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Rexhepi: Parallel structures and division of Mitrovica – obstacles for standards (Kosova Sot)

Kosova Sot runs an interview with the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Bajram Rexhepi. 'I am a realistic optimist. It depends how much is expected from the implementation of standards. I think the plan for the operationalization and implementation should be realistic and have the support of all institutions, political leaders, the civil society and the international community. I hope that we are going to achieve the necessary progress until the time foreseen for the resolution of Kosovo's final status,' Rexhepi was quoted as saying.

Mr. Rexhepi, even though it was said that Kosovo's final status would be resolved in 2005, it was not made clear what option is at stake. The people of Kosovo is determined on the independence of the state of Kosovo, but what are the options for Kosovo which will be taken into account by the international community?

Even though this was left as an open issue, we are very clear in what our goals. Our option is the independence of Kosovo, and there are no other options. Therefore, we are mobilizing all our energy so that we can achieve progress in the implementation of standards as soon as possible. And when the time is right, and when we believe we have achieved the necessary progress, that is the time when the issue of status is going to be addressed and there is no other alternative.

Who is going to assess whether or not the eight standards presented by the international community have been fulfilled? Is the Kosovan side going to take part in the evaluation process?

As far as the implementation plan goes, it has been envisaged between the working groups, and together with the SRSG we are going to evaluate the progress in the fulfillment of these standards every three months. The SRSG is also going to brief the Security Council in New York and the European Union on the fulfillment of the standards. In a way we are partners in this process and there is certainly going to be a joint evaluation, even though New York might have the final say, however, it is very important for us to be active partners and that our opinions are equally assessed.

Who is going to evaluate the implementation of standards in northern Kosovo and Mitrovica? Is Mitrovica also a standard and is the territorial and administrative integrity of Kosovo one of the standards?

Yes this is related to the implementation plan. And it was not only our request, but we also have support from the Security Council during their recent meeting, when almost all ambassadors said that parallel structures and the division of Mitrovica are real obstacles to the fulfillment of standards, therefore during the implementation plan we are also going to have the integration of Mitrovica.

When will the plan for standards be made public and can you tell us if the final version has been compiled yet? What is the content of the plan for the operationalization of standards?

The plan for the operationalization of standards is almost finished, and it is going to be made public in the next couple of days if it will get the endorsement of the Contact Group. Even though the part on the operationalization of standards is almost finished, the implementation plan is still on the phase of ideas. There are different versions on what could be the best way of cooperation between the structures of government and UNMIK, in order to be as efficient as possible in the implementation of this plan. I believe that it is going to be ready in two weeks.

Have the working groups been appointed and who are the people that are going to chair these working groups?

As far as the government goes, we have appointed the people who are going to head the working groups. However, we envisage that apart from the ministers, these working groups are also going to include civil services, the administration, the civil society and independent experts, so that this can be highly efficient.

The most gossiped topic in the last couple of months was dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade. How do you explain the fact that you refused to attend the meeting in Vienna on October 14, and now you are going to head the working group for dialogue?

I have appointed myself because this is the hottest issue, and because other ministers have been hesitant to head this group. At the same time, I am also the coordinator of all these working groups together with the SRSG. There are also two other ministers in the group for dialogue. We are going to head it together, and we are making the necessary preparations.

You have asked for the support of the assembly all the time. Have you changed your position?

Yes, the best thing would be if the assembly supports this as a package, bearing in mind the fact that when US Assistant Secretary of State Marc Grossman presented this plan it was supported by the leaders of institutions and political parties. That was a relatively good support. I believe it would be good if the plan receives the formal support of the assembly after it is made public. However, even on the issue of participation in the working group for dialogue, we have had two approaches: a political position from the assembly, or the other solution was to find a way to involve government structures in this dialogue through the implementation of standards.

We have been witnessing constant pressure on Kosovar institutions for the start of dialogue with Belgrade. The resuming of the meeting was foreseen to take place in November, however, this hasn't happened so far. How realistic is it to expect that talks are going to resume this year?

