended to enable this mission to take full control of the territory and the Serbian-Kosovar border. NATO forces will probably be gradually replaced by EU EULEX officials and Kosovar force structures. This decisive measure undertaken by KFOR means that it will no longer tolerate the Serbian community demonstrating its distinctiveness.

- The opening of the administrative point in Mitrovica in Kosovo is intended to be the first step in the introduction of an effective network of public services controlled by Pristina in this area. These services would supplant the administration, police and healthcare system financed by Belgrade. New investments and jobs will be geared towards encouraging Serbs to co-operate with Kosovar institutions. The Kosovar government does not however have sufficient funds in order to implement an attractive programme to integrate Serbian communes with the rest of the country. With regard to this, the majority of Serbs consider the measures undertaken by Pristina to be a political demonstration of the control the Kosovar government exerts over this area.
- In the immediate future an escalation of tensions in the Serbian communes and an increased number of incidents targeting the Kosovar government may be expected. The Serbs, who are averse to and mistrustful of the government in Pristina, will thus wish to demonstrate their autonomy and to strengthen their position before another round of Kosovar-Serbian negotiations to be resumed in September this year.