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Minister Murati's controversial statement and the reactions that followed

POLITICAL UPDATE

The Minister of Diaspora, Valon Murati, has come under fire for linking the illegal emigration from Kosovo to the “privileged” position of minorities in Kosovo. During a lecture to students in a private university on 26 February on the issue of illegal immigration of Kosovo citizens to the European Union, Murati referred to constitutional provisions guaranteeing community rights, stating, “There exists a very problematic relationship with the Serbian minority. Our constitution is also problematic because it gives minorities a privileged position,” and that “we can’t change the constitution without two-thirds of the votes of the minorities in parliament.”¹ Murati was also quoted to have said that “this was one of the major reasons for illegal immigration of Kosovo citizens.”² The Ministry of Diaspora, on the other hand, has noted that Minister Murati’s statements were “taken out of context.” The Ministry explained that, while he did say minority communities are privileged in Kosovo in terms of constitutional rights, he also said that this was not the main reason why Albanians are leaving, but “one of the reasons” in addition to the lack of rule of law and poor economic and social development.³

Murati’s statements were widely covered in the media and were condemned by the Consultative Council for Communities, a government body bringing together civil representatives of all non-majority communities in Kosovo. The CCC called Murati’s statement “unsubstantiated” and added that it does not contribute to inter-ethnic relations, much less help solve the actual problem of illegal migration.⁴

The fiercest criticism came from a network of various NGOs and individuals representing the Serbian community in Kosovo, under the umbrella of the Kosovo Policy-Action Network (K-PAN). In a press statement, they demanded an apology from the government and Mr. Murati’s immediate resignation. K-PAN evaluated that “such statements from a high-ranking government official reveal the cynicism and hypocrisy of the political elites in Pristina when it comes to their commitment to building a multi-ethnic society, and that the fear of the Serbian community and that of other communities is reasonable in terms of their guaranteed rights being violated.” K-PAN also assessed the statement as “a type of pressure from Pristina which makes it clear that it will not back off from its maximalist positions in the Brussels dialogue, which does not leave room for compromise when it comes to the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities whose establishment is being delayed.” Finally, K-PAN called Murati’s statement “very dangerous and a continuation of the well-established praxis to blame the Serbian community for all failures of the political elite in Pristina,” while noting that it may lead to “mobilization of people along ethnic lines.” In this regard, they demanded that “the manipulation of the dissatisfaction of the majority

¹ See here <http://koha.net/?id=27&l=46460> or <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-serb-ngos-call-for-removal-of-albanian-minister-1>

² <http://koha.net/?id=27&l=46460>

³ Statements to ECMI Kosovo from Lorik Pustina, Director of Communications and Head of Department for Public Information at the Ministry of Diaspora, 3 March 2015.

⁴ <http://www.ccc-rks.net/index.php/lajme-sq/item/204-komunikate-per-shtyp-27-shkurt-2015>

community with the current socio-economic situation and its articulation through the instigation of ethnic divisions by the Pristina elites be stopped.”⁵

Whatever the motives and the context within which the statement was given, ECMI Kosovo strongly believes that statements linking overall bad socio-economic situation in Kosovo to the “privileged position” of communities, and particularly the one of Serbian community, contributes to the incitement of inter-ethnic intolerance in Kosovo. Currently inter-ethnic relations between Albanian and Serbian communities are quite tense, especially at the political level, following the dismissal of the ex-Minister for communities and return, Aleksandar Jablanović, the tacit protest of Srpska lista, currently outside the Kosovo Government, and the continuous discontent of Kosovo elite and population with the interference of Serbian government in Kosovo state affairs. Against this background, it is evident that these kinds of statements do not contribute to the improvement of inter-ethnic relations and understanding in the Republic of Kosovo. Community rights are set forth in the Constitution and provide a legal framework and protection mechanisms guaranteeing their integration in Kosovo’s society; they complement existing rights enjoyed by all Kosovo citizens, rather than overshadowing them. Additionally, we are unable to see a direct link between community rights guaranteed by the Constitution and illegal immigration of Kosovo’s citizens to the EU, particularly since illegal immigration is not limited to Albanians and has significantly impacted all of Kosovo’s communities.⁶ In its policy brief *Forging a Working Environment within the Government of Kosovo*, ECMI Kosovo elaborated on the need for the Government of Kosovo to foster a working relationship and on the need for public officials to bear in mind the nature of their role in the government on sensitive issues dealing with ethnic relations.

The public condemnation of Murati’s statements is the first such action to have been undertaken by representatives of Serb civil society organizations in Kosovo. While it is laudable that Serb civil society organizations take up their role as watchdog monitoring the work of political parties and the government, there is a risk that civil society gets engaged in the ethnically framed political confrontation that has complicated the work of the Kosovo government since its formation in December 2014. Civil society should maintain its position as a realm of a more constructive engagement and dialogue between Albanian and Serb communities and it should not be an extended playground for political confrontation.

For more information please contact us at + 381 (0) 38 224 473 or through email at info@ecmikosovo.org

⁵<http://koha.net/?id=27&l=46460>; http://www.b92.net/info/komentari.php?nav_id=962689.

⁶ See ECMI Kosovo’s policy brief analyzing the rising emigration of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian community members in Kosovo here: <http://www.ecmikosovo.org/?p=5847>

POLITICAL UPDATE

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About ECMI Kosovo

ECMI Kosovo is the principal non-governmental organisation engaged with minority issues in Kosovo, with the overarching aim to develop inclusive, representative, community-sensitive institutions that support a stable multi-ethnic Kosovo. ECMI Kosovo contributes to the developing, strengthening and implementation of relevant legislation, supports the institutionalisation of communities-related governmental bodies, and enhances the capacity of civil society actors and the government to engage with one another in a constructive and sustainable way.