Internationals want this to happen in December, even though we are going to make the certain preparations regardless of the political situation in Serbia. We are also invited to attend the summit in Brussels, where Italy will end its presidency of the European Union. And we are also going to be ready with the appointment of working groups. We will see when this is going to start.

Elections were recently held in Serbia and they have failed. Nonetheless, what can be seen is that radical forces are ruling there. In your opinion, how is this going to influence the continuing of talks between Prishtina and Belgrade?

In a way this turns down the expectations of the international community, because the latter often claims that there has been a major democratization in Serbia. The high figures of votes that the radicals have won in presidential elections refutes the euphoria of internationals and no one can tell what is going to happen in the political scene in Serbia, especially after parliamentary elections, especially after the return of radicals and the fact that the person who is accused by The Hague tribunal is on the top of the list. This is a paradox that political circles in Serbia are sometimes irrational in their positions. However, we will have to wait and see what is going to happen, because some political parties have boycotted presidential elections, and something might change in parliamentary elections, even though it can be clearly seen that the public opinion in Serbia has tendencies to lean towards more radical and nationalist movements.

Isn't the return of the pension fund and war damages practical and urgent issues?

Yes, these are highly important issues. However, in general, war damages is an issue that await us. I don't believe that this issue can be solved through dialogue on practical issues of mutual interest. Maybe we can start addressing this issue. However, it is going to be easier to resolve this issue after the resolution of status because they are seen as obligations. The issue of the pension fund is one of the future priorities of the government, but let's wait and see. As for the issue of war damages, we have appointed a commission that prepares all the evidence on this matter.

Mr. Prime Minister, your government has been trying to work without competencies for two years now. Can you tell us about the current situation with the transfer of competencies?

I cannot say that we are completely without competencies, but with few competencies. We have some ministries that have full competencies. Sometimes I say that even if we had a sufficient budget for all our projects and if we had no limitations, it was difficult to build state structures in two years. Certainly this takes at least five to ten years. However, with the current competencies that we have we want to be as efficient as possible, and we are in the constant process of asking for more competencies. Functioning institutions is also part of the standards.

Some critics say that Albanian politicians are not ready to take over these competencies. Have you managed to fulfill the competencies that you have?

This is relative. I think that there has been huge progress in many areas, even though the work of the government is not so visible, because there are positive developments on a daily basis. The goal of this government is not to be identified with two-three projects that will be remembered for a long time. Our goal is to lay the foundations of a state so that it can be a lot easier for the next government.

Are you going to fulfill competencies by the end of your mandate?

No, because it is not realistic. It is impossible to fulfill all competencies when you are under Resolution 1244. Even if there will be changes in the Constitutional Framework, we can still not have competencies. I think that the majority of competencies will be transferred by the end of this mandate, so that the next government becomes more completed.

In the latest meeting of the government, you demanded the resignation of KTA Director Marie Fucci and the members of the KTA Legal Office, by claiming that they are responsible for the current state of privatization. What will you do if they resign?

First of all, we are interested that the process of privatization resumes as soon as possible with the regulations and operational policies that have been in force so far. The people who have asked for changes in this matter have caused confusion and are in a way are considered guilty. Therefore, damages are inflicted on citizens and on the future of Kosovo, and someone usually has to pay a price for this. Therefore, in this context, we demanded the resignation of those who are responsible for this confusion, because the government has never contributed to this confusion.

How will the blocking of privatization affect the operationalization of standards?

These are directly linked to each other. With the blocking of privatization, serious political and economic damages have been inflicted. This has especially affected the issue of trust. The trust, which was necessary for the proper start of privatization, has been lost. It is also known that the economic development, trade economy and the issue of ownership are one of the key standards, and therefore they are directly linked and can have a negative impact on the implementation of standards.

The government has identified 53 laws of the previous Serb system in Kosovo, which have to be declared null and void by the assembly. Is the assembly competent to do this?

