
KOSOVO STALLS ON SERBIAN MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATION

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22.11.2016

21.11.2016

Balkan Insight

Kosovo officials are dampening down expectations that the agreement on setting up an autonomous Association of Serbian municipalities will happen this year.

Despite reports that the Kosovo government will push ahead with the establishment of an autonomous Association of Serbian Municipalities in the mainly Serbian north of the country, officials have confirmed to BIRN that an agreement is not in sight yet.

Bajram Gecaj, deputy minister for local government, stated that the government has much work ahead before the agreement can move forward.

Amid continuing protests against the deal from opposition parties and with Serbian MPs currently boycotting parliament, the government is not rushing to formally propose the model that would give the Serbian community more autonomy at local level.

Although the government formed a working group to draft the statute of the Serbian association in July, Gecaj said no steps have been taken in that direction.

As BIRN previously reported, the EU-mediated agreement between Serbia and Kosovo reached in mid-2015 envisaged that the statute of the Association would be drafted within four months, a deadline that expired last December.

But Gecaj told BIRN that work on the draft statute could take more months, as Kosovo's institutions were now busy working on the agreement on telecommunications with Serbia.

The work on the draft has not yet begun. We had the telecom issue and now, after this agreement was reached, we will be waiting for signals, but it will take a few months, Gecaj said.

The deal reached last week between Kosovo and Serbia on telecommunication was seen as a step forward towards solving the status of the municipalities with a mainly Serbian population.

On November 6, Kosovo and Serbia agreed to allow the International Telecommunication Union, ITU, to allocate a new, separate telephone code for Kosovo, +383, by December 15.

Serbia had long resisted this as part of its policy of denying Kosovo the attributes of an independent state. Kosovo declared independence in 2008 but Serbia still claims the former

province as part of its territory.

The EU's Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, said that the deal on telecommunication could open the way for progress on the Association of Serbian Municipalities.

Another problem that could cause delays, according to Gecaj, is that Kosovo Serb parliamentarians are currently boycotting government institutions over a separate issue, the adoption of controversial law on the disputed Trepca mine complex, which Serbia also claims.

The political timing is not appropriate, as contacts with Lista Srpska are not that good because of disagreements over the Law of Trepca, he added.

Last week media reported that Lista Srpska, a pro-Belgrade alliance of Serbian parties, was ready to return to parliament to provide the votes needed for the ruling majority to approve the municipality agreement.

On November 14, it said that voting on the municipalities agreement could be a possible reason to go back to parliament.

The government, however, argued the process of forming the association could not begin until Lista Srpska returned to parliament.

The principles of the deal were agreed in Brussels in August 2015, and stipulate that Kosovo Serbs should have full oversight over economic development, education, healthcare, urban and rural planning, with budgetary contributions coming directly from Serbia. In exchange, the municipalities would agree to full integration into Kosovo.

The association would have broad powers, including a president, vice-president, assembly, council, coat-of-arms and a flag.

While the government formally pledges support for the idea, the opposition Vetevendosje party has strongly opposed the agreement ever since it was signed, often throwing teargas in parliament.

The party has said it will "act the same way" if there is any new attempt by the government to proceed with it.

Our political commitment is to block the process before it comes to the assembly. The other opposition parties are also against the association, the chief of Vetevendosje's parliamentary group, Glauk Konjufca, told BIRN.

A Pristina-based political analysis, Agon Maliqi, said that following adoption of the telecoms deal with Serbia, the municipalities issue would probably be on the table in Brussels soon.

He said the Albanian parties in government had slow down the process of establishing the association, waiting for a more appropriate political moment, after this agreement caused tensions between government and opposition parties.

"The fact that Kosovo institutions failed to ratify the agreement on border demarcation with

Montenegro is an additional problem that can cause delays," Maliqi noted.

Establishing the association is difficult politically, as this government couldnt establish the demarcation [with Montenegro] either, he said.

A possible solution, according to Maliqi, could be the inclusion of the opposition Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, AAK and NISMA parties in the process of drafting the statute.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/association-of-serb-community-municipalities-impossible-on-2016-11-18-2016>

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