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Serbian returns to Kosovo not impossible, says report

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The European Stability Initiative think tank says that there are only 65'000 displaced Kosovo Serbs living in Serbia proper - a figure that seriously challenges Belgrade's claims of close to 220'000. If true, the revelation could be bad news for Belgrade, which has used inflated figures to promote its plans to carve-up the province. The report also warns that given the new demographic evidence, certain models of decentralization could lead to renewed conflict.

By Tim Judah for ISN Security Watch

Four months after Kosovo exploded in violence, all sorts of decentralization plans are either being examined or produced. But virtually unnoticed so far in the recent debate has been a new report on Kosovo, whose findings should radically alter any future discussion about the province. For the first time a credible organization, the much-respected Berlin-based European Stability Initiative think tank, has taken a hard look at the numbers of Kosovo Serbs - both inside and outside the province - and its conclusions are startling. Far from there being close on 220'000 Kosovo Serbs displaced in Serbia proper, the ESI concludes that there are probably only 65'000 - many of whom have likely already sold their homes and have no intention of returning. If that is the case, the whole vexed question of the return of Serbs to Kosovo is far more manageable than anyone ever thought.

Curious headcounts

Ever since NATO-led peacekeepers entered the territory five years ago, a huge mystery has surrounded the question of the numbers of Kosovo Serbs. Throughout the 1990s, the working figure used by Serbian officials for the number of Serbs (and Montenegrins) in Kosovo was always around 200'000. Indeed, that seemed more or less credible if one looked at the census data from 1981 and 1991. In the first of these, 209'437 Serbs were registered in Kosovo, not including 27'028 Montenegrins. The second census registered 194'190 Serbs, not including 20'045 Montenegrins. While Albanians boycotted the 1991 census, Serbs did not, and while in this period the Serbian authorities of then-president Slobodan Milosevic would have had a political and propaganda interest in exaggerating the figures, they never did. So the question, ever since June 1999, is how the

number of Serbs in Kosovo before the war jumped from 200'000 to 320'000 after the war. The figure of 320'000 emerges when you add the 100'000 or so Serbs presumed to still be living in Kosovo today with the 220'000 or more that the Serbian authorities claim are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Serbia proper. The answer, according to the ESI, is simple. The figure for IDPs is nonsense and the original figure of some 200'000 was correct. But there is more interesting data to come. While many assume that the bulk of Kosovo's Serbs live in the north of the province - in north Mitrovica and the area abutting Serbia proper - a look at the relevant data proves that assumption to be wrong.

The Lausanne Principle

The report by the ESI is called *The Lausanne Principle: Multiethnicity and the Future of Kosovo's Serbs*. It takes its name from the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne in which Greece and Turkey agreed to exchange the vast majority of their minority populations, resulting in the enforced uprooting of almost 1.5 million people, "destroying", says the report, "communities which had existed since ancient times". The report argues that applying this method to resolving the Kosovo conflict is unacceptable in the 21st century, but that it might appear seductive and feasible since many assumptions made about Kosovo are based on incorrect data. Many of those who saw the convoys of Serbs leaving Kosovo in June 1999 assumed that the Serbian flight meant that, in the wake of the end of Serbian rule in Kosovo, there would very soon be no more Serbs left in the province. However, while it was clear that there were indeed few Serbs left in any towns save the north of Mitrovica, it also became clear that quite a number had remained behind in enclaves, in the north, but also in the center and south of Kosovo. Within a year or so, the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and other international organizations began using a ballpark figure of 100'000 or so Serbs remaining in Kosovo, while the Serbian authorities claimed there were between 200'000- 230'000 IDPs in Serbia, of which the overwhelming bulk were Serbs, and perhaps 30'000 were Roma. (In a September 2003 registration exercise, Montenegro revealed that there were 18'047 IDPs there, down one-third from its original estimate of 29'132.) The Serbian Government's recent plan for Kosovo says there are "around" 220'000 displaced Kosovo Serbs, but even so, numbers oscillate wildly depending on where you look. In January 2003, a report from the Kosovo Coordination Center, the official Serbian government body that has, until now, had responsibility for dealing with Kosovo, claimed there were 110'287 IDPs. Interestingly, Serbian research indicates that the majority of Serbs left during NATO's 78-day bombing campaign in 1999, and not after it. While many at this point might argue that the most reliable place to look for figures would be the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it appears that the UN body has never done its own registration exercise and uses the higher Serbian figures, but cautions that it believes the numbers to be too high.