Bearing in mind the fact that the assembly is the highest legislative body, we have asked for it to declare these laws null and void. We know that for the time being only UNMIK or the Legal Office in New York can do this. However, we, as Kosovar representatives in the Kosovo Trust Agency must do our part of the obligation and refuse these laws. Even though these laws might appear OK, the political environment was discriminatory and decisions were made based on political directives.

Why was Kosovo left out of the free trade area? Who is responsible for this?

It is known that the Legal Office in New York and the European Union, with the initiative of the Stability Pact have compiled the formulation that Kosovo should sign free trade agreements. Despite pressure from Serbia, which has asked that all free trade agreements that it has signed with other countries to include Kosovo too, but we

have refused to do this, and the European Commission has applied pressure on Serbia not to impede this process because the whole region must be a free trade area. Therefore, Kosovo cannot remain an isolated area. We have signed such an agreement only with Albania and we are in the process of signing them with several countries. We hope this is going to continue, even though in a conference in Rome, where Kosovo didn't receive the proper treatment, the deadline to sign free trade agreements has been postponed.

A group of experts for the Process of Stabilization and Association have visited Kosovo recently. What does this process bring for Kosovo?

This was a political process that was designated first of all for Kosovo after the war. You know that Kosovo did not attend the first meeting in Zagreb. However, thanks to the pragmatism, activity and dynamics of Erhard Busek a possibility was created for Kosovo to join these regional integrations. It is known that there are three desks there, one for democratization, for infrastructure and security, and Kosovo attends most of these as an equal partner together with UNMIK.

Let us go back to the field of legislation. Experts claim ...

Mr. Rexhepi, it has been two years since you have taken over the mandate as Prime Minister of Kosovo. You were appointed in this position after the leading political forces reached a compromise. Two years after, do you think that was a righteous decision?

I am to speak about this it is going to a bit subjective. However, bearing in mind the obstacles of the coalition government and all the limitations that we have had from the Constitutional Framework, I think that we have nonetheless been successful. I can also say that the stability of the government in these 20 months is a success. We will put in our utmost efforts to be as successful as possible until the end of the mandate.

What are going to be concerns of the government for next year?

The two key issues are: the implementation of standards and the tracking mechanism of Association and Stabilization. These two lead toward the resolution of final status and closer to integration into the European Union.

Does this mean that the government is going to set asides major problems that concern Kosovo, such as poverty, unemployment and social crisis?

Through the implementation of standards there must be progress in reducing the unemployment rate, even though we don't have too long. We must put together the legal framework. We hope that the process of privatization is going to resume as soon as possible, because this would lead to more jobs. The government is oriented toward small and medium businesses, especially in agriculture and light industry. I also hope that with fiscal policies and customs taxes there is going to be improvement so that we can encourage our manufacturers. But this is also an obligation of municipalities because new job opportunities are created in municipalities and not by the central level, because this is not a centralized economy.

There have been statements that two offices will be formed next year, the office for energy and the office for foreign affairs. Do you expect that UNMIK is going to allow the government to form them?

There are no legal obstacles as far as the office for energy goes. Whereas, on the issue of foreign affairs, I have said before that it is not going to be a ministry but something similar to it. We will try to find the right ways to do this. But it is known that according to the Constitutional Framework, the political representation falls under the competencies of the Presidency, therefore, the Government, the Presidency and UNMIK must find the right way of doing this.

In your opinion, what is the most difficult standard?

It really depends on the expectations from the issue of returns. If there are big expectations, in the context of IDP returns, then I can say that this would be an unrealistic plan. And realistically speaking we cannot expect all IDPs to return to Kosovo. Some of them have sold their properties and have found a different future. Furthermore, economic development is now on the spotlight, especially with the obstacles in the process of privatization, and there hasn't been sufficient progress on this matter. And this is also one of the difficult standards.

Local media have been claiming that the assembly will vote on changes in the Constitutional Framework in January. Is it wise to spend time in changing the framework, or maybe work should start in compiling the Constitution of the State of Kosovo?

