

RECOM Advocacy to Collect One Million Signatures of Support

Campaign in Kosovo began on 26 April 2011 and ended on 5 June 2011 as initially planned

Overview

The campaign to collect signatures in support of RECOM, the Regional Commission for Establishing Facts about War Crimes and Other Serious Human Rights Violations Committed on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia in the Period 1991-2001, is an initiative which began on 26 April 2011 and ran for six weeks commencing on 5 June 2011. During this time period, young activists from Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Slovenia simultaneously set to the streets to collect one million signatures in order to set up the Regional Commission RECOM. At the end, the signatures should be presented to the governments of each of the countries as proof of civilian support and to persuade the respective governments to show their support by signing the petition, thereby setting up the first Regional Commission RECOM. RECOM's mission will be to establish facts about the war crimes committed in the Former Yugoslavia from 1991-2001 and to create a comprehensive system of documentation and archives that includes an economic assessment of losses sustained as a result of the war. The Regional Commission will:

- Create a final report containing a list of the killed and missing, a list of camps, and other detention points
- Determine the fate of the still 15,000 missing persons all over the region of what constitutes the Former Yugoslavia
- Build solidarity with victims from all ethnic groups/states
- Provide victims and their families with dignity

The Commission is meant to include majority and minority populations, families and associations of victims and missing persons, and those with ethnicities identical to those of the main “perpetrators.” Their inclusion speaks to the depth and scope with which the Commission intends to investigate the war. Through the process of establishing the facts about war, the system of justice will be closely scrutinized on national, regional, and international levels. Establishment of the Commission is especially important to Kosovo where there are still 1,821 missing persons, but no comprehensive list of victims exists. Kosovo is also not currently recognized by two former Yugoslavian states, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, further undermining the country’s ability to fully move forward from the war.

More than 500,000 people around the region—over half of the target goal---signed the petition for RECOM during the campaign to collect one million signatures.

Of the total amount of signatures, the amount collected in Kosovo amounted to 100,513, or twenty percent of the total collected during the campaign and ten percent of the targeted one million signatures. Participation in Kosovo surpassed participation in Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. Individuals who refused to sign the petition perceived RECOM as an initiative “coming from Belgrade.” Yet, despite a harsh rejection of the RECOM initiative by segments of the population, Kosovo was the only country in the region that managed to collect all of the signatures it had planned. In fact, Kosovo exceeded expectations by collecting more signatures than the original target.

Table

Country	Citizenships	Signatures
All Countries	371432	371007
Bosnia & Herzegovina	66045	68652
Montenegro	27097	26841
Croatia	15733	14340
Serbia	148881	147688
Kosovo	100513	100467
Slovenia	4605	4427
Macedonia	8558	8439
Other	0	135

Besides the obvious credit that needs to be given to the organizations responsible for collection of signatures such as NGO Integra in Kosovo, the above-presented figures information could be useful for possible researches and analysis of the correlations of this outcome since the end of the violent conflict, numbers of victims, current socio-political developments etc.

Now that the campaign has come to an end and the numbers have been calculated, it is time for reassessment. The signature collection will continue indefinitely until the goal is reached. In addition to collection points throughout the cities and rural villages of the former Yugoslavian states, signatures will also be collected online. However, the door-to-door campaign will not continue. Information about the campaign will be readily available and dispersed to those who express an interest.

Advocacy Campaign for RECOM in Kosovo

CRDP used inclusive methods to draw support for RECOM among diverse populations within Kosovo during the advocacy campaign. The Center organized ten meetings with civil society stakeholders and public servants from different municipalities throughout Kosovo. More than three hundred men, women from different ethnic backgrounds participated. The participants shared their views on RECOM and provided suggestions in reference to the initiative. The participants expressed their support for the initiative by signing the petition.

In regard to RECOM, Kosovo ranks second in the region based on the number of NGOs and individuals who signed the declaration. Taking Kosovo's size into consideration, the campaign was a huge success. Signatures of support came from women, youth, artists, and among the most prominent human rights activists in the country. People signed as individuals or in connection with NGO's, associations of victims, associations of veterans, media organizations, and religious communities.

However, not everyone in Kosovo supports RECOM. There are nineteen member groups of the Coordinating Council of Family Associations of Missing Persons, yet only two of them support RECOM. All others are against the initiative to establish the Regional Commission. One NGO, the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms (and its sub branches), opposed the creation of RECOM. Other think tanks, who were neither for nor against RECOM, have negatively affected the initiative with their ambivalence rather than reinforcing it.

The opposition is both determined and bold. On 29 April 2011—only three days after the successful launch of RECOM in Kosovo—the Coordinating Council of Family Associations of

Missing Persons (one of RECOM's most ardent opponents) issued a public statement directly asking people not to support the RECOM initiative.

