

Helsinki bulletin



HELSINKI COMMITTEE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA
address: Kralja Milana 10,
Belgrade, Serbia
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

NO.97 // OCTOBER 2013

KOSOVO ELECTIONS: A STEP TOWARDS EU

Local elections in Kosovo, now scheduled for November 3, make a major section of the Brussels Agreement (signed on April 18, 2013) considering their relevance to integration of Serbs in Kosovo North. The elections will test Serbia's leadership's readiness to genuinely Serbs' turnout in the elections and their legitimacy. For the first time ever Serbs from four municipalities in Kosovo North will be casting a ballot – and the outcome will be dismissal of parallel institutions operating illegally since 1999.

At the same time local elections in Kosovo may testify of Belgrade administration's U-turn in Kosovo policy: they may testify that the ruling SNS-SPS coalition has both formally and actually abandoned its longstanding policy for Kosovo it had promoted till the elections of May 2012 while criticizing the then ruling Democratic Party /DS/. This is probably the main reason why Kosovo elections are kept in a "local profile."¹

¹ Throughout the summer reconstruction of the government was the topic No. 1. In September the focus was shifted to the ouster of Mayor of Belgrade Dragan Đilas. As it seems, careful „selection“ of priorities is meant to draw public attention away from the only real progress the new regime has made.

The elections will also put a formal end to Belgrade's political and intellectual elite's partition scenario for Kosovo: the scenario they have considered for decades a precondition to lasting normalization of Serb-Albanian relations. The scenario was abandoned under the pressure from the realities. Premier Ivica Dačić has advocated partition as the best solution to the problem till the last moment.

Although no major incidents accompanied signing of the Agreement, the climate of resistance the conservative bloc (DSS and SPC and a number of right-wing groupings ideologically close to the Progressists) and some circles in Kosovo North have been creating since indicate unpredictable response to the elections. Apart from the ongoing campaign for boycott incidents are more and more frequent as the date of the elections draws nearer. The murder of a Lithuanian police officer on EULEX staff only was most illustrative of the high-risk situation in Kosovo North.²

² The policeman was killed while three customs officers on EULEX staff were shot. They were ambushed in the territory of the Zvečan municipality on September 19, 2013; Politika, September 20, 2013.

The official Belgrade took upon itself to campaign for Serbs' participation in the elections, especially in Kosovo North and thus make up for all delays in the implementation of the Brussels Agreement. Moreover, the date for the beginning of accession negotiations with EU depends on the elections. This is why Belgrade so promptly condemned the murder of the EULEX policeman.³

The international community is focused on Kosovo elections expected to be a turning point in Kosovo's territorial integration. Integration of four municipalities in Kosovo North into Kosovo's legal system opens the door to the region's sociopolitical and security consolidation. For more than a decade Kosovo North has been among the unsafest regions in Europe. Despite the fact that with Belgrade's ample assistance – financial, organizational and political – local Serbs have held all the reins of power in the area, including the judiciary and the police, no one has ever taken the responsibility for the high crime rate and citizens' insecurity.

The motive behind Belgrade's campaign for the biggest possible turnout of local Serbs in the elections is "legal and legitimate" influence on Kosovo once parallel structures are dismissed. The community of Serb municipalities to be constituted after the elections would serve the purpose by obstructing, whenever necessary (for Belgrade), integration of the Kosovo society and normalization of Belgrade-Prishtina relations.

³ Premier Ivica Dačić said, "The shot at EULEX officers was a shot at Serbia's future." Vice-Premier Aleksandar Vučić called the act "a shameful attack...actually against Serbia and Serbs...an attempt against everything Serbia has accomplished in the past period." "Serbia has no right to be silent and allow terrorists and extremists believe they could govern Serbia," he added. Ibid.

BELGRADE'S CAMPAIGN FOR THE ELECTIONS

Although tensions were expected on both sides elections are being smoothly prepared. A key message the international community put across was that the outcome of the elections would be valid regardless of citizens' turnout.

The government of Serbia has dismissed almost all parallel institutions in Kosovo North despite local claims about unconstitutionality of the motion. Under the pressure from his own party Premier Ivica Dačić unseated some local figures, primarily directors of medical centers, including Rada Trajković. He not only tried to lessen the tension within SPS but also to tone up his party's pretty deflated infrastructure in Kosovo. Internally displaced Albanians will also cast a ballot in the local elections in Kosovo North.

