

# Helsinki bulletin



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## KOSOVO: SERBIA STICKS TO ITS STRATEGY

Local elections in Kosovo, called in its entire territory for the first time ever, demonstrated once again the major trait of Serbia's policy for "recognition" of the new reality in the region, for Kosovo this time. Serbia's overall situation – dramatic state of its economy above all – calls for a higher level of relations with EU, the level securing its integration. However, Serbia is still preoccupied with its "geostrategic significance" with an eye on playing a more important role at the international scene. This is why its priorities for Euro-integration are so ambivalent.

Local elections were of major importance for the Serb community in Kosovo: for the first time they were called under Kosovo's law in four municipalities with majority Serb population (Kosovska Mitrovica, Zubin Potok, Leposavic and Zvecan). Though marked by obstructions, anti-election campaign, boycott, verbal and even physical violence resulting in the closed down polls in Mitrovica North, the elections were a major step towards the region's social and political stabilization. This is the more so important since this part of Kosovo has been among the unsafest areas in Europe in the past 15 years. In spite of the fact that local institutions – the judiciary, the police, etc. – had been

in the hands of local Serbs, organizationally and politically supported by the official Belgrade, no one has taken the responsibility for the extremely high crime rate and citizens' sense of insecurity.

When it comes to the Serb community casting a ballot, the gap between Serbs in the North and those south of the Ibar River remained deep. Moreover, the elections seem to have deepened the gap considering mass turnout of voters in the South (over 50 percent) and hardly ten percent of registered Serb voters in the North going to the polls.

Yet another division within the Serb corps was manifest in the elections. The seeds of it were sowed by Belgrade authorities: by favoring one electoral list, the Serb Civil Initiative /GIS/, they wanted to secure their influence on the future community of Serb municipalities. This clearly obstructed the Serb Liberal Party /SLS/, almost the sole relevant political force of Kosovo Serbs up to now.

Considerable differences Belgrade officials on the one hand, and the entire conservative bloc on the other displayed while preparing

themselves for the elections derived from two different scenarios – both coming to naught on the Election Day. The conservative bloc (Democratic Party of Serbia, Serb Orthodox Church, Serb Radical Party and extreme right-wing group) had called for a boycott and, indeed, the boycott actually worked in Kosovo North. The regime, for its part, did its best to keep the elections under its control. It aimed, among other things, at ensuring the victory of the GIS list in Kosovo South and thus destabilizing SLS participating in the Kosovo government for years now. This goal was partially achieved: GIS won the elections in Gracanica, the biggest Serb enclave in Central Kosovo. Despite the presence of strong police forces in Kosovo North the regime did not manage to secure an adequate turnout of voters. Therefore, it had to orchestrate incidents because of which several major polls had to be closed down hours before the polls closing time.

It was evident that the regime either cannot or does not want to control extremist groups. The fact that these groups were let in Kosovo and were active regardless of numbers of Serb policemen indicates that their presence was either ignored or could not be prevented. The regime's attempt at placing Serbs south of the Ibar under its control is threatening: the Belgrade regime could control the entire process of Kosovo's consolidation in the long run. Moreover, it could stir up radicalization of the Albanian population.

Russia's support to "Kosovo is Serbia" policy<sup>1</sup> and its attempt at "maintaining the status quo"<sup>2</sup> also throw light on Kosovo elections and the present government's attitude.

Having decided to recognize the outcome of the elections regardless of voters' turnout the

<sup>1</sup> Russian Ambassador in Belgrade Alexandar Chepurin in an interview with the Pecat magazine, November 8, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

European Union gave its consent to repeat elections in the three polls in Mitrovica North as yet another opportunity for Serbs to cast a ballot. Namely, Premier Ivica Dačić had stressed out that the entire "concept" would fail should an Albanian be elected Mayor of Mitrovica. "In that case it would be impossible to constitute local self-government and the community of Serb municipalities. Conflicts, even armed conflicts, could break out as well," he said.<sup>3</sup> Such rhetoric plus adequate security and political preparation were effective: in the repeat elections on November 17 voters' turnout was over 20 percent.

