

Tension is growing in the Serb communes in northern Kosovo

Marta Szpala

A number of incidents have been seen over the past few weeks in Kosovo's communes inhabited by the Serb minority. A Lithuanian police officer died as a consequence of firing on a column of the EU's mission, EULEX; the family of Oliver Ivanovic, candidate for mayor of Mitrovica and a former Serbian secretary of state for Kosovo, were attacked; and grenades exploded in Mitrovica and in a Serb enclave called Strpce. The tension is rising due to local government elections scheduled for 3 November. Pursuant to the deal struck in April between the prime minister of Serbia, Ivica Dacic, and the prime minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, the election will for the first time also be held in the four Serb communes in northern Kosovo, which are not controlled by Pristina. The newly elected institutions are to replace the Serb administrative bodies which have been governing these areas so far.

Commentary

- The normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, which for instance provides for the disbanding of Serb institutions operating in Kosovo (police, healthcare and education system), is seen as a success by the governments of Serbia and Kosovo, and by the EU, which is supervising this process. A peaceful atmosphere during the local elections and a high turnout will be vital for the implementation of the agreements concluded, which guarantee the Serb minority the ability to influence the policy of the government in Pristina and significant funds for local governments. The election will also mean a step towards further normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo relations. Therefore, the governments in Belgrade and Pristina are encouraging the public to take part in the vote.
- However, the deal has been rejected by a significant part of the Serb minority in northern Kosovo. The local community believe that the government in Belgrade has reached a compromise with Pristina at the expense of the interests of the Serb minority in Kosovo. Furthermore, the deal is very general; the parties have not agreed on a number of issues which directly affect the life of the local community. Serbs are concerned about the possible loss of their jobs once local administration becomes subordinate to Pristina, their wages (those in Kosovo are much lower than Serbian ones), access to healthcare and social welfare, and their pensions. Given all this, most of the local population believe that participation in the election is contrary to their interests, since this will be seen as legitimisation of the new order. Due to the fears that an undisturbed election will allow

Serbian and Kosovan politicians to deem that the problems of Kosovan Serbs have been resolved, the present mayors of Serb communes are appealing for a boycott of the election. Another group who oppose the vote are those benefiting from the well-developed shadow economy in northern Kosovo, who fear the introduction of strong state institutions in this area.

- The incidents seen over the past few weeks have been aimed at discouraging those who would wish to take part in the election from casting their votes. The incidents are likely to intensify, and it cannot be ruled out that they will reach their peak on the election day. For this reason, the greatest challenge for the EU and NATO missions – EULEX and KFOR – will be to ensure the security of voters, members of the election commissions and international observers.