EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MINORITY ISSUES KOSOVO

KOSOVO COMMUNITY ISSUES MONITOR

2 JULY 2015

VIDOVDAN: NO NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

During the past weeks, the Serb community in and outside Kosovo, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, have marked the holiday of Vidovdan with cultural events and religious services throughout Kosovo. On Sunday 28 June, the annual celebrations surrounding Vidovdan concluded with a memorial service at Gazimestan. No incidents were reported either by police or by media. This is a highly significant step towards normalisation of ethnic relations in Kosovo, even in relation to politically charged commemorations such as Vidovdan. This information bulletin analyses the factors that contributed to this positive development.

Commemorating the historical Battle of Kosovo of 1389 between Ottoman forces and, what most historians agree, a coalition of Balkan Christian principalities (which was led by Serbian Prince Lazar and included Albanian princes), Vidovdan occupies a crucial place in Serbian national identity and Serbian Orthodoxy. The political meaning that over time has been ascribed to the Battle of Kosovo and Vidovdan, however, carries with it a lot of potential for political and ethnic incidents and divisions. In the modern period, the Battle of Kosovo and Vidovdan have been used to support Serbian political and territorial claims to Kosovo. Kosovo Albanians see it as particularly provocative because it was one of the crucial expressions of the rising exclusive Serbian nationalism in Kosovo during the repressive Milošević era. As a result, during the last decades, politicised controversies over Vidovdan triggered numerous ethnically motivated incidents, which have overshadowed the cultural and religious meaning the commemoration has for the Serb community in Kosovo.

Against this background, the absence of any sensational news related to this year's Vidovdan commemoration is a noteworthy step in the right direction towards a multi-ethnic stable Kosovo. This is all the more remarkable if we take into consideration the timing of the commemoration in the midst of controversial discussions on the establishment of the Special Court, which has sparked protests by the Veteran Association of the Kosovo Liberation Army and opposition parties.

There are two factors which contributed to mitigating the potentially divisive character of the commemorations. First, there was massive presence of Kosovo Police, especially on the roads between Gazimestan and Gračanica/Graçanicë – the major sites for the commemoration.[1] Such a proactive measure creates a feeling of safety and security for people who attend these ceremonies and assures communities that the legal provisions that guarantee their right to maintain, express, and develop their cultural identity are respected in practice and that authorities are willing to take extra measures if needed.

In addition, politicians from the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian side have refrained from politicising the event, unlike during previous years or on the occasion on this winter's Orthodox Christmas.[2] The presence of political representatives from the Republic of Serbia was remarkably more low-profile than during the last years and the message given by political and religious representatives

[1] https://koha.net/?id=27&l=64117.

[2] For more on the strong political rethoric that was used in relation to incidents on Orthodox Christmas, see ECMI Kosovo, 'What Should Be Remembered From the Jablanović Case?' (8 February 2015).

focused on cultural tolerance and coexistence rather than confrontational and exclusive statements on the status of Kosovo.[3]

Although non-events like this barely make the news, they are key to foster an environment where cultural identities of communities in Kosovo are not seen as occasions for confrontational political messages in the first place. There is a lot of shared history among Serb and Albanians in Kosovo and narratives that respect the national identity of each other are a prerequisite for a long term reconciliation. This year's 'uneventful' commemoration of Vidovdan offered such a narrative that did not focus on potentially provocative divisions with other communities. As such, it serves as a positive example for similar type of events and sites in Kosovo that hold significant position in Serb national identity while at the same time being conceived as provocative on the Kosovo Albanian side for their political potential. The same principle should also be applied to cultural and historical events that are central to Albanian national identity but might carry provocative political connotations for the Serb community.

The lessons to be learned from this year's Vidovdan revolve around the importance of proactive security measures on potentially charged events and the responsibility of politicians in defining and determining the meaning ascribed to the cultural identities of communities. Regardless of continuing political disputes and the short-term political advantages that can be gained from symbolical events, the only valid long-term vision for Kosovo is one where various communities are secure and free to express their cultural identity.

An important step to normalise Serbian cultural identity within Kosovo would be to determine a Memorial Day for the Serbian community in Kosovo. The Law on Official Holidays foresees the creation of a Republican Holidays Committee, the composition of which reflects the diversity of Kosovo's society.[4] The Republican Holidays Committee has the power to determine which days are Memorial Days, of which there are currently eight.[5] In addition to the Republican Holidays Committee, municipal authorities can also determine which day is a Memorial Day within that municipality according to the Law.[6] The list of Memorial Days included in the Law and on the Calendar of Holidays does not include a Memorial Day celebrating the culture, identity and history of the Serbian community in Kosovo.[7]

[3] http://www.rtklive.com/rtk2/?id=2&r=2367;http://kossev.info/strana/arhiva/proslava_vidovdana/5452.
[4] Law No. 03/L-064 on Official Holidays, Art. 5.
[5] 28 November – Day of Albanians; 12 June – Peace Day; 6 March – Day of Memorial and Respect for Veterans; 23 April – Day of Turks; 8 April – Day of Romas; 15 February – Day of Ashkalia; 28 September – Day of Bosnians; 6 May – Day of Goranis. Law on Official Holidays, Art. 5.5.
[6] Law on Official Holidays, Art. 7.
[7] Orthodox Easter and Orthodox Christmas are Official Holidays.

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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.

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