

HELSINKI Bulletin



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N° 57 • February 2010

Consolidation of Kosovo State and Belgrade's Response

After independence declaration Kosovo entered the phase of state consolidation. While trying to prevent it at any cost, official Belgrade channeled all its diplomatic energy into lobbying against Kosovo's international recognition. Its turning to the International Court of Justice for an advisory opinion about the legality of Kosovo's independence is meant for the same purpose.

What Belgrade really wants to achieve is a fresh round of negotiations with Prishtina, which would hopefully result in Kosovo's partition: the Northern Kosovo would go to Serbia. Therefore, Serbian media have been more and more playing on the thesis about the Greater Albania. They are invoking the findings of a Gallup poll showing that the great majority of Kosovo Albanians (70 percent) take that Kosovo and Albania should unite, whereas 47.3 percent of interviewees in Kosovo and 39.5

percent in Albania believe this would become true in foreseeable future. Historian Cedomir Antic holds it only logical when it comes to Albanians.¹ In fact, by showing understanding for Albanians' aspirations Belgrade wants to strengthen its argumentation for Serbs' demands: partition of Kosovo (as well as for similar feelings when it comes to Republika Srpska).



This is about a decades-long strategic goal. However, after 1999 Belgrade shifted the focus of that goal to



¹ <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Tema-Dana/38648/Kosovo-paravan-za-pljacku-drzave>

Northern Kosovo and prevention of its integration. This shift is evident in a number of writings of the so-called Serb national strategists. So, Dobrica Cosic acknowledges that Kosovo and Metohija “are lost” and claims that the Serbian National Assembly “loses, without a word of protest, the 46-kilometer ethnic territory of Serbia bordering on the Ibar River and the biggest Serbian mountain, Mt. Kopaonik.” At some locations Albanians are annexing the Serb ethnic territory till the border between Serbia and Turkey valid till the Berlin Congress in 1878, while “Serbs say nothing and dream of Europe without frontiers,” says Cosic.²

The latest article by Svetozar Stojanovic, a key national strategist, is most illustrative in this context. Stojanovic confirms the plan for Kosovo’s partition, emphasizing, “To all intents and purposes, further integration of the densely Serb populated part of Kosmet into Serbia as Serbs’ motherland is the most important task of all.” “That means not,” continues Stojanovic, “that we should stop insisting on integration of the entire Kosovo and Metohija into Serbia, on safety for our population in enclaves surrounded by Albanians, on the search for our missing compatriots, return of internally displaced persons and refugees, safeguard of churches, monasteries and cultural monuments and on restitution of our usurped property or at least on compensation for it.” “This should be called the policy for division of control over Kosovo rather than for Kosovo’s territorial partition. It would be worthwhile to give thought to an amendment to Serbia’s Constitution, whereby the densely Serb populated part would be directly integrated into Serbia, whereas the by far bigger part of Kosovo and Metohija would be

treated as ‘essentially autonomous,’” writes Stojanovic.³



As it turned out, Belgrade managed to convince the West that Serb nationalists were undermining the government through the Kosovo issue. The West has never asked Serbia to recognize Kosovo and has turned a blind eye to many of its in consequence. In fact, the international community – US and EU in the first place – has tolerated Serbia’s foreign policy as it believed that Serbia’s Foreign Minister was shielding President Boris Tadic from Serb nationalists with his Kosovo rhetoric. That’s mostly why the international community swallowed Serbia’s initiative before UN for an advisory opinion on Kosovo’s independence from the International Court of Justice – it assumed that the motion as such implied that the

² Pecat, February 5, 2010.

³ Svetozar Stojanovic, www.nspm.rs January 24, 2010.

question of Kosovo would be taken off the political agenda.⁴

However, warnings about Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic's arrogant behavior are more and more frequent. The latest was sent by Jelko Kacin, special rapporteur for Serbia of the European Parliament. Kacin criticized Jeremic's statement that in the process of Serbia's EU accession "a ball is in EU's yard now." "This is not about a football game but about Serbia's future," said Kacin, adding, "EU is not trying to join Serbia but the other way round." "As long as Mr. Minister takes that his duty consists of commenting a football game, he cannot be up to the task of a foreign minister of a country after EU accession," said Kacin.⁵



Jeremic was criticized even more sharply for having withdrawn Serbia's Ambassador in Podgorica when Montenegro established diplomatic relations with Kosovo and for his acid comments about Croatian President Mesic's visit to Prishtina on January 8, 2010.

