

Helsinki bulletin



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SHIFT IN BELGRADE'S KOSOVO POLICY AND ITS IMPACT

The political atmosphere in Serbia has changed significantly thanks to a shift in the attitude of the political leadership to Kosovo.

Following submission of the joint EU and Serbian resolution to the UN General Assembly, and the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the independence of Kosovo, Serbia's political life has undergone some meaningful changes. President Boris Tadić's articulation of the "new policy", was welcomed with strong support from the Serbian public. This implies, firstly, "that Serbia must not be a country of just one issue – Kosovo" and, secondly, "that we shall not be able to accede to the EU if we import new conflicts into it"¹.

This is underlined by the disappearance from public life of Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić the standard bearer for the hard-line Kosovo policy. From the extremely important role assigned to him by the media in recent years, Vuk Jeremić is now mentioned only in agency news, and then only indirectly. In the past few days he has unexpectedly begun to promote the idea of dialogue: "We solve problems in the region by dialogue, and that is our greatest

contribution to building democracy in the world²".

One consequence of this turnaround is the ferment within the Democratic Party, where two factions are now battling for supremacy. One is in favour pressing ahead with Euro-Atlantic integration while the other backs the status quo. In this context, Jeremić is also fighting an independent battle for the deputy presidency of the party, leading to the conclusion that the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences camp is losing ground in its campaign to use him to influence the Democratic Party. The upper hand in this underwater battle of the Democrats is now held by the progressive forces, led by Defence Minister Dragan Šutanovac, Vojvodina Premier Bojan Pajtić and Belgrade Mayor Dragan Đilas.

After a decade of repeating the mantra "Kosovo is Serbia", a completely new approach to the Kosovo problem has been created for the Serbian public. Apart from the extreme right associations and parties, most of the public has now thrown out the time-honoured talk of "red

lines³, and “Serbia’s sovereignty” in favour of advocacy for dialogue and a new beginning.

KICKING OFF WITHOUT “TOUGH TOPICS”

It has taken very little time for the debate on Kosovo to acquire a completely new connotation in public discourse. Serbian politicians are now sidestepping the fact that dialogue and negotiations with Priština will focus on the problems of day-to-day life, on “technical issues”, rather than on status.



Mainstream politicians admit that thorny topics are being set aside in favour of beginning with easier matters. Thus the president of the Democratic Party’s Political Council, **Dragoljub Mićunović**, has said that, for now, Belgrade is primarily interested in talks “on the status of human rights in Kosovo. We have our compatriots there and we cannot ignore or be indifferent to their situation.” Mićunović believes that property issues, both private and state, are of vital importance: “There are our monasteries there, and cultural monuments. As well as various economic issues that we should not neglect. We export more to Kosovo than we do to America and we have a surplus in this exchange. So we’re interested in trade and in investing⁴.”

3 Radio Free Europe, October 8, 2010

4 *Politika*, September 27, 2010

As neither Belgrade nor Priština are in any hurry to begin dialogue, the international community has begun preparations to kick it off. In the absence of any agenda generated by Priština and Belgrade, it seems that Brussels, with the support of the US, has decided to draw up its own agenda of possible topics. The first issues to be discussed would be those of the borders in the north and protection of the religious and cultural heritage. Priština daily *Koha Ditore* reports that the EU is ruling out any possibility of negotiations on the status of Kosovo but believes that there should be discussion of a special status for the north “based on the real situation on the ground⁵”.

No one denies that, sooner or later, Belgrade and Priština will have to talk about northern Kosovo and the Serbian enclaves and monasteries. But for now the focus is on general “constructive cooperation” and “Serbia’s European prospects”. The formulation in the Serbian and EU joint resolution, “a dialogue between the sides”; it neither excludes nor imposes any topics for discussion so, to a great extent, the conduct and content of the talks will depend on the readiness of Belgrade and Priština to find a compromise in direct negotiations.

IMPACT OF THE NEW POLICY

The first results have come from direct discussions between President Tadić and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton on Kosovo and the launch of dialogue.