Many Kosovo newspapers published the controversial statement, and provided this summary of the Coordinating Council of Family Associations of Missing Persons:

The Coordinating Council of Family Associations of Missing Persons, has reacted to the campaign to collect signatures in several cities in the Republic of Kosovo and the region, based on the initiative of "the Belgrade Humanitarian Fund," which has reported allegedly for "the need for trials for war crimes in the Former Yugoslavia."

"As before, the servants of Belgrade are manipulating the people, especially the families of the missing, falsely stating that the Serbian initiative is supported by most Kosovo Albanians, especially the families of victims of the recent conflict in Kosovo" [noted in a communication to this Council].

The communication said that from 25 associations of missing Albanians operating in Kosovo, only two individuals who allegedly are leading such associations support the work of the Serbian Humanitarian Fund.).¹

The statement created confusion among those who were being presented with an entirely new perspective on RECOM.

The confusion caused some to question where the initiative came from, what stance the government would take on it and whether or not they should support such an initiative. The confusion and ambiguity was reflected to a great extent in the field when the volunteers went out collecting signatures door to door or inviting people to visit the various stands set up for the purpose of dispensing information and collecting signatures.

The response in various regions/cities, in Kosovo in regard to the signature collection campaign, was diverse. The opinions regarding the creation of the Regional Commission RECOM ranged from outright objection to complete support. It is important to let the victims speak and ensure their voices are heard, regardless of whether or not they give their signatures. Their criticisms

¹ <http://www.ekonomisti.net/artikulli/1/0/9999/familjet-e-te-zhdukurve-reagojne-ndaj-fushates-komra/>

<http://shqip.time.mk/read/0921da7c93/fb880c2a0/index.html>

and complaints about the Regional Commission can be helpful to create better efficiency, more solidarity, and greater inclusiveness for the initiative.

Various Thoughts on RECOM from Around Kosovo

One of the greatest and doubts frequently expressed by respondents throughout Kosovo is that the Regional Commission and its entire initiative came too late. Families and associations of victims feel as if they were ignored and believe that dealing with the conflict twelve years after its occurrence will not benefit them. An observation from Peja was that some who did not sign the petition and deemed the initiative “delayed” were martyrs and missing persons who said they were still hurt from what happened. As Marigona Sheremeti said, “It was their choice and we could not force them to sign.” She is correct but their current pain from the past conflict provides evidence to compel the creation of the Commission to help them deal with the past and ease their pain. They also reason that no one cared about the missing persons twelve years ago, so now is definitely too late. They speak as though gathering information about the missing persons is a missed opportunity.

If we are to learn from this experience, the program of collecting signatures and the information dispersed should be revised in order to provide examples demonstrating that truth commissions and the processes of transitional justice take time. Doing so might help convince those opposed to the Commission of its utility and help them understand the complexities of the process. The commissions and tribunals are created when the time is right and the parties of the conflict have a desire to move on. Furthermore, the capacity to deal with the facts about a war immediately after it has occurred is practically nonexistent given the extent of damage to infrastructure and the economy that warrant immediate attention.

Other critics of the initiative aim their skepticism at the inclusion of Serbia in the Commission. In particular Jahir Bejta from Glllogvc expressed his opinion regarding RECOM:

“What is the initiative of RECOM, let us talk a bit regarding the proposal of the Statute. This statute has been fixed in a mysterious way, in order for Serbia not to be responsible and not to pay the debt towards the whole region of the Balkans especially the debt it owes to Kosova.”

The general mood in Glllogvc is negative regarding the Regional Commission. Some participants claimed that the people who signed the petition did not know what they were signing. They also are suspicious about the process of gathering information which they believe exploits the victims.

The Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian representatives of civil society in Ferizaj who participated in discussions recognize the overall utility of the Commission in providing justice for all, including the minority communities throughout the region. Hajrush Xhaferi made an important observation about the issue of witness protection and the security of those victims, especially minority victims, who contribute to the commission. He recommends greater attention be paid to their personal security as there are no formal statutes or protections for witnesses: "I appeal to everyone to be careful on how they act, because we know that a lot of witnesses did not go to testify in Hague tribunal due to the pressures and threatening. These are the things that you should have in mind." Retaliation is a serious concern and can be a serious impediment to the justice system and needs to be eradicated for RECOM to achieve its stated goals. Despite such dangers, there are respondents from the minority community who are willing to give their signatures in support of the Commission. They express hope that the initiative will provide answers regarding their missing family members. In the city of Gjakova many people were reluctant to sign the petition and remained silent as to their reasons why.

