

# Helsinki bulletin



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## EU CANDIDACY OPENS PROSPECTS FOR SERBIA

EU candidacy marks the end of an era marked by anachronous policy that had taken the country to isolation and a historical impasse. It is a major political signal and a crucial step towards joining the most important European integration. This new status will also positively affect Serbia's international standing and encourage foreign investment that has almost melted away in the past two years.

As it turned out, Germany's opposition to Serbia's candidacy on December 9, 2011 has yielded fruit – it prompted Serbia to engage more earnestly in the dialogue with Pristina and start fulfilling EU criteria, those related to Kosovo in the first place.

Having agreed on Kosovo's regional representation (while last barricades at border crossing were discreetly dismantled) Serbia has practically secured a candidacy status at the eleventh hour. Under diplomatic pressure from key international factors – Brussels, Washington and Berlin – Serbia has finally worked out the crucial dilemma about its place at the international scene and opted for European integration. In the past several months – ever since the European Council postponed its decision on its



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candidacy – this orientation has been seriously questioned.

Belgrade's policy "both Kosovo and Europe" has suffered a defeat. The ruling elite's expectations that considerable administrative and parliamentary work on the adoption of European legislation, continuation of reform processes, arrest and extradition of last fugitives from the Hague justice, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic, along with European Commission's recommendation, would suffice the status need had obviously been unrealistic.

Escalation of the crisis in North Kosovo last summer and the attempted partition scenario sounded the alarm among European policy-makers. The message by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, during her brief visit to Belgrade, was clear-cut: there would be no change whatsoever of borders and EU would never take in a country locked in a frozen conflict ("yet another Cyprus").

Belgrade has not interpreted this unambiguous warning properly. The dialogue with Pristina in the shadow of barricades and occasional serious incidents (wounded KFOR troops, including Germans) failed to start normalizing bilateral relations. That was the reason why postponing the decision on Serbia's candidacy the European Council detailed the preconditions for progression along European course: establishment of integrated control over border crossings with Serbia, free movement of international missions, EULEX in the first place, in the entire territory of Kosovo and an agreement on Kosovo's regional representation. Belgrade's self-assured officials expecting Europe to once again "shut its eyes" to their doings were evidently disappointed. So an anti-German campaign for sorts was launched through the media.

The influential anti-European bloc made use of the postponed candidacy to energize its anti-European campaign and advocacy for the so-called military /anti-NATO/ and political /

anti-EU/ neutrality for the country. Aiming for Serbia's stronger reliance on the East, political parties in this bloc – above all Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ and Serb Radical Party /SRS/, along with the media close to them – argued that Kosovo was more important than Europe and that EU's policy was the one of constant conditioning.

"Euro-enthusiasm" dramatically declined among citizens of Serbia in the second half of 2011. Comparing with the years following on Milosevic's ouster when 70 percent of interviewees had been favorably minded about membership of EU and the over 60 percent average this percentage spiraled down to some 50 percent in mid-2011 (and was even smaller for a brief period after Angela Merkel's visit and culmination of the crisis in Kosovo).<sup>11</sup>

Having assessed all the aspects of the situation in Serbia, including potential risks for regional stability, key international players decided that Serbia should better be returned to the European track. Under their pressure Belgrade and Pristina reached an agreement on Kosovo's regional representation. And this bought Serbia a ticket to Brussels.

## RESIGNATION AND ANTI-EUROPEAN CAMPAIGN

Serbia's political elite reacted strongly at the postponed candidacy of December 2011. The government tried to convince citizens that EU wanted it to recognize Kosovo – a price it would never pay. Skepticism about EU future – with emphasis on the crisis it was going through – was spread in parallel. Most agile in promoting

<sup>11</sup> According to the public opinion survey conducted by New Serb Political Thought the percentage of citizens in favor of EU has been below 50 ever since September 2011. Findings of this survey show that 37.9 percent of citizens are against membership of EU (Politika, February 15-16, 2012).

such theses were Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic and Minister of the Interior Ivica Dacic. Vuk Jeremic said, “Four foreign ministers from EU told me that we could not join EU unless we recognized Kosovo.”<sup>2</sup>

According to the *Pecat* weekly – a mouthpiece of the anti-European bloc – “today’s EU resembles Titanic...why should one embark such a seriously damaged ship and pay for it with a part of one’s territory?”<sup>3</sup>

Similar considerations were present in other media as well, including Serbia’s most influential daily, *Politika*. “Recognition of Kosovo for the sake of candidacy would be unreasonable. For, we cannot be sure that EU will accept us in its ranks later on and that EU will be in place in ten years from now...Simply, they do not offer us membership for the price of Kosovo as some propagandists claim, but only a candidacy status. And that’s a bad deal.”<sup>4</sup>

Euro-skeptics build their arguments on the thesis that “accession will be not only a long process but also a uncertain one.”<sup>5</sup> Bosko Jaksic, columnist for the *Politika* daily, takes that what we witnesses at the public scene was “a Serb denial front.”<sup>6</sup> What is dangerous, he says, is that this front does not include only Democratic Party of Serbia that has been constant in this regard but that Democratic Party cohabitates with it thus “seriously undermining its image and the image of the ‘most pro-European government’ in the post-October Serbia.”<sup>7</sup>

The latest book by Dr. Vojislav Kostunica, DSS leader, “Why Serbia rather than EU?” stands for the anti-European bloc’s ideological frame.