At the beginning of October, Serbia collaborated with EULEX for the first time to combat organized crime in northern Kosovo. Border controls between Serbia and the north of Kosovo were stepped up significantly and so, for the

5 Radio Free Europe, October 8, 2010



first time in the past ten years, Serbia showed an interest in standing up to organized crime involving Serbs in Kosovska Mitrovica. Ten years of complete lawlessness had seen new criminal gangs being established among Kosovo Serbs. For years the Serbian media insisted that the Albanian community was the source of crime in the Balkans, despite data showing that both communities are involved in criminal activities. What must be emphasized is that Serbian criminal circles in the north have, to a large extent, been responsible for an increase in the profitable business of human trafficking.

The bulk of the business is smuggling (oil and oil derivatives in first place, along with cigarettes and alcohol), as well as arms, drugs and human trafficking. The joint operation of the Serbian police and EULEX resulted in the arrest of one of the leaders of the Serbian underworld in Mitrovica. On October 5, 2010, a man was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder, illegal possession of weapons and causing general danger. This kind of intervention by EULEX (in collaboration with Serbia) functions as a demonstration, a warning to the most

extreme elements in northern Kosovo. And although this police and customs operation alone does not imply any long-term solution, it shows that, following agreement at the highest political level (Ashton and Tadić), more concrete results in the field may be expected.

Following the boost in border controls, smuggling in northern Kosovo dropped within weeks, as evidenced by the longer lines of trucks and semi-trailers waiting to observe the law and customs regulations at authorized border checkpoints.

During the same period, the Kosovo authorities continued to close down Telekom Serbia's mobile telephony stations. This has made it more difficult for Serbs (especially those in the enclaves) to communicate with central Serbia. At the same time it has put Kosovo's mobile telephony market on a legal footing. It should be noted that Telekom Serbia has not paid tax on its mobile telephony services in Kosovo for the past ten years, in the light of which the decision of the Kosovo authorities is within the law.

The mobile telephony issue is the most concrete example of topics which could be on the agenda for discussions between Belgrade and Priština. The dialogue may begin with issues affecting everyday life, such as freedom of movement (the fact remains that Kosovo citizens cannot move freely in Serbia with documents from Kosovo), the issue of missing persons, culture, education, healthcare and the status of monasteries. The status of northern Mitrovica remains the only outstanding issue.

REACTION TO EARLY ELECTIONS IN KOSOVO

The resignation of Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu, the fall of the government in Priština and the scheduling of early elections could mean further delays in launching talks. However the flurry of diplomatic communication among Belgrade, Brussels, Washington and Priština indicates that dialogue will nevertheless begin before the end of the year. The first item on the agenda could be the problem of missing persons. This has already been discussed between commissions for missing people on both sides, under the auspices of the UN, so it appears that agreement on this could be reached immediately.

The calling of early elections in Kosovo has thrown Belgrade into a completely new situation to which it must respond without delay by making a decision on whether Serbs should vote in the elections. The international community is looking to the government in Belgrade for a constructive attitude to this, being, as it is, part of the deal made with the EU and the US. So far, the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have taken a clear position on the elections.

There is increased tension in the atmosphere among Serbs in Kosovo with the calling of

early elections. The last few days have seen the beginning of a process in which Kosovo Serbs must decide whether or not to vote while Belgrade decides whether or not to call on them to do so.

Serbian Government Minister Srđan Srećković (SPO) believes that voting in the Kosovo elections is the only way for Serbs to protect their interests. “The only means for us to preserve our influence in Kosovo are the people who are physically present there, as ordinary citizens, as well as their representatives in institutions. We can’t insist on preserving something while at the same time we ignore everything that contributes to it. In the end, Serbs in Kosovo must decide for themselves whether to vote in the elections or not⁶.”

Ranđel Nojkić, the chairman of the Provincial Board of the SPO in Gračanica, says that it would be good for Serbs to vote in the coming elections. He also emphasizes that “this is a very important moment for Serbs in Kosovo, and also for Belgrade, because next year will see the denouement... thus Belgrade should be obliged to call on Serbs to vote and tell them the cost of the immeasurable damage which would be done if they do not⁷”.