Dr. Marko Jakšić, MP from DSS and local Serb leader, is among the strongest critics of Belgrade's dismantlement of parallel institutions. "After the elections Belgrade will close down the last Serb institution. This is why it prepares the so-called law on financial assistance to Serbs under which some 14,000 Serbs will be left jobless," he says.⁴ "Should Serbs participate in Kosovo elections the remaining institutions of the state of Serbia would be immediately closed down and exodus would be inevitable," warns Jakšić.⁵

A survey conducted by the NIN weekly indicates that those advocating boycott of the elections are more in the public eye.⁶ Oliver Ivanović running for the office of the Mayor of Kosovska Mitrovica thinks the same. The campaign against the elections will prevail if Belgrade continues to

⁴ Nevenka Stojčević, *Geopolitika*, special issue, September 2013.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ NIN, September 12, 2013. (Findings of the survey were published two months before the election day when the election campaign was not on yet).

behave the way it does now, he warns.⁷ He says that Belgrade's messages to Kosovo Serbs are indistinct: it appeals to citizens to participate in the elections but does nothing in the field to secure a bigger turnout.⁸

According to some estimates, citizens' turnout will not exceed 15 percent in the North. Citizens who will go to the polls say, "We have to obey the government of Serbia as that is the only government we have."⁹ And those who will boycott the elections argue, "By casting a ballot we recognize the state of Kosovo, we recognize its government and recognize their authority over our municipalities."¹⁰

Serbs' boycott of the elections, says Duško Janjić, would annul Belgrade's major accomplishment in the negotiations and make it possible for Kosovo authorities and the international community to appoint provisional self-governments thus postponing the establishment of the community of Serb municipalities. Besides, he adds, Belgrade's failure to convince Serbs to participate in the elections would make it a less credible negotiator in the eyes of the international community.¹¹ Serbs' participation in the elections is also important for sociopolitical reasons: Kosovo Serbs and Albanians are in the process of redistributing political power. "Local elections, let alone the upcoming parliamentary elections, create conditions for the emergence of a new Serb political elite: and this elite has to be made up of people who actually live in Kosovo and live on what they earn there rather than receive double or triple salaries; they must come from younger, educated generations given that today's Serb elite cannot compete with the elite the international

community has raised by helping Kosovo authorities," says Janjić.¹²

Preparing itself for the elections Belgrade tried to ensure the necessary assistance from "the grassroots:" it tried to involve officials from recent parallel institutions in Kosovo North in the campaign for the elections. It also advocated the so-called unique Serb voting list.¹³ However, after paying several visits to Belgrade (to meet with President Tomislav Nikolić) local leaders denied participating in the elections.¹⁴

Thirty-three "Serb" lists were registered for the elections. Arguing for a "unique" voting list, Belgrade officials (such as Aleksandar Vulin) were saying, "In this way Kosovo Serbs would definitely win in all municipalities."¹⁵

Serbs south of the Ibar River have been against such a list from the very beginning. "There is not a single serious argument why a unique, collective, state-run or whatever list – the one

¹² <http://akter.co.rs/25-politika/51901-klju-na-normalizacija-odnosa-s-pritinom.html>

¹³ As it seems, the "unique Serb list" is meant to ensure Belgrade's control over future heads of Serb institutions in Kosovo North, as well as unity and compactness of the "community of Serb municipalities," whereby the community would resemble Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina. After all, Aleksandar Vulin, minister without portfolio, said that Serbs in Kosovo North "need a Dodik of their own." *Danas*, August 12, 2013.

¹⁴ For Slaviša Ristić, mayor of Zubin Potok, the appeal for participation in the elections was "an indecent proposal" given that "by casting a ballot on November 3 Serbs would formally recognize Kosovo's independence." *Danas*, August 16, 2013.

¹⁵ *Danas*, August 10–11, 2013; Minister Vulin's parallel with President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik lays bare Belgrade's wish to make the future community a surrogate to the Bosnian entity. "Through a unique list we shall definitely win in all the municipalities with Serb majority population. Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska, is appreciated in Kosovo with good reason. So why shouldn't Kosovo Serbs have a Dodik of their own?" he said in an interview. *Danas*, August 8, 2013.

⁷ *Večernje Novosti*, November 16, 2013.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *NIN*, September 12, 2013.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ <http://akter.co.rs/25-politika/51901-klju-na-normalizacija-odnosa-s-pritinom.html>

leading to political bargain among Serb parties in Kosovo – should be better than individual vote for each individual party,” says Slobodan Petrović, leader of the Independent Liberal Party and Vice-Premier of Kosovo.¹⁶

A unique list – Serb Citizens’ Initiative – was formed under Belgrade’s auspices. As it seems, the list will score better in Kosovo North than in the municipalities south of the Ibar with Serb majority population.

OPPONENTS TO THE ELECTIONS

The Serbian parliament verified the Brussels Agreement with majority vote. Most media (especially the media under the government’s control) also gave their support to it, all of which toned down the tensions generated by the conservative bloc. Vojislav Koštunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ is the only parliamentary party keeping “the flame of resistance.” However, it failed to turn itself into a pillar of all those dissatisfied with the new policy for Kosovo. And yet the party’s influence on public opinion is not to be underestimated: it is an ideological leader of the entire conservative bloc, “national institutions” in the first place.