Flaka Uka shared a story at the meeting in Peja which took place on May 12, 2011, about a member of the Roma community: "We have places where people welcome the initiative and sign. I want to mention a case, where a member of Roma community told me that he has 5 sons missing since the last war in Kosova. He grabbed me by the hand and thanked me that I found time and visited him. He was around 60 and he was living only with his wife. He signed for him and his wife." The action of this Roma man strongly reinforces the notion of solidarity. His hope can provide inspiration to others to communicate and begin to deal with past by supporting RECOM.

The sentiment in Mitrovica was generally supportive of RECOM, with some key concerns. Rexhep Lushta stresses the importance of testifying, as those who hide the crime are accomplices to the crime. He believes that although it may not be possible to resolve everything, they can inform the victims of the process of truth seeking. They can testify, but not blame anyone. He sees RECOM as a way to help the victims find comfort and accentuate the truth. At the meeting in Mitrovica one Serbian respondent expressed his support: "What I heard today is good and serves to the initiative for all the nations of Balkans. It is time to be civilized. I am one of the lucky ones to not have witnessed the last conflict in former Yugoslavia. It would have been better if this was not today's topic. I hope that this initiative will be successful and I offer my help in everything. However I have a question on the statute regarding the mandate of the commission, concretely period 1991-2001?² The concern was that if the time period after 2001 was not included in RECOM, victims who had lost their family members

² 'The question was whether or not the RECOM Mandate would include the period after 2001'?

during that time period would not sign the petition and give their support to RECOM. The timeframe of the mandate is a very sensitive issue as some Serbian families had their children kidnapped even after 2001.

In the Anamorava region in Eastern Kosovo, specifically in the city of Gjilan, the number of collected signatures was smaller due to the fact that the region was not destroyed by the conflict as heavily as the central, northern and western parts of Kosovo. The lower numbers in Gjilan can also be explained by the smaller number of victims and missing persons from the region. From this information it is possible to deduce that the people from this particular area may feel less empathy and solidarity with those that were more severely affected by the conflict.

The experiences, and concerns of all those who participated in the meetings around Kosovo regarding the RECOM initiative show the various opinions regarding the Regional Commission. No one person is wrong or right; everyone is entitled to their opinion. For the most part people have justified reasons for refraining from signing the petition and personal concerns about the motives of RECOM. Those people who support it want the Commission to be created so that these individual cases of suffering can be remedied or at least helped by providing the families of these victims and missing persons with some information to comfort them.

Concerns Regarding the Future of RECOM

The transcripts from the advocacy and advocacy meetings around Kosovo to discuss the creation of RECOM and assess the signature campaign highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the Regional Coalition based on gathering support. There are also some solid concerns which can be dealt with as soon as possible to ensure the process goes smoothly. For instance, to ensure better accountability and transparency, activists who collected signatures must sign a contract to ensure that do not collect duplicate or falsified signatures. Were this to happen it would be a severe blow to the whole campaign for collecting one million signatures. Further measures should be taken to guarantee that false/duplicate signatures will not be a problem and that all signatures are valid. Also, supporters of RECOM should publish information identifying the key demographic groups, particularly, certain age groups. Will there be a minimum age to sign the petition? If so, how will that age be determined and what is the justification for it?

There were a few comments throughout the meetings which expressed concern at the Mandate of the Commission focusing only on 1991-2001. Some believe that it should extend beyond 2001 and some that it should pre-date 1991. Their concerns are justified if RECOM is

meant to be a comprehensive regional truth commission. However, rather than weighing themselves down with every detail, supporters of the Commission should address this concern and emphasize the fact that the most intensely violent period for the region was this decade between 1991 and 2001, thus making it the main focus of the Regional Commission. The Mandate stresses perfectly that does not intend to ignore the periods of violence and persecution before 1991 and after 2001, but that the initial objective is to deal with this crucial time period where most violations of war crimes and crimes against humanity took place. They should reinforce their commitment to making RECOM a comprehensive initiative and explain that the process needs some time before it can be considered a success.

Conclusion

Despite the support and many criticisms and challenges that the volunteers faced in the field, along with the contradictory media debates and propaganda surrounding the RECOM initiative and its campaign to collect one million signatures of support, the experience in Kosovo has been an overall success. As Minister of Health in the Government of Kosovo, Mr. Agani pointed out: "This initiative and its Regional Commission are the only way to overcome the barriers that were created by politics regarding war crimes", and he expressed conviction that the establishment of the Commission will be supported by members of the Kosovo Parliament members".

In a short time period, 100,513 members of Kosovo society expressed their commitment to establishing justice and dealing with the past by providing their signatures in support of RECOM. The accomplishment of Kosovo in this regard is impressive considering their geographic size relative to other states in the region which are all participating in the signature campaign.