The international community disapproved Serbia's attempt to arbitrate regional relations: such attitude was seen as

⁴ waz.euobserver.com.

⁵ <http://www.srbijanet.rs/vesti/vesti-iz-zemlje/43377-kacin-kritikovao-vuka-jeremica.html>.

counterproductive for all regional actors, including Serbia, and a waste of everyone's time. And that's exactly what Serb nationalists are actually trying to accomplish: to slow down the process of EU integration. Jeremic's behavior is illustrative of that.

However, Albanians in South Serbia responded to Belgrade's anger at Kosovo strategy on north integration. President of Kosovo Assembly Jakup Krasniqi said, "Serbs from Northern Kosovo who are after secession should know that Albanians from Bujanovac and Presevo are also ready to integrate into Kosovo." According to him, the exchange of territories "should be agreed on and carried out not only in cooperation with local Serbs but also in tandem with Belgrade politicians."⁶ This indicates that Belgrade – keeping South Serbia under permanent control – will be facing new challenges from the territory it has always considered strategically significant. Milorad Ekmecic, historian and strategist of the Bosnian war, says that whoever controls the Presevo Valley controls Macedonia and has hegemony over the Balkans.

Northern Kosovo and parallel institutions

Parallel institutions established in North Kosovo have been the biggest challenge to the consolidation of Kosovo's statehood. They have been notably strengthened at the time of Vojislav Kostunica's premiership in 2004-08. Kostunica's cabinet

⁶ www.B92.net, February 10, 2010.

abundantly subsidized these parallel structures and these subsidies were never subjected to inspection. The “Kosovo budget” was classified as top secret till 2010 and, as such, sourced corruption. The funds set aside for Kosovo were spent at will.⁷ The Serbian government’s decision in 2010 to additionally cut the budget for Kosovo (some 40 million Euros were set aside this year) testifies that Serbia is incapable of financing its Kosovo policy: in other words, it cannot subsidize parallel institutions and have the individuals working towards Kosovo’s partition on its payroll.

Parallel institutions in North Kosovo survived independence

7. For decades Kosovo has been used as a pretext for robbing Serbia’s citizens. Fictitious projects and investments have been used for robbing the state budget. For instance, the fictitious project for cleaning the Gracanka River basin cost Serbia 11,7 million RSD and there is no telling where the moneys went. Actually, someone simply copied the project already elaborated by the Kosovo government, added the term ‘restoration’ just in case, and submitted it for the consideration of the Serbian government. In early 2007 the Serbian government approved the project and paid out the funds for its implementation. With the same moneys individuals were then buying themselves apartments and other property in Serbia, financed partisan activities, etc. According to Goran Arsic, head of Kosovo district, reconstruction of the 5-kilometer road between Laplje Selo and Gracanica was charged 63.7 million RSD despite the fact that the same road had been ‘reconstructed’ several times. In the Kosovo Polje municipality, 12.5 million RSD were charged for several hundred meters of sewers in the village of Kuzmin, and 12.302 million for 2-kilometer sewers in the village of Batuse (one meter of sewers costs 30 Euros at most).

<http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Tema-Dana/38648/Kosovo-paravan-za-pljacku-drzave>.



declaration in February 2008. Apart from Northern Mitrovica – that has been and still is a strategic point for Kosovo partition – Serbia made considerable investment in some enclaves south of the Ibar River, particularly those in the Strpci municipality, including the Brezovica ski center. For ten years now Northern Mitrovica has been no man’s land – neither Serbia’s nor Kosovo’s laws are respected over there. With uncontrolled border between Northern Mitrovica and Serbia on the one hand, and dysfunctional judiciary and the police on the other, Northern Mitrovica became a major center of corruption and organized crime in the Balkans.

Pro-European government and Kosovo

Serbia’s incumbent pro-European government (formed in May 2008) visibly changed the Kosovo policy. Though Kosovo still ranks high at its foreign policy agenda, Serbia has made several strategic and technical steps vis-à-vis Kosovo. First of all, it developed a sort of exit strategy by transferring the status issue to the International Court of Justice. Further, in 2009 President Tadic and the government (with Socialist Party of Serbia as a coalition partner) signed a crucial document – the agreement between the Ministry of the Interior /MUP/ and EULEX. The agreement de facto recognized the (international) border with Kosovo given that it provided customs and security control.