<sup>2</sup> Blic, December 22, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Pecat No 196, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Politika, December 28, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Danasu, January 9, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Politika, December 25, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Largely advertised in the media and even published in installments in the *Politika* daily, the book was meant not only to promote Serbia’s traditional anti-Europeanism but also to prepare citizens for the possibility of another postponed candidacy on March 1. Written in the form of an extensive interview with Kostunica, the book points to EU as a bureaucratic creation that “undermines traditional foundations of democracy embodied in a nation-state.”<sup>8</sup> The economic-financial and institutional crisis EU is going through is used as a proof of its “undemocratic attitude.” This is testified by deposals of Greek and Italian prime minister, Papandreou<sup>9</sup> and Berlusconi – EU pays no heed to “people’s will” and electoral procedure, concludes Kostunica. “European Union is transformed from a union of mutually cooperating states into a union of non-sovereign entities.”<sup>10</sup> “Neutrality would make it possible for us to develop the best possible friendly relations with Russia and stands for a guarantee that Serbia would never join a anti-Russian alliance...It would also make it possible for us to make our own decisions and look after our dignity and national interests,” says Kostunica.<sup>11</sup>

## SERBIA VS. GERMANY

Germany, the most influential country of EU, was blamed for the postponed candidacy. The media were spinning an anti-German campaign of sorts, associating the one in early 1990s<sup>12</sup> (when Germany was marked as a “main culprit” of Croatia’s and Slovenia’s independ-

<sup>8</sup> Politika, February 6, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Papandreou was not allowed to hold a referendum.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Germany was blamed for Slovenia’s and Croatia’s secession. At that time and later on the unified Germany was often referred to as „Fourth Reich.“ The story headlined „Two soldiers and two wars“ the Politika daily published on December 30, 2011 says that „two world wars in which the German army occupied Serbia are still heavily burden ob-

ence). Germany's crucial role within EU was often directly or indirectly compared to the one it played in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (through the term "Fourth Reich").

The fact that Germany is Serbia's biggest donor was swept under the carpet. As of early 2011 only its assistance has amounted to 232 million Euros, "a record breaking sum" as German Ambassador to Serbia Wolfram Mass put it.<sup>13</sup> Germany's assistance to Serbia since 2000 has been over one billion Euros. At the same time Germany is the biggest investor in Serbia – German companies have invested over 1.5 billion Euro.

## A SEARCH FOR A RESERVE OPTION

As it seems, political elite, faced with the possibility of once again denied candidacy status in March, was seriously considering other options. "It seems that Serbia wants to avoid European agenda," said Jelko Kacin, EU rapporteur for Serbia.<sup>14</sup>

This was a tonic for the opposition – it begun feeding its electorate with different solutions for Serbia. At a parliamentary debate on European integration, Vladimir Todoric, director of the Policy Center, said, "The only person speaking in favor of EU and believing in what he said was EU Ambassador Vincent Degert."<sup>15</sup> Other addresses, he said, sounded apathetic, "passionless and de rigueur."<sup>16</sup>

Such observations and many like them indicate a dilemma about whether Serbia should proceed towards EU at all. Advocacy for the so-

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jective and rational perception of Germany's involvement in the Balkans."

13 Danas, December 17-18, 2011.

14 Radio Free Europe, December 19, 2011.

15 Politika, February 3, 2012.

16 Ibid.

called multi-vectorial foreign policy – similar to the one Turkey has opted for tired of waiting in EU's lobby – is most indicative in this context. In other words, "we should not waste time on accession formalities" given that under present circumstances "EU would consider Serbia a worthwhile factor only if it is strengthened through non-European partnerships."<sup>17</sup>

## UNDECIDED BORIS TADIĆ

No doubt that the biggest pressure the three-month uncertainties was on President of the Republic Boris Tadic. Too many stumbling blocs were in the way of a clear-cut headway towards EU – "red lines" about Kosovo, Dobrica Cosic's influential circle and controversies of the "both Kosovo and EU" policy on the one hand. On the other, there were "European promises" made over the last election campaign, Democratic Party's ratings continuing to fall when compared with Serb Progressive Party and forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