In the meantime the Serb Orthodox Church’s /SPC/ fierce resistance was successfully neutralized. Activities of Vojislav Šešelj’s non-parliamentary Serb Radical Party are incapable of ensuring massive demonstrations – as evidenced by a handful of street protests against the Agreement.

Unquestionable leaders of Kosovo Serbs until recently – unseated leaders of municipalities in the North and longstanding politicians Milan Ivanović and Marko Jakšić of DSS in the first place – are the strongest challengers of Kosovo

¹⁶ Article penned by Slobodana Petrović, *Danas*, July 20–21, 2013.

Serbs’ participation in the elections.¹⁷ DSS mostly uses them in its actions against the elections. As for the parliament, Vojislav Koštunica and head of his caucus Slobodan Samardžić are practically the only MPs advocating boycott of the elections.

DSS also organized a protest meeting under the slogan “Against the False Elections in Kosovo” in Belgrade’s Sava Center. A committee for “defense of Kosovo and Metohija” chaired by Slobodan Samardžić was introduced on the occasion.

OBSTRUCTIONS FROM BOTH SIDES

The upcoming elections are a new challenge to Belgrade and Prishtina alike. Both sides are after goals of their own: Prishtina is after integrating the entire territory of Kosovo into its legal system, while Belgrade is after keeping Serbs and their institutions, notably those in the North, “within its system.”

What mark the election campaign are obstructions and tensions that are constantly raised. For instance, the Kosovo government banned political leaders from Serbia from mass meetings. Premier Ivica Dačić, who was supposed to attend a meeting in Strpce, threatened with boycott of the elections and pulling the plug on the negotiations with Prishtina. All misunderstandings have been cleared up so far thanks to EU mediation.

¹⁷ Marko Jakšić, who is also MP from DSS, misses no opportunity to criticize the government from the parliamentary rostrum. He refrains not from insults as well. At the session discussing the reconstruction of the government Jakšić called the Brussels Agreement „the highest treason in the history of the Serb nation.” „Neither the government nor the parliament have the power. The power is in the hands of foreign embassies. Therefore, the government in Prishtina could return a favor to its Serbian counterpart by naming a street in Prishtina after Ivica Dačić,” he said on the occasion. *Politika*, September 3, 2013. Indicatively, his microphone was plugged out in the middle of his address considering live broadcast of parliamentary sessions by RTS.

CONCLUSIONS

- Belgrade could slow down the entire process of normalization after the elections considering the strong resistance to it within the administration itself; this is best evidenced by President Nikolić statement, “We are aware that we could hardly survive without membership of EU but we are also fully aware that we could not survive at all without Kosovo and Metohija.”¹
- This is exactly the way of thinking that will mark the (anyway delayed) implementation of the Brussels Agreement – a process necessitating intensive work on fulfillment of all the obligations undertaken.
- The Brussels Agreement implies preconditions for normalization of Belgrade-Prishtina relations. The normalization process, however, will be burdened with inadequate capacities of both sides, high expectations and relatively tight deadlines – in the first place for changing both communities’ mindsets.
- Branko Ružić, minister without portfolio monitoring the process of EU accession, probably testified to this by saying, “We shall be working on two tracks in order to ‘soften’ all provisions of the document. We shall be lobbying with friendly countries and by taking concrete steps demonstrate the government’s resoluteness to fulfill all the obligations and do its best for the settlement of the Kosovo problem without touching on status neutrality.”²
- Though weakened by the outcome of the negotiations Serbia’s conservative bloc and its influence are not to be underestimated. The bloc’s exponent in the regime is President Tomislav Nikolić despite the assent he gave to the agreement;
- Civil society organizations can be most helpful in the implementation of the new Kosovo policy and the Brussels Agreement. Their potential is in the ties they have established with representatives of Kosovo Albanians – officials and NGO activists alike – and the contribution they can give to Kosovo Serbs’ integration into Kosovo society is most valuable;
- The civil society can play a crucial role in the monitoring of the Belgrade-Prishtina agreement and development of neighborly relations primarily through educational outreach programs. Serbia-Kosovo relations cannot be stable as long as negative stereotypes about Kosovo Albanians are predominant in citizens’ perception;
- The biggest challenge in the period to come will be to activate Kosovo Serb forces willing to work on integration of Kosovo North institutions into Kosovo’s legal system. Communication between Serbs south of the Ibar River and those in the north is also on the priority list given that “a model of good practice” in the implementation of the Ahtisaari Plan could help Serbs in Kosovo North to accept the agreement more painlessly.

¹ <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:454249-Nikolic-Tesko-cemo-preziveti-bez-EU-a-bez-KiM-ne-mozemo>.

html:454249-Nikolic-Tesko-cemo-preziveti-bez-EU-a-bez-KiM-ne-mozemo.

² <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html%3A453703-Kosovo-nam-nije-sused>