Serbia’s application for EU candidacy gives everything a different perspective. For, once it becomes a formal candidate Serbia will probably move further towards accepting the realities. The MUP-EULEX agreement fundamentally changes the balance of

power given that it obliges Serbia to make concessions.

The parallel structures are still in place. However, the problem actually begun solving by itself after local elections held on November 15 throughout Kosovo except in Northern Mitrovica. The turnout of the Serb community was considerable despite all obstructions. And a turnout as such additionally questioned the anyway inoperative parallel institutions. So it happened that after ten years of parallel governance in the Strpci municipality a new local leadership came to power rather smoothly. The local self-government was formed by Independent Liberal Party and Hashim Thachi's Democratic Party of Kosovo. Serb Branislav Nikolic was elected mayor of Strpci (the municipality in which Serbs make 70 percent out of total population). Only a day before, Goran Bogdanovic, member of the Serbian cabinet, was forced to leave the territory of Kosovo because of disrespect for the prescribed procedure and political engagement.

Official Belgrade's reaction to Serbs' turnout in the local elections was rather mild. Only some opposition leaders commented the U-turn in the Strpci municipality, whereas officials of the ruling coalition hardly said anything despite the fact that the municipality had been treated as most significant for its economic potential. In response to Minister Bogdanovic's expulsion from Kosovo on the grounds of illegal entry the Serbian Premier just invited some ambassadors to a consultive meeting and handed them a formal demarche.

Strategy for North Kosovo integration

The international community formulated a plan for North Kosovo's integration into Kosovo institutions.

The document titled "Strategy for Northern Kosovo" quotes, among other things, that the establishment of a separate municipality Northern Kosovska Mitrovica is the most important measure in Prishtina's endeavor to take control over the North. The document focuses the advantages of decentralization for Serbs in the North – "advantages in everyday life" that may help to overcome the biggest problem: "the feeling that the establishment of a new municipality of Northern Mitrovica implies recognition of Kosovo independence." The document also suggests that Prishtina should "strongly support the Serbs ready to cooperate" and financially assist "moderate political factors in North Kosovo."

According to the Kosovo government's plan, the municipality of Northern Kosovska Mitrovica will become operative after municipal elections scheduled for May 2010.

The document envisages prompt preparations for formation of the municipality: International Civilian Office /ICO/ shall appoint a preparatory team and open its office in the Bosnjacka Mahala settlement of Northern Mitrovica, populated by Serbs and Albanians alike; the same premises shall house an office for communities of the Kosovo government and work towards empowerment of these bodies.



The Strategy also plans the Kosovo police's stronger presence in the North, setting up of courts and taking over the control over two borders crossings with Serbia. Following a successful integration of the Northern Kosovska Mitrovica municipality into Kosovo system, another three municipalities in the North with majority Serb population – Zvecani, Leposavic and Zubin Potok – will be integrated by a similar mechanism, say authors of the documents.

Official Belgrade that “supports parallel institutions and exerts pressure on Kosovo Serbs to refrain them from partaking in Kosovo system” is the biggest stumbling bloc in the way of the strategy's implementation, quotes the document. According to its authors, economic crisis in Serbia plays into the hands of the integration plan given that it forced the Serbian government to cut down the budget for Kosovo Serbs. Serb “parallel” institutions that do not recognize the government in Prishtina need to be marginalized, UNMIK offices closed down, while EU presence strengthened through EULEX, they say. Further, EULEX should open offices in the North and engage more interpreters, drivers and other staff from the ranks of Kosovo Serbs so as to improve its communication with the Serb community.

Belgrade's reaction to the Strategy

Official Belgrade's strong opposition to the Strategy indicates that it has not given up yet the plan for Northern Kosovo's integration into Serbia. State Secretary for Kosovo and Metohija Oliver Ivanovic said, “The international community should be more careful when taking measures for the North given that Mitrovica is

not the same as Gracanica and Strpci.”⁸ For his part, Minister for Kosovo and Metohija Goran Bogdanovic said the announced strategy for integration of the Serb community was unacceptable to it and led to destabilization of the North.⁹

Indicatively, Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac commented, “Any strategy that implies not the cooperation with non-Albanian population and imposes solutions on the municipalities where Serbs are in the majority is unwelcome.” However, he emphasized, “We are closely following the situation, as well as other developments in the North. I believe the problem would be overcome solely by diplomatic means.”¹⁰ Minister Sutanovac's statement testifies of official Belgrade's caution and hints at the possibility of its cooperativeness in the case of Northern Kosovo.

