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Prime Minister of Kosovo: First Mayor of Postwar Mitrovica

Bajram Rexhepi: Mitrovica's light is flickering, with the perspective of its death

The interview with Bajram Rexhepi explains his perceptions for this difficult period of the town, and he blames the other municipalities for leaving Mitrovica alone ... [there follows a commentary from the paper itself]

Zëri: Mr. Prime Minister, in the most difficult period you were mayor of Mitrovica town. What could have influenced the course in order that Mitrovica would not have been divided into two parts?

Rexhepi: I still believe, even though a document like that never came on my hands, that there was maybe an oral agreement, in the period when Martti Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdyn had talked to Milosevic before the Kumanova agreement, that there was an agreement on the north part of Kosovo for a period of time, to give some kind of half-sovereignty (over this territory) to ex-Yugoslavia, so that in that way people could remain in that part until the condition for the return of Serbian Internally Displaced Persosn would be achieved.

At that time and under the conditions under which I worked I hoped and expected that there would be solidarity from other municipalities in Kosovo, in the way that each municipality would help in order to take back their people (Serb IDPs), but that support was missing. In that way we were alone with our problem.

Zëri: In february of this year you participated in a conference in London about the Mitrovica issue. How this issue is looked upon by international community?

Rexhepi: Today there is a status quo in Mitrovica. Despite some positive movements - there is movement over the Ibar Bridge and the establishment of the UNMIK administration in North Mitrovica - nevertheless in Mitrovica you can still feel a complete *lack of perspective*. Mitrovica looks like a town, whose light is already flickering, with the perspective of death facing it and this goes for both sides, the North and the South. It was the initiative of ESI (European Stability Initiative) that prepared some information, initiated talks between the experts on both sides on how both sides could be encouraged and the local structures but also

Mitrovica citizens would be involved in common projects with an economic perspective which could create new jobs and create new hope for a better future for young people.

In this meeting the Trepca problem was also discussed. Finally people are freed from the misperception that Trepca is a gigantic company, which can have the reputation it had years ago. This reputation has vanished already a long time, 15-20 years, ago.

This reputation of glory disappeared even before the Milosevic regime. In the end everybody agrees that Trepca's perspective lies in smaller units and not like it was before. It is the will and readiness of the government to allocate funds for rehabilitation and reactivation of mines and those units that are vital and our wish is to open a perspective for Trepca during the four, five coming years. Otherwise, only mining and of concentrates in this moment is not enough.

Zëri: There are voices that you discussed about union of North Mitrovica with Zvecan municipality, this opened a big debate here? How true is this?

Rexhepi: This issue was proposed as an idea, and based on this idea was meant to reorganize the Northern Part and so that eventually Zvecan would become a part of North Mitrovica.

The arguments that this organization gave were that the Serbs always fear the majorisation, they fear to be outvoted in the northern part and with this proposal there would be 60 percent Serbs and 40 percent Albanians.

This package proposal includes, first the return of all residents of the Northern part to their own apartments or houses without any hinderance, with full freedom of movement, and afterwards the possibility of unification of the Northern part with Zvecan. This was their idea, which we heard in London, which we have to analyze if it is acceptable. We didn't reach any agreement and we didn't promise that it would be fulfilled but that we will have a look at it in the future.

Zëri: How do you like this idea?

Rexhepi: If this is acceptable, the return of people into their property, maybe this is an alternative which can overcome the idea of a partition of the Northern part. This is not the best solution and I cannot say am I in favor or not. We have to look at it and to deeply analyze it. And we have to see which price we will pay if we refuse or if we support it.

We have to know which is the best interest for Kosovo. Is the interest of Kosovo that UNMIK and the Kosovo government govern in all territory or is in our interest to have structural parallel system in the existing enclaves; so I think that all political leaders should give their contribution, but only after they have analyzed the proposal.

Zëri: Taking into consideration all, from the structural parallel system now and five years ago in northern part of Mitrovica and all what is happening there do you think that international community failed in managing this problem?

Rexhepi: It is well known for all of us that this is a failure of the mission. The five year period was relatively enough to establish legitimate structures based on elections, but because of interference of different structures from Serbia and in the first hand from the Coordination Center who formed and finance these parallel structures with the help of some Serbian leaders

from Kosovo, this led to the result that UNMIK couldn't accomplish their mission. This is very clear and was openly discussed in Security Council and in European Union, but despite the wish that these institutions disappear and integrate in our legitimate institutions this didn't happen.

Now, what was the reason? Should they have used more force to enforce the law, this is the issue that is perceived by them. We have our perceptions, that they followed the wrong strategy in supporting the Coordination Center, the institution which helped create enclaves in Kosovo.

Zëri: Can the current situation in Mitrovica create problems in fulfilling the standards?

Rexhepi: Of course, this was said in the last report of the Security Council. Without territorial integration democratization cannot happen. This is a big problem for implementing the standards.