The best thing would be to have a permanent constitution because it is known that the Constitutional Framework is a bit narrow for the reality in Kosovo. Even though it is stated that this is the reserved right of UNMIK, there are however chapters that allow the changing parts of the Constitutional Framework in cooperation with the international administration. And it would be good to have the support of the SRSG if these changes are initiated, in order to avoid a situation where these changes would remain in paper and become inapplicable.

If you are offered another mandate as prime minister would you accept it?

Well, it might be too early to think about this. I am not thinking too much about the prime minister's post too much. In this aspect, I have been able to contribute to the issue of Kosovo in general. If they find it reasonable or positive for me to have another mandate, I will voice my willingness. It is an issue of assessment. My ideal goal would be fulfilled with the resolution of status.

Hoti: Processes have been delayed, because there is no coordination between UNMIK and Kosovans (Zëri)

Zëri conducted an interview with Rexhep Hoti, head of the Coordination Office between the Kosovo Government and UNMIK/SRSG. 'The cooperation between the UNMIK administration and Kosovan institutions so far was not at a satisfactory level,' Hoti was quoted as saying. He also said that, 'processes have been delayed because there was no coordination between UNMIK and Kosovans'.

According to Hoti, the cooperation between UNMIK and the local institutions should focus on standards, after the document gets green light by the Contact Group, which

document will pass on to our institutions, to the Government and the Assembly and then we will have the most difficult stage; their implementation.

In fact, the Office of the Government at UNMIK, or the coordination office, was initiated on 26 August this year when PM Rexhepi sent Holkeri a letter talking about cooperation with UNMIK and the SRSG.

‘The office of the Government covers cooperation in the fields of executive, conditionally speaking, coordination of the work between the Prime Minister and the chief of UNMIK, but also the cooperation with other relevant institutions within UNMIK, like the Political Office’, says Hoti.

In the first plan presented it was foreseen to create five working groups in the Government and five in UNMIK that would monitor the process. But, after the last meeting with Harri Holkeri on Saturday with local leaders, some of the latter did not like that much the idea of forming working groups, as they assessed they might delay the process. On the other hand, Rexhep Hoti says that forming of these groups was UNMIK’s idea. ‘It is understandable because UNMIK has its structures ready for these five groups, while the Kosovo Government, expect for one group, has not structures in place for a successful implementation the way UNMIK has proposed’. Anyway, says Hoti, the Government has responded positively since they consider implementation of benchmarks as a very important process, and therefore has started preparations for forming these groups, although this issue is not yet final.

These processes, according to him, will be concluded when Contact Group in New York gives the green light.

Skepticism of some local leaders about forming these groups, from Hoti’s point of view is that most of the similar groups formed so far have failed.

However, for implementation of standards, he says, it is necessary to form structures for their implementation, since their implementation cannot be done if one standard or one part of one standard remains without concrete structures for their implementation.

The process of operationalization or the plan on operationalization of the standards is expected to take the final form after the Contact Group meeting that is going to take place on 3 December 2003, and there is not yet a concrete stance on how the assessment is going to be done at the final stage around mid 2005. According to Hoti, the Government thinks that the assessment of the benchmarks should be done in accordance with assessment of the same benchmarks in the region.

Apart from benchmarks, other concrete issues of cooperation will have to do with transfer of competencies, returns, and other issues.

As part of the process to transfer competencies from UNMIK to Kosovo institutions, it has been mentioned several times that five new political offices were to open, which would later turn into new ministries of the Kosovo Government in the areas they do not have competencies today; justice, security, foreign policy, energy and other sectors. But, delays in opening these offices and in general delays about many other initiatives are due to a lack of cooperation between UNMIK and locals.

‘Over the last 20 months for different reasons we could not succeed in many processes and we could not meet our plans since there hasn’t been coordination between UNMIK and the Government, and that two bodies have acted separately, meaning it happened that six months or a year were needed for them to agree’, he says.

In general, says Hoti, politics is suffering from spontaneous politics; initiatives are taken and left in oblivion.

He thinks that the transfer of competences should be defined as transfer of mixed competences and the ones reserved for the SRSG to locals and not as it is presented to the public as the transfer from the chapter five of the Constitutional Framework, a chapter that belonged to the Government since its establishment.