Under Belgrade-Prishtina Agreement the Kosovo elections crucially determine a fixed date for the beginning of Serbia's accession negotiations with EU. What Serbia demonstrated in these elections obliges EU to be cautious when negotiating with Serbia. Implementation of the Brussels Agreement is crucial not only for Serbia and Kosovo, but also for consolidation of the entire region. The more so should EU strengthen the civil society and, along with other factors, involve it in the process of implementation of the Agreement.

## ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The election campaign had to be carefully planned considering a relatively short period of time left for convincing Kosovo Serbs – living "outside the system" (of Kosovo but of Serbia as well to a considerable extent) – that the "Kosovo elections" were in their interest. This was the more so important since advocates for a boycott had been pretty active in the terrain. Besides their argumentation for the boycott was the same as that Belgrade's officials, while in opposition, had promoted for fifteen

<sup>3</sup> Danas, November 11, 2013.

years. This caused confusion among numbers of citizens.

Instead of providing counterarguments for the boycott Belgrade's protagonists were accusing Prishtina of obstruction: complaining about electoral lists, the emblem of the Central Electoral Commission, the design of ballots, etc. And, trying to ensure the victory of "their" GIS in Serb populated municipalities south of the Ibar, Belgrade officials spent more time in Gračanica than in Mitrovica North.<sup>4</sup>

With its contradictory messages the Serb Orthodox Church, influential among Kosovo Serbs, only contributed to the general confusion. In mid-October in the Pec Patriarchate, Patriarch Irinej finally "took sides" when he advised Kosovo Serbs to participate in the elections. "In the settlements with majority Serb population, Serbs should go to the polls so as to avoid the possibility of having Albanian officials in power in their areas," he said. "<sup>5</sup> However, on the eve of the elections other dignitaries such as bishops Amfilohije (Radović) and Atanasije (Jeftić) also spoke their mind – and argued for the boycott.<sup>6</sup> And then the Patriarch had a change of heart: his wording "we'll be better off without Europe than without Kosovo" may influence voters' turnout in the second round.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "Some seem to neglect that Kosovo is not Vrbas: there you cannot tarnish to the uttermost your political opponents and spread rumors about them and have all that dead and buried in three days only. The situation in Kosovo is something more serious and call for more serious actors and tactics," commentary run in *Nase Novine*, November 5, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> RTV B92, October 14, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> "If the price of the ticked to Europe is Kosovo's secession, we shall say 'no, thank you' to Europe. We shall rather stay by ourselves – if that's our fate – but we shall have our Kosovo," said the Patriarch after the first round of the elections. *Politika*, November 9, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> *Politika*, November 9, 2013.

## THE ELECTION DAY DRAMA IN MITROVICA

In the late afternoon of November 3 in Kosovska Mitrovica a group of masked persons raided the polls in the "St. Sava" elementary school, smashed voting boxes and chased away members of the election committee and voters. About the same incidents took place in yet another two polling places.

In the absence of true and accurate information about these incidents, the media run speculations by various political interest groups. The official Belgrade's first reaction only added to the confusion.

Namely, shortly after the raid on the three polls the media the media carried Vice-Premier Vučić's dramatic, almost self-accusing appeal to the international community: to give Serbian authorities "just 45 minutes in Kosovo North" to impose law and order. Krstimir Pantić's (candidate for the mayor of Prishtina on GIS list) rush accusation of Marko Jakšić, leader of Kosovo Serbs and MP from the Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ as the mastermind of violence indicate Belgrade's involvement in the riot.

DSS and Marko Jakšić himself responded promptly to this accusation: the raids on the polls were organized by "masked gendarmes", which means Belgrade officials, they said.