President Tadic's statements in this three-month period vacillated – he first said that EU was preconditioning a candidacy status with Kosovo's recognition, then promptly gave a cold shoulder to the *Turnabout* movement's initiative for a change in Kosovo policy just to come up with a rational interpretation ("the political process for Kosovo is nearing its end and shrinks our space for maneuver"). He made a major step towards recognition of the realities by saying, "Actually, big powers, members of the Security Councils, plus Germany are those with a final say on Kosovo...And they would not accept its partition."<sup>18</sup>

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17 Politika, January 30, 2012. The article headlined „A Fear of Future" was penned by Nikola Jovanovic, editor-in-chief of the magazine „Challenges of European Integration" and adviser to Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic.

18 Nedeljnik Press, January 11, 2012.

All the time he carefully avoided to assess Serbia's chances for EU candidacy. All he said was that "one should not spread optimism."<sup>19</sup> He also proposed a four-item plan for Kosovo – administration of Serb monasteries, special guarantees for enclave Serbs, issues of citizens' and the state's property in Kosovo and a special "solution" for North Kosovo. The later obviously implied a special status like the one invested in Republika Srpska.<sup>20</sup> He put forth his plan to all relevant international players – so far neither has accepted or rejected it.

## A DIPLOMATIC BLITZKRIEG

In late February the Brussels-Berlin-Washington troika made its mind in favor of Serbia's candidacy. The reasoning was that should Serbia remain outside European trends for another year (and occupied with upcoming elections, forming of cabinet, etc.) "damage control" would be impossible. So key international factors went on the diplomatic offensive prior to the one and only Belgrade-Pristina dialogue in 2012. It was effective – the two-day meeting between Borislav Stefanovic and Edita Tahiri resulted in a compromise on Kosovo's regional representation.

It was back in January 2012 that the European Parliament pleaded for a candidacy status while reminding it of the preconditions. Besides, "friendly" countries such as Italy or Czech Republic openly supported Serbia's candidacy. But it was only the sudden visit by German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle on February 23 that realistically hinted at the possibility for the status. "I came to Belgrade for two reasons – to give credit and to encourage. My visit is a sign of recognition for all you have

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

done and a gesture of encouragement for the remaining meters to run," he said.<sup>21</sup>

Head of EULEX Xavier de Marnhac paid a visit to Belgrade on the same day. The next night Serbia's gendarmes removed barricades from Brnjak and Jarinje borders crossings in Kosovo's north. Few days earlier William Burns, US deputy secretary of state, visited both Belgrade and Pristina. "We ask both sides to be flexible and creative so that Serbia and Kosovo can participate in regional forums," he said on the occasion.<sup>22</sup> US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also urged Premier Thaci about a compromise for Kosovo's regional representation.<sup>23</sup> Three foreign ministries – French, Italian and Austrian – sent EU a letter of support for Serbia.

Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Konuzin was also on the offensive in those days. Konuzin has always reminded Serbia that EU was "neither principled nor fair" when it came to it. This time his warning was rather undiplomatic – Serbia should think twice about the price it has to pay for joining EU, he said.<sup>24</sup>

## REACTIONS TO COMPROMISE AND CANDIDACY

Not even the ruling coalition was exactly euphoric about the newly obtained candidacy status (March 1). The fact that this was preceded by a compromise on Kosovo's regional representation explains such a moderate enthusiasm. Despite the claims the both the compromise agreement and the candidacy testify to "efficient 'both Kosovo and EU' policy" there is no doubt that the agreement reached with Pristina (including integrated border control and free movement for international missions)

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<sup>21</sup> Politika, February 24, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Politika, February 19, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Danas, February 23, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> TV B92, February 26, 2012.

marks a major turn in Kosovo policy. According to President Tadic, this policy “secures Serbia’s European prospects, safeguards our national interests and demonstrates that Serbia is a factor of stability in Southeast Europe.”<sup>25</sup> Minister of the Interior Ivica Dacic also speaks about protected national interests, whereas Suzana Grubjesic of the United Regions of Serbia emphasizes that it is important for Serbia to “stick to its course to Europe and thus secure better future to its citizens.”<sup>26</sup>

Vuk Draskovic, leader of Serb Renewal Movement, said he hoped the elections would bring about “a U-turn in the state’s strategy for Europe.”<sup>27</sup> For Cedomir Jovanovic, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, the EU candidacy stands for “a fresh opportunity” and marks “the end of the irresponsible and bad policy that has sacrificed millions of citizens in the past years.”<sup>28</sup>

In the context of upcoming elections, the candidacy means a lot to the ruling coalition. Some estimate that the candidacy status would stop the downward curve in the Democratic Party’s popularity but would not raise its ratings.<sup>29</sup>