In fact Harri Holker has promised to opening of two offices; one on energy and the other on cooperation with foreign countries.

‘Opening of these offices is a conceptual issue and if we had been capable of creating an action plan then the concept of these offices would have been much clearer’ he says. Adding that with a more constructive pressure and insistence there could have been opportunities for some of these offices to open and later to convert into ministries.

‘Resolution 1244 itself foresees ‘elimination’ of UNMIK while with they actions, they are proving the opposite, since UNMIK is barricading not to move from here at all’, Hoti stresses adding that if this continues there is a risk of deepening the crisis, which is deep anyway. We are ready to cooperate and this is why the PM has asked for opening of this office.

In general, according to Hoti, the Kosovo Government has ambitions to be transferred into a government with complete responsibilities and competences, and for UNMIK administration to have the role of advisors as foreseen in the Constitutional Framework.

In this respect, according to Hoti, the Kosovo Government and UNMIK should reconstruct their operational policies.

However, the key challenge for UNMIK administration and for our Government and other institutions will be the process of operationalization and implementation of eight benchmarks that the Contact Group has foreseen to be fulfilled by mid 2005.

Two main problems for the implementation of the standards: short time and organizational structures (Zëri)

Zëri reports that plan for the operationalization of the standards would be ready in the second week of December.

Even though after Saturday’s meeting that SRSG Holkeri had with Kosovar leaders where Wednesday December 3 was mentioned as the date when the plan for the operationalization of the standards would be announced, reliable diplomatic sources told paper *Zëri*, that the plan itself would be ready in the beginning of December’s second week.

Nevertheless, there were neither general serious problems nor special comments by the Contact Group members, but the procedure for consulting the Contact Group was taking time and this also had postponed the process for a couple of days. The UN HQ in New York should support the final draft after its completion, which was based on the draft from November 12, whereas in Pristina it could be announced as a plan for operationalization of the standards.

In the meantime, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister and the Serbian coordinator for Kosovo, Nebojsa Covic, had prepared his remarks where among other things he proposed the complete removal of the standard that involves the Kosovo Protection Corps, because in his opinion the KPC should be completely disbanded. UNMIK reliable sources confirmed that Covic’s comments would not be taken into

consideration, because UNMIK is not obligated to coordinate its actions with Belgrade, but only to inform them about the detailed proposals regarding operationalization of the standards. However, Belgrade officials have another opportunity to influence this issue, because the international administration consults all relevant political elements in Kosovo, including representatives of the coalition Povratak.

However, UNMIK doesn't expect serious problems at this point.

Most probably, the unforeseen problems are related to the implementation time and also to the joint structures of UNMIK and Kosovo government that are due to be established. Internationals are already convinced that those structures could begin by July to be used for implementation of the standards. After the summer holidays, August and the rest of the months would be used for the electoral campaign. Afterwards, the time would have come to negotiate the creation of a new government. The current election system could enable that one party might win absolute majority in numbers of deputies. All these facts could postpone concrete work about the standards until 2005.

Another issue that is major concern amongst internationals is the process of the implementation of the standards. The task for implementing the standards will belong to a High Level Group, which should be chaired by SRSG Holkeri and Prime Minister Rexhepi. The basic idea is that UNMIK and the government must intensively cooperate regarding the implementation of this plan and not to have contradictions concerning the competencies.

Such a solution would in principle be desirable, particularly if there was a consensus between UNMIK and the locals regarding the plan for the operationalization of the standards. Daily tensions are unavoidable along the road if we really want to have a new quality at the beginning of 2005, compared to the end of 2003. However, gradual transfer of competencies from UNMIK to the locals is part of this common work but not a prerequisite.

Why the draft is delayed (*Kosova Sot*)

Kosova Sot carries an editorial on the draft of the operationalization of standards.