Mutual accusation continued after the elections. Indicatively, however, Belgrade officials refrained from public statements: their only "spokesman" in the matter was Minister without Portfolio Aleksandar Vulin (in charge of Kosovo) who just kept accusing DSS. On the other hand, Slobodan Samardžić, the vice-president of DSS and head of its parliamentary caucus, came public with a photo of Bratislav Dikić, the dismissed chief of the Gendarmerie, allegedly taken on November 3 in Kosovska Mitrovica where he was "most active," claimed

Samardžić. The tense atmosphere marking the Election Day in Kosovo North actually culminated in the vandalistic attack at the polls.<sup>8</sup>

Compromised local elections in Kosovo North, held under the Prishtina law, suited Belgrade authorities once it became evident that the local elections in Kosovo North would fail.

Responsible for everything, especially for violent incidents in Mitrovica North, are Belgrade authorities. The elections were cut short at the point they realized that the voters' turnout is so low that GIS could not possibly win. This is what Slobodan Samardžić of DSS pointed out a day later, arguing that there was no reason whatsoever to discontinue the elections given that the developments on the Election Day confirmed the success of the boycott his party had advocated for.<sup>9</sup>

The request for annulment of the elections by two candidates for the Mayor of Mitrovica, Krstimir Pantić and Oliver Ivanović, and their appeal for a repeat in "due time"<sup>10</sup> give strength to the thesis about Belgrade authorities' standing behind violent incidents.

Adrijana Hodžić, the head of the Kosovo government Office for Kosovo North, warned about "politically poorly organized" elections in Mitrovica. <sup>11</sup> Her comment was, indirectly, addressed to the official Belgrade.

<sup>8</sup> According to Politika's coverage of the elections, people going to the polls were fewer than members of election committees, reporters and groups of "silent observers" protesting against the elections and calling for the boycott nearby the polls. "Fear and tension were in the air from the early morning in the town covered with lists of candidates on the one hand and anti-election posters on the other. Walls and poles were plastered with posters saying 'Boycott saves us all,' Stop to Siptar elections, 'I will not dirty my hands...'" Politika, November 4, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> RTS, November 4, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> RTV B92, November 3, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> RT Vojvodina, November 4, 2013.

Obviously thoroughly prepared and well-organized violence in Mitrovica also opens to question the control over security services. Whether or not the state – or the present regime – is above them has been for long the topic of speculation. The question has been raised on several occasions recently, apart from Mitrovica events (cancelled Pride Parade in October, football fans' savagery in November, etc.). But speaking of Mitrovica, the very presence of the dismissed chief of the Gendarmerie, Bratislav Dikić, the deputy-director of the police at present, is highly suspicious. The explanation that he was "not on duty there" is hardly convincing.<sup>12</sup>

Peaceful reintegration of four Serb populated municipalities and dismissal of parallel structures after almost 15 years is among key paragraphs of the Brussels Agreement signed by Ivica Dačić and Hashim Thaci (April 19, 2013). The local elections of November 3 were a major test of the implementation of the Agreement and normalization of Belgrade-Prishtina relations. Probably, they were also a major ticket to the opening of accession negotiations with EU in January 2014.

## AWAITING THE REPEAT

The hue and cry Belgrade media raised by the end of the Election Day and a day later, especially about the violence and the necessity for annulment of the elections in Kosovo North, died out soon. Instead the media began carrying compliments for "successful elections" in Kosovo by all relevant international factors (EU and OSCE in the first place).

There is no doubt about Brussels playing a major role in all this: Brussels wants to see the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue pursue the course

<sup>12</sup> Vanja Vukic, the secretary of state at the Ministry of the Interior, Novi Magazin, November 7, 2013.

towards full normalization of relations. At the tripartite meeting in Brussels on November 6, Dačić, Thaci and Catherine Ashton agreed to continue “the election process.” Belgrade authorities had to assent to Kosovo Central Election Commission’s decision to call repeat elections just at the three polling centers where voting had been violently cut short on November 3 (actually in the entire territory of Mitrovica North, including some twenty polls). The repeat elections are called for November 17.

