

Local elections in Kosovo overshadowed by incidents

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Local elections were held in Kosovo on 3 November. The election was peaceful, except for the four Serb communes in the north of the country, which had thus far been not been controlled by the central government and where an election scheduled by Pristina was held for the first time. Groups of people burst into the area's three largest polling stations in Mitrovica and destroyed the ballot boxes and election materials. This incident caused the withdrawal of OSCE employees and all other polling stations in the four Serb communes to be shut down before the election ended. The election at the three stations in Mitrovica is to be repeated.

Commentary

- The fact that an election was held in compliance with democratic standards should be seen as a success for the young state. No attempts to influence the election result on a broader scale were noted. Another unambiguously positive sign is the fact that national minorities actively participated in the election, including Serbs living in enclaves in the southern part of the country, where the voter turnout was even higher than average, ranging between 56% and 67%. This is clearly a success in building a multinational state and the integration of the Serb minority.
- The governments of Serbia and Kosovo and the international community (EULEX, KFOR, the OSCE) were unable to guarantee security to voters and election committees in the four Serb communes in northern Kosovo, especially in Mitrovica. The election of new local governments in this area is vital if the situation is to be stabilised and, in the broader context, for the process of normalising Kosovo-Serbia relations. Pursuant to the agreement which Kosovo and Serbia reached in April this year, new local governments reporting to Pristina were to replace the local government institutions which had already been dissolved as being subordinate to Belgrade. The new governments were to implement the arrangements made in the agreement, and thus contribute to the integration of the northern communes with the rest of the country.
- The voting process itself and the election campaign in the Serb communes in northern Kosovo fell far short of democratic standards. Voters and candidates were intimidated before and during voting, the voting lists were incomplete, and the attack on the polling stations was the culmination of this. These incidents and the fact that the voting time was reduced have given rise to doubts as to whether the election results will be recognised and also about the legitimacy of the governments which will potentially be

chosen this way, which would jeopardise the process of implementing the Kosovar-Serbian agreement. Simply repeating the election will not change the situation much, especially since the risk of further incidents has not been eliminated.

- The way in which the election was held clearly proves that an intergovernmental deal will not solve the problems of the local Serb community in northern Kosovo. By boycotting the election they showed their resistance to integration with the Kosovar state according to the rules set by the governments (according to the OSCE, the turnout in these communes was no higher than 22%). The situation in northern Kosovo is still far from stable and requires greater engagement from international forces, since the governments of Kosovo and Serbia are equally unable to control the situation in this area.