The meeting the Assembly of Serbs from Kosovo convened in tandem with the Serb Orthodox Church on February 4, 2010 in Kosovska Mitrovica strongly rejected Peter Feith and Hashim Thachi's plan for “integration of Northern part of Kosovo and Metohija. Participants in the meeting said they expected Belgrade to defend Serb national interests in Kosovo and strengthen the parallel institutions defying the international community's plans.¹¹ They demanded the Serbian

⁸ www.b92.net.

⁹ <http://www.e-novine.com/region/region-kosovo/34271-Odbacena-strategija-sever.html>.

¹⁰ www.blic.rs

¹¹ www.e-novine.com.



parliament to adopt a resolution on Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia. Marko Jaksic, vice-president of the Assembly of Municipal Communities in Kosovo and Metohija, said, "Kosovo cannot be independent without Belgrade's assistance." Bishop Artemije strongly criticized official Belgrade for "dividing Serbs in Kosovo." Representatives of Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/, New Serbia /NS/ and Serb Radical Party /SRS/, Milos Aligrudic, Velimir Ilic and Dragan Todorovic, participated in the meeting. They actually represented Serbia's conservative bloc that uses the integration strategy for mobilizing Serbs against the government and coercing early parliamentary elections.

Kosovo government's and ICO's intensive preparation for Serbs integration

The International Steering Group for Kosovo (encompassing the countries that have recognized Kosovo) backed the plan for integration of Northern Kosovo into Prishtina institutions that has been put forward by the International Civil Office. At its meeting in Vienna on February 8, 2010, ISC urged all sides, including Serbia, to „play a constructive role in this important process so as to ensure better living conditions in Northern Kosovo.“ The meeting also concluded that „a considerable progress“ has been made in the implementation of Ahtisaari's plan for Kosovo and that Kosovo's territorial integrity was „closely connected with regional stability.“¹²



Serbian officials, however, rejected the plan for integration and called it dangerous for regional stability. Deputy Prime Minister Bozidar Djelic said that Serbia did not recognize the International Steering Group and considered it illegal and its conclusions meaningless.¹³ Commenting the Vienna meeting, State Secretary Oliver Ivanovic said that Peter Feith was „rigging“ the results attained in Kosovo and trying to present himself as a more successful man than he actually was. According to him, unilateral decisions by individuals or groups of countries would not make UNMIK withdraw from Kosovo as the UN Resolution 1244 was still in force. „Such a decision cannot be made in the UN Security Council and, in my view, Peter Feith should start thinking about getting himself another job.“¹⁴

Dusan Janjic of the Forum for Interethnic Relations, commenting the strategy, called Peter Feith “a lobbyist” for Prishtina's bigger influence on the entire territory of Kosovo. “Belgrade should not be concerned with Feith and raise his ratings as it had raised James Lyon's but finally start a dialogue on Kosovo and Metohija with Brussels. Serbia should do its best to have the European Commission dealing with

¹² www.B92.net, February 8, 2010.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Politika, February 9, 2010.

Kosovo rather than Feith, who threatens with preconditioning Serbia's membership of EU with recognition of Kosovo," said Janjic.¹⁵ "Feith is by far more dangerous in Brussels than in Kosovo and Metohija. He gives voice to what the majority in EU thinks: that Belgrade's policy is in crisis. This, due to the crisis of EU's policy for Kosovo, opens the door to Brussels for imposing on Belgrade a choice between EU and Kosovo. One should expect some member-states to soon precondition Belgrade's membership with recognition of Kosovo. And Belgrade should respond with a counterthesis: no doubt that we are joining the Union but by the Cyprian model. It seems that this is what Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic is trying to accomplish," explains Janjic.¹⁶

Peter Feith has already appointed 14 members of the Preparatory Team for Northern Mitrovica to explore resources, means and administrative structure necessary for smooth functioning of the new municipality. He also announced the establishment of a TV channel to broadcast in minority languages, as well as a special TV in Serbian. Article 3, Annex 2, of the Ahtisaari plan provides, "Kosovo shall take all measures necessary to secure an international frequency plan to allow Kosovo Serb community access to a licensed Kosovo-wide independent Serbian language television channel."