Since a few weeks the idea for compiling a draft on the standards operationalization is circulating in international and governmental offices. The press paid a particular attention to this document, which hasn't been approved yet. We noticed a delay in formulating the new concept that would facilitate the work on implementing the standards. The government says it is waiting for a green light from New York, while UNMIK gives evasive responses regarding the [public] announcement of the draft. Delaying its announcement is important, because the longer the draft is delayed the longer the talks on final status would be postponed. Considering that Kosovo is no longer in the focus of the UNSC, we may foresee a long delay until a draft on the operationalization of standards will be published. Currently the international community is focused on the fight against terrorism, the Middle East crisis and other global problems.

By not transferring competencies to the local institutions, Kosovars still have their hands tied for proving their abilities for matching the international demands. So, it seems that two things are postponing the talks on the final status, the delaying of the draft for operationalizing the standards and the delaying of the transfer of competencies.

Holkeri: Criminals have no room in societies that oppose crime (Koha)

Koha Ditore carries a report from the burial of the KPS officer, Isuf Haklaj, who was ambushed along with two other colleagues on November 24. After four days in a state of coma, Haklaj passed away on Friday night and was buried with high honors in Isniq near Deçan.

Kosovo chief administrator Harri Holkeri, who attended the burial, said that Kosovo should choose between good and evil. 'In societies where people make the choice to speak out, to tell the truth, these murderers cannot win,' Holkeri added.

'Criminals have no room in societies that oppose crime,' he said and invited people again to join the sacrifice of Haklaj and Tolaj.

Kosovo president Ibrahim Rugova qualified the murder of KPS members as killings of Kosovo's institutions, paper reports.

'We will not give up. We are focused on fighting the criminals and bringing them before justice,' said UNMIK Police Commissioner Stefan Feller. He promised that all police capacities were focused to arrest the perpetrators of last week's ambush.

'The murders of Isuf Haklaj and Sabahate Tolaj give a message for a different Kosovo, one where violence and anarchy are ruling,' said KPS commander Colonel Sheremet Ahmetaj.

Kosovo Government and UNMIK to have a new confrontation on privatization tomorrow (Zëri)

Zëri reports that four UNMIK representatives and four Kosovo Government representatives would meet tomorrow in Pristina to try and find a compromise regarding the extremely opposite views on the complicated privatization process. As foreseen two weeks ago, a KTA Board meeting is scheduled for 2nd December. Though he had not yet received an official invitation, Minister of Trade and Industry Ali Jakupi said that the local members would take part in the Board meeting.

Zëri further reports that the last Board meeting held on 21 November had not brought any results, instead the differences in standpoints of UNMIK and the Government had only deepened. Even the PM's engagement, who had met several times with Pillar IV head Lambsdorff (only last week), had not brought any results.

Referring to opinions of local economy experts, *Zëri* concludes that considering last week's developments the next Board meeting would only result in 'a new confrontation between locals and internationals'.

Shala: Extraordinary measures (Zëri)

Zëri carries an editorial by Blerim Shala about the last security measures in Kosovo.

After 72 hours of increased security measures by UNMIK and KFOR, Prishtina is supposed to return to a normal situation, because terrorist attacks against internationals, particularly against UNMIK are not to be expected.

This is the news that might be formulated in the end of this increased security measures.

On November 27 Prishtina's citizens speculated about security measures that weren't seen here since the war was over in June 1999. It would be good if UNMIK kept informed Kosovans about what is going on. Due to the lack of reliable information, speculation may only complicate the international administration's efforts for bigger security in Prishtina.

On the other hand, based on the UNMIK official's justification concerning the release on bail of the defendants by the ICTY, security in Kosovo is far from a desirable level, because Kosovo's borders with the neighboring countries can easily be passed. Guarding the borders, including the airport is a key issue against terrorism. Regarding developments within Kosovo, we can conclude that Kosovo can be more easily controlled than other countries in the region. It is known why. Nevertheless, the increased security measures that have been in force in the last three days have proved the willingness of UNMIK and KFOR to function under the circumstances of a terrorist threat. In this case there were certainly some eventual deficiencies, but they can be overcome in due time.