In the meantime Vice-Premier Aleksandar Vučić<sup>13</sup>, in his capacity as the chairman of the Security Services Coordination Bureau, promised to have perpetrators of the November 3 incidents brought to justice. The media quote unofficial sources saying that Belgrade authorities submitted to Brussels all tape-recordings in their possession indicating masterminds of the incidents of November 3.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Serbia’s key officials had promised to have the assassin of the Lithuanian member of EULEX, killed in early October, identified and arrested; nothing came out of it so far. 14 Novi Magazin, November 7, 2013.

Premier Ivica Dačić, one of most agile advocates of the repeat elections, pays little heed to political correctness and even threatens – with possible armed conflicts.<sup>15</sup> “We should seize the opportunity, and this is the opportunity to come to power, legitimately and legally. Otherwise, if an Albanian becomes the Mayor, conflicts may easily break out again...And then who will be responsible for such as disastrous outcome?” he says.<sup>16</sup> He makes a point of a possible “Albanian mayor:” this is his major argument for Serbs’ participation in the repeat elections (according to the results of the first round Agim Deva and Adrijana Hodžić will be running for the office of Mayor of Mitrovica in the second round).<sup>17</sup>

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15 RTV B92. November 6, 2013.

16 Politika, November 7, 2013.

17 “An Albanian pictured as a scarecrow, a signal for a conflict...This is a careless remark, to put it mildly. How would we react at a Kosovo politician’s threat to Albanians, ‘If you refuse to obey me, you will get a Serb in the office of the Mayor?’”, a commentary by Boško Jakšić, Politika, November 10, 2013.

## CONCLUSION

The fact that the two major ethnic communities, Albanian and Serb, took the course towards a common goal – to ensure better conditions in the “terrain” of everyday life and fundamental existential problems – is a fresh advance, especially in the context of Serbia’s attempt at playing on the “old” strategy for Kosovo.

The “success of the elections” guaranteed and subsequently “verified” by the international community and its watchful eye (EU in the first place) was also a major test of Belgrade’s and Prishtina’s readiness for full implementation of the Brussels Agreement. International observers’ compliments to Serbia and Kosovo encourage them both to pursue the course towards EU.

All this makes a solid foundation for a gradual renewal of interethnic tolerance and trust, as well as for normalization of political relations in Kosovo. Parliamentary elections in Kosovo in 2014 should testify to this advance.

The road towards it will be long and thorny, especially in Kosovo North. Kosovo’s territorial and political integrity will considerably depend on the policies of international players – EU, US and Russia in the first place, and their respective interests in South Balkans.

The international community just condemned the Election Day incidents but did not comment on responsibility for them, while local players were accusing one another. The truth about masterminds of the incidents should be established: to do away with speculation and one-sided interpretations and, above all, to lessen the tensions in Kosovo North and contribute to gradual stabilization of the situation in four “Serb municipalities.”

The great majority of Serbs in Kosovo North have not yet accepted the “U-turn” in Belgrade’s policy for normalization. This is also to be ascribed to the fact that Kosovo North is the stronghold of Serbia’s most conservative elites – from DSS to the Serb Orthodox Church.

Now after the elections, pro-European civil society organizations in Kosovo and Serbia alike should galvanize their actions creating a favorable atmosphere for the parliamentary elections in 2014. The first regular local elections in Kosovo North open the door to the rule of law in the region and hence to more serious civil society activism.

Actions by the elected representatives of the GIS in Kosovo South (Gracanica) and Belgrade’s attempts to control Serb enclaves in Central and South Kosovo through them will be new challenges for Kosovo Serbs. The international community should, therefore, more carefully monitor the developments that obstruct the consolidation of the state of Kosovo. As for Serbia, it should convince the international community that it would not be playing on GIS to destabilize Kosovo.