Democratic Party representatives are treading very warily in their statements on this issue. The minister for Kosovo and Metohija, Goran Bogdanović, says that there are many factors involved in whether or not the party will take part in the coming elections and that the decision will be “weighed carefully⁸”. Secretary for State Oliver Ivanović claims, however that the Serbian Government doesn’t have time to consider what would be best for Kosovo Serbs: “The elections have caught us unawares and we don’t have enough time to see what would

6 *Danas* October 23-24, 2010

7 *Politika*, October 20, 2010

8 *Ibid.*

be good for Serbs and Serbia to do about the elections⁹”.

It's not out the question that, once the early elections have been called and campaigning begins, the Democratic Party will more openly encourage Serbs to take part. This is indicated by a statement from the president of the party's Political Council, Dragoljub Mićunović, who said in an interview with Novi Sad daily *Dnevnik* that “the policy of boycotting” Kosovo elections which has so far been pursued has not borne fruit because Serbs have always been left in a ghetto after the elections, with no legal protection and no influence in the institutions. He also emphasized that he does not believe that “by doing so they have helped Kosovo in any way to remain part of Serbia or that they have hampered those who have recognized independence. I don't know whether the Serbian Government will take a position this time or what that position will be, but I hope that it will, in any case, be guided by rational, rather than emotional reasons.¹⁰”

Professor Radoslav Stojanović also emphasizes that “talks between Belgrade and Priština cannot be discussions of technical issues because the conflict between Serbs and Albanians stretches back 150 years.” He believes that “the direction of national reconciliation should be taken, a far more painful and longer process than a procedure before a court, but it is the only solution¹¹”.

The governing coalition's ambivalence about the parliamentary elections in Kosovo is most probably a political tactic – one which ensures that the opposition cannot openly brand it yet another “betrayal of Kosovo” if Serbs are openly called on to vote. It is, however, indicative that the government-friendly *Politika*

has enumerated the advantages for the Kosovo Serb community of taking part in the elections. Under the front page headline “What can Serbs do in the Kosovo Parliament¹²”, *Politika* argues that if 10,000 Serbs were to cast their ballots they would have thirteen MPs in the Kosovo Parliament and would thus be one of the largest caucuses. “Only once during the past decade – in 2001 – has Belgrade called on Serbs to vote in Kosovo; more than 36,000 responded and they won 22 seats in the parliament. In the 2004 elections, when Vojislav Koštunica's government urged a boycott, only 1,800 Serbs voted and, in 2007, again without a call from Belgrade, even less – just 800¹³.”

President Boris Tadić still hasn't declared himself on the Kosovo elections. But he does point out that his goal is to “solve the historical conflict between Serbs and Albanians which has continued since the League of Prizren, a century and a half and, through dialogue, first on issues which can be solved and which would raise trust between the two sides to a higher level”. Tadić still insists that he will never recognize the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo and that it would be “a disastrous error if anyone in the European Union were to blackmail Serbia into recognizing Kosovo's independence in return for membership of the Union¹⁴.”

The failure to take a stand on the participation of Serbs in the Kosovo elections paves the way for the “patriotic forces” to continue seeing each and every attempt to have Serbs take part in the political life of Kosovo as treason and recognition of the “fake state of Kosovo”.

Kosovo experts believe that Serbs should take advantage of the democratic right to elections and, by so doing, look after their own interests.

9 *Politika*, October 25, 2010

10 *Dnevnik*, October 31, 2010

11 *Blic*, October 31, 2010

12 *Politika*, October 25, 2010

13 Ibid.

14 www.b92.net, October 29, 2010

Dušan Janjić, the director of the Forum for Ethnic Relations, says that “participation in Kosovo elections is a matter of being realistic and the reality is that there is a Kosovo Parliament and that the Kosovo budget is potentially an important source of funding for the survival and development of the Serbian community”. He emphasizes that it would also be good for Serbia to have Serbs in Kosovo institutions¹⁵.