According to the plan, Kosovo security forces /KSF/ should be responsible

¹⁵ Press, January 26, 2010.

¹⁶ Danas, February 3, 2010.



for the protection of religious and cultural monuments, including Eastern Orthodox monasteries, churches and other historical monuments. Quoting sources from NATO, the Prishtina-based daily in Albanian "Koha Ditore" claims the Gazimestan monument would be on KSF priority list. Since 1999 when NATO forces came to Kosovo all major monuments of Serbian culture and history have been under the protection of KFOR.

Kosovo Serbs, however, say that KSF is still not capacitated for protecting Serb monasteries the more so since "security conditions" are not the same at all locations. Some monasteries such as, say, Gracanica, are in the places where their believers, Serbs, live, they underline.

The Kosovo government granted 2.1 million Euros to several major projects in the municipalities of Strpci and Gracanica. The government is more and more trying to answer the needs of displaced Serbs. Among other things, it organizes their visits to Eastern Orthodox graveyards. Serbs' return to Kosovo is also organized smoothly. So, for instance, seventeen returnee families from Serbia have been given keys to new apartments in Laplje Selo. Under the project another 36 families internally displaced within Kosovo will be housed. According to UNHCR, some 20,000 displaced persons and refugees have returned to Kosovo up to now.

International actors and consolidation of Kosovo state

Serbia's strategy for Kosovo had considerably relied on Russia and its support, notably after it placed the Kosovo issue on the UN agenda. However, there is obviously another dimension to Russian support, which Serbia hardly takes into account:

Russia may easily stop supporting Serbia as it searches for a modus vivendi with US and EU. Russia actually changes the mode of its support to Serbia according to circumstances. So Russian Standing Representative with NATO Dmitry Rogozin said Serbia would have to give up Kosovo should it want to join NATO – and then, he added, Russia would also have to reconsider its attitude towards Kosovo as they /Russians/ “cannot be bigger Serbs than Serbs themselves.”

Rogozin also said, “All NATO member-states have not recognized Kosovo. This refers to Spain, Greece, Rumania and Slovakia. However, under international law and NATO statute such a situation does not hinder Serbia’s membership of NATO. Given that the majority NATO states will not change their stances, Alliance can accept Serbia into its ranks but only within Serbia’s ‘new’ borders – without Kosovo.” Belgrade will have to formally recognize sovereignty of Prishtina, which will subsequently change Madrid’s and Moscow’s stances, he stressed.¹⁷

According to most analysts, this threat actually blackmails Serbia. On the other hand, it may be Russia’s exit strategy from the situation that disturbs its relations with NATO and EU.

The announced visit to Kosovo by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton indicates that US is raising the tempo of its policy for Kosovo’s consolidation and will not treat Belgrade “meddling” in Northern Kosovo with indulgence. The fact the representatives of Kosovo Serbs were invited to President Obama’s National Prayer Breakfast also testify of US concern with the Western Balkans.



¹⁷ Blic, February 4, 2010.

EU strategy for consolidation of Kosovo statehood has been productive so far. Serbia's further movement towards Euro-Atlantic integrations will be surely conditioned with its acceptance of Kosovo realities.

Formal recognition of Kosovo is not on the table yet. However, cooperation with Kosovo, through regional cooperation, is gradually imposed on Serbia as a precondition. If it wants to obtain the status of EU candidate, Serbia will have to manifest more flexibility about Kosovo: it will have to provide support to the functioning of Kosovo institutions.

The international community's attitude towards President Tadic and the ruling coalition in Serbia can be summed up as follows, "Such dynamics should be created to enable Belgrade to reach a face-saving solution, whereby the support to parallel structures would be reduced and ultimately ended on the one hand, and (Serbia's) movement towards EU accelerated on the other."¹⁸

The international community has sped up its activities for Kosovo's stabilization and consolidation. This is a new challenge for the Serbian government. The government should not miss the opportunity for demonstrating its cooperativeness given that the time of Belgrade's blackmail and manipulation is running out.



¹⁸ http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/sever-kosova:-obustaviti-podrsku--sacuvati-obraz_170079.html