Serious planning hindered by conflicting data

Gerald Knaus, the director of ESI says that five years after the end of the war it is shocking to examine all sorts of official documents in and about Kosovo in which the numbers of Kosovo Serbs - and Albanians - vary enormously, making any kind of serious planning, from everything to education and health to decentralization, a real hit-and-miss affair. And yet, making an accurate assessment is not necessarily hard to do. The ESI based its research on the numbers of Serbs in Kosovo on the easily available figures of primary school enrolments. The results show that “there are still nearly 130,000 Serbs living in Kosovo today, representing two-thirds of the pre-war Serb population”. Of these, 75'000 are living south of the Ibar river, which runs through the city of Mitrovica, in Albanian majority areas. That is, in enclaves that are surrounded by Albanian areas or in mixed villages. “Almost all of the urban Serbs have left, with North Mitrovica now the last remaining urban outpost. However, most rural Serbs have never left their homes. The reality of Kosovo Serbs today is small communities of subsistence farmers scattered widely across Kosovo.” Although the paper acknowledges that most rural Serbs have left western Kosovo, in relative terms their numbers are low. Also, arguing that it was impossible for the number of Serbs to have gone up from some 200'000 to 300'000 during the 1990s, the ESI believes that the true number of Serbian IDPs is about 65'000. When its researcher in Belgrade tried to gain access to Serbian voter numbers from Kosovo, she was told these figures were unavailable.

An impossible task becomes achievable

The implications of this research are wide ranging. What may have happened is that the Serbian authorities added large numbers of people to the real number of Kosovo Serb IDPs by including police, soldiers, civil servants and their families to the IDP numbers - even if those people were not from Kosovo but were only there to work, and hence were not technically IDPs who would one day want to return. It also appears that there was no deregistration of IDPs who may have fled during the bombing or afterwards, but subsequently returned. By implication, it is also clear that if the figure of some 65'000 is correct, almost all of them are from the cities, meaning that the numbers who may still want to return is likely to be much, much lower, since many will have already sold their property and whatever the Serbian plan for Kosovo says, would have no intention of returning to isolated rural settlements, even if there were jobs for them. So says the report: “If most Serbs are still in Kosovo and potential returnees number in the tens rather than hundreds of thousands, then what seemed an impossible task suddenly becomes achievable.”

The implications for decentralization

The second implication concerns the issue of decentralization and territorial autonomy for Serbs. The ESI produces a map of the Gnjilane area. It shows that the way Serbian villages are distributed, plus the way mixed and Albanian villages are scattered in the area around the town, means that it would be impossible to draw coherent lines to demarcate a Serbian autonomous area here - or in many of the other places Serbs live in Kosovo. However, it cites the plan of the Serbian Government, which argues that in "just compensation" for Serbian property in towns Albanian inhabited areas should now be given to Serbs. This, and other plans for territorial autonomy, are thus "dangerously flawed", says the report. "Kosovo Serbs cannot be separated into enclaves without mass displacement of both Serbs and Albanians, increasing hostility and further compromising the security of Serbs. Any attempt to implement this vision leads inevitably towards renewed violence." It adds, however, that when it comes to the recent ideas from Serbia: "If, as seems likely, the Belgrade plan is a tactical ploy aimed at securing the partition of Kosovo, it amounts to a betrayal of a large majority of Kosovo Serbs." If the real aim of the Belgrade plan is eventually to carve off as much of the Serbian-inhabited north of Kosovo, while allowing the rest of the province become independent, then the majority of Kosovo's Serbs who do not live in those parts will more than likely find themselves abandoned and thus forced to flee.

Bad news for Belgrade

The Lausanne Principle makes various recommendations of how to proceed in Kosovo, but certainly the report's biggest contribution is to underline how a significant part of the debate on Kosovo has been proceeding on the basis of false assumptions. It serves the interests of no one, least of all Kosovo's Serbs, to plan an untenable future based on guesswork, wishes, and desires rather than hard facts. The report demonstrates not just the difficulty - and in many cases the impossibility - of drawing neat boundaries within which to implement territorial autonomy for Serbs, but also debunks a key part of Belgrade's plan, which foresees the influx of large numbers of displaced Serbs to yet-to-be-built urban centers. All this may be bad news for the Serbian government and its plan, but by contrast, the fact that there are 130'000 Serbs remaining in Kosovo - who are clearly pretty tenacious - may be less than welcome news to certain sectors of Kosovo's Albanian body politic. The numbers of Albanians in Kosovo also varies wildly between 1.5 million and 2.2 million, with as many as 500'000 believed to be outside the province. Nailing down that figure should be the next task at hand, either for ESI or for a long talked about, but never implemented census in Kosovo. Accurate numbers will not solve the Kosovo conflict, but at least they would make it easier to see who is where and what is needed.