
Kosovo**Status quo?**

Oct 14th 2004 | BELGRADE
From The Economist print edition

An election that will matter for next year's talks on Kosovo's future

THE people of Kosovo are gearing up to vote. Although this has been a UN protectorate since the end of Serbian rule in 1999, some powers have been devolved back to elected politicians. The province's October 23rd poll matters because talks are likely to begin next year on its final status. More than 90% of its population is ethnic Albanian. Overwhelmingly, they want nothing less than full independence.

Nothing spectacular is expected to change on the Albanian side as a result of the elections. But who might the Albanians talk to, first in Kosovo's parliament and then in the final-status negotiations themselves? After the attacks on Serbs and other minorities last March by Albanian extremists, Vojislav Kostunica, Serbia's prime minister, his government and the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church all called on Kosovo Serbs to boycott the October 23rd poll. But Boris Tadic, Serbia's president, has called on them to vote. The Serbs have ten constitutionally guaranteed seats in Kosovo's parliament, but these deputies will have little credibility if the turnout is low.

Mr Kostunica is pushing a plan drawn up by his aides to create autonomous Serbian enclaves in Kosovo. The plan also suggests that some of the 220,000 Kosovo Serbs now displaced in Serbia should return to Kosovo, to live in new towns that link to areas where Serbs live now. But this echo of Israel's settlements in the West Bank seems unlikely to come about. One reason, suggests a report by the European Stability Initiative, a Berlin-based think-tank, is that there are not 220,000 displaced people in Serbia. Their research points to only 65,000, many of whom have sold their properties and have no intention of returning. The ESI also suggests that more Serbs remain in Kosovo than was thought. By examining school registers, the researchers calculate that there are 128,000 Serbs in the province.

Many Serbs think that Kosovo should be partitioned, with the mostly Serb-inhabited north joining Serbia. They argue that most Kosovo Serbs live there, so few would lose their homes by such a division. But this is wrong, says the ESI report. Two-thirds of Serbs actually live in the south, in rural areas. And most do not live in neat enclaves that could easily become Serbian autonomous areas. Similar research is now needed on how many Albanians live in Kosovo, a figure that varies between 1.5m and 2.2m. Without reliable data it is hard to make plans for health and education, let alone for elections or for an independent state.