Serbia’s powerful conservative bloc had not hoped for such an outcome – the candidacy status, therefore, marks its defeat. Vojislav Kostunica, DSS leader, says that Serbia was humiliated in Brussels as EU forced it to complicity in “the establishment of an independent state of Kosovo.”<sup>30</sup> Everybody knows that candidacy is useless, he says, adding, “as long as Serbia sticks to the policy of ‘no alternative to EU’ the economy and the country will continue to

25 Politika, February 25, 2012.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 RTV B92, February 27, 2012.

30 Politika, February 25, 2012.

decay.”<sup>31</sup> For Serb Radical Party the candidacy equals “high treason.”<sup>32</sup>

The media advocates of anti-Europeanism try to cover up their disappointment with bitter mocking of the complicated manner in which Kosovo will be represented from now on. They mostly make fun of the asterisk or “snowflake” (that will melt soon, as Edita Tahiri put it).

“Even though it might be ridiculous, the Constitution should not be laughed at by the President of the Republic and the government. What snowflakes, what utter nonsense! Constitutional name of this territory is Kosovo and Metohija. The term ‘Kosova’ with as many as one thousand asterisks can be called a compromise by which ‘both sides lose a bit and gain a bit,’” says Cvijetin Milivojevic, columnist for the *Danas* daily.<sup>33</sup> He reminds that in 2012 it will be hundred years since Kosovo “has been restored under Serbia’s sovereignty.”<sup>34</sup>

According to Djordje Vukadinovic, editor-in-chief of the *New Serb Political Thought*, the said asterisk is just a fig leaf of “the incumbent government’s failed Kosovo and European policy.” What worries him the most is “a meek reaction by Euro-skeptics and anti-Europeans” indicating that “a dangerous consensus between the ‘European’ and the ‘patriotic’ Serbia that implies a loss of Kosovo is about to be reached stealthily.”<sup>35</sup>

The latest issue of the *Pecat* magazine is dedicated to “high treason” by the ruling coalition, which it labels “Brussels Serbs.”<sup>36</sup> “Dacic’s police and Thaci’s diplomats has successfully, with

31 Politika, February 29, 2012.

32 Politika February 25, 2012.

33 *Danas*, February 28, 2012.

34 Ibid.

35 Kolumna „Fusnota, pahuljica ili smokvin list“, Politika, 28. februar 2012.

36 *Pečat*, br.206, 2. mart 2012.

guns and pencils, rounded off Kosovo's independence," says the magazine.<sup>37</sup> This mouthpiece of the "anti-European Serbia" claims that undercover agreements that have preceded Serbia's candidacy lead to new national humiliation and further decomposition of Serbia.<sup>38</sup>

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37 Isto.

38 „Briselska zvezdica je do sada svakom normalnom bila jasan znak da će biti još zvezdica, i to na severnoj srpskoj pokrajini, na Zukorličevom Sandžaku, šiptarskoj Preševskoj dolini, kao i da velika zvezda već blista na Duklji, ali se

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zahvaljujući evropskoj kandidaturi Beograda i ljutim srpskim Briselskim junacim, ona prvo pojavila u Hajduk Veljkovoj Krajini u vidu rumunsko-vlaškog pitanja", piše u uvodniku glavni urednik Milorad Vučetić. Isto.

#### CONCLUSION:

The EU candidacy ended the dilemma about Serbia's strategic orientation and marks a turn in both domestic policy and the country's international standing.

The candidacy will further crystallize relations at political and social scenes, contribute to the country's economic performance and at least to some extent relax the atmosphere characteristic of the past few months.

Mediation and pressure have born fruit: the agreement on Kosovo's regional representation provides Kosovo's representatives will sit behind the plate 'Kosovo' with an asteriks pointing to the footnotes which will include the following text: 'This label [i.e. "Kosovo"] does not prejudice the status of Kosovo and is in accordance with Resolution 1244 and the opinion of the ICJ on Kosovo's declaration of independence.'

EU candidacy for Serbia is a major contribution to regional stabilization and integration. Kosovo has obtained its EU roadmap. To start with, it obtained negotiations on free visa regime and visibility study.

The candidacy implies a new political context for Kosovo Serbs (those in the North in particular). The sooner they realize that they have to cooperate with Kosovo institutions, the sooner will relations between two ethnic communities relax.

Serbs in North Kosovo need support for normalization with Pristina. Governments in Belgrade and Pristina are responsible for normalization of relations between the two communities.

Belgrade should also take a responsible approach towards future elections in Kosovo: it must take all necessary steps to ensure good atmosphere for the elections.

Finally, Belgrade will have to define its policy for Kosovo Serbs in a transparent and constructive manner.