“PATRIOTS” REACT

While international political and diplomatic focus was on the government crisis in Priština, the Serbian radical forces took advantage of this to carry out their own “institutional coup” by overthrowing the local authorities in the north which were established by parallel elections in May 2010.

The increase of tension in northern Kosovo is also a result of political turmoil within the Serbian community in the shape of a sudden change of leadership of the Northern Municipal Council. Two councillors from Rasim Ljajić’s Social Democratic Party defect to Vojislav Koštunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia and Tomislav Nikolić’s Serbian Progress Party. This enabled the two parties to seize power in the local government which, up to this point, had been controlled by a Democratic Party-led coalition.

The Serbian Government challenges the

legitimacy of the change, with the minister for Kosovo and Metohija, Goran Bogdanović claiming there is no basis for it in law¹⁶.

The most radical response is from extremists in Kosovska Mitrovica. This has been accompanied by violence, with several incidents occurring in the past month. On September 27, an explosive device was thrown at the houses of the Stojković and Milosavljević families from Zvečan for the second time in three months. It was sheer luck that no one was injured in the 12.30 a.m. attack, but it caused major damage to the property. The families believe that they were targeted for their involvement in preparations for the elections, in which the Kosovo Government is including northern Kosovo. On October 20 in Kosovska Mitrovica, a hand grenade was thrown at a vehicle owned by Momčilo Arlov, a prominent civil society activist in Kosovo.

Attacks on those who collaborate with Kosovo institutions demonstrate the increased anxiety and political insecurity among the most extreme members of the Serbian community in Kosovo. It also indicates a consolidation of radical forces against Tadić’s policy and the need to pay more attention to dialogue among the Serbian communities in Kosovo because their interests are completely opposed – the northern communities advocate partition while those south of the Ibar River are strongly against it.

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

SUMMARY:

We are seeing the very beginning of a new phase in relations between Serbia and Kosovo which carries the burden of Belgrade's hard-line attitude so far. The new approach stems from a unified position within the EU on the resolution on Kosovo as well as collaboration between the EU and the US. Belgrade has clearly understood the message of this new strategy.

There is still very little mutual trust between Albanians and Serbs so the role of the international community is the prime guarantor of successful dialogue between Belgrade and Priština.

The new circumstances marginalize the long-standing strategy of partitioning Kosovo which has until now been behind the attitude of the authorities in Belgrade. Both the US and the EU have ruled out any possibility of such a deal, not only for Kosovo but also for Bosnia. Some circles in Belgrade still hope that this scenario may be viable and this hope is bolstered by statements from some international figures, such as William Montgomery who advocates "the partition of Kosovo and Bosnia".

The new phase in relations between Belgrade and Priština is reflected in a change in media attitude to Albanians. This demonstrates the important role an affirmative media campaign can play in transforming the public mood.

The civil sector on both sides can make a significant contribution to expediting the process and calming the atmosphere. Already a Belgrade-Priština dialogue within the context of the civil society (the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia and the Kosovo Foundation for an Open Society) has met with a positive response and could be an important channel for a rapprochement between the two sides.

The shift resulting from the Brussels breakthrough shows courage on the part of the government and President Tadić in their relations with both Priština and Serbs in Kosovo. This is why Serbs should be called to vote in the Kosovo elections in order to influence their own future and prevent decisions affecting their lives being made by those who do not live in Kosovo.

The calling of early elections in Kosovo and the radicalization of Serbs in the north has created a space for disruption of the positive momentum created by the Resolution on Kosovo in the General Assembly. It is important that KFOR, EULEX and the Kosovo police should continue their coordinated operations in the north to prevent further radicalization and drive establishment of the rule of law and an ambience conducive to long-term goals.

As much attention as possible should be paid to young Albanians and Serbs because, in the words of Ilir Deda, leader of the emerging New Spirit party, "... a different generation is being born in Kosovo whose basis is not conflict, although we have all grown up with that conflict"¹