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BELGRADE ITSELF SETS THE DATE OF ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS



On June 28 the European Council did not decide on the exact date for the beginning of accession negotiations between Serbia and EU. As expected, Germany had the upper hand: the exact date had to wait until concrete results of the Brussels Agreement were evaluated. Berlin stuck to its principled stance – Serbia should respect not only what it had obliged itself to but also its own signature. The Council made a decision encouraging Serbia with, if not steely,

than sufficient guarantee that negotiation would begin in foreseeable future.

Belgrade will “set the date itself,” as Jelko Kacin put it. In other words, in the months to come Serbia must focus on the implementation of the Brussels Agreement and, at the same time, prepare itself for structural reforms and establishment of negotiating teams.

The international community has fully supported the incumbent government negotiating an agreement with Prishtina. The “conditional” trust in Belgrade it manifested by awarding its efforts and recognizing the progress it made encourages Serbia’s political dynamics faced with the opposition from the conservative bloc.

THE GOVERNMENT’S ATTITUDE

Top governmental officials – Premier Dacic and Vice-Premier Vucic in the first place – have focused all their attention on visits to European capitals rather than on the implementation of the Agreement. They have lulled themselves and citizens of Serbia that the “date” was to be taken for granted. They even refrained not from threats: without a fixed date it would be hard to implement the Agreement. However, this thesis, launched by Dacic, was short-lived. Other domestic players, and probably those from abroad, reminded him of his own interpretation of the initialed Brussels Agreement: “initialed in the best interest of the state and people.”

When it came to rhetoric, Premier Dacic made the biggest progress. When the European Council gave Serbia a green light for accession negotiations he told a ceremonial session of the Serbian government (June 28 in Krusevac) that on that day Serbia had changed its century-long belief, attitude, ultimate goal and the myth “which made us look backwards rather than step forwards.”¹ However, only actual negotiations with EU will show whether placing Serbia into European “frame” is enough for its radical transformation. Commenting the issue, historian Latinka Perovic said, “Clutching at straws, Serbia seeks refuge in the European frame, which implies not yet a change in a lifestyle and, especially, reasoning. Pragmatism is

¹ Politika, June 29, 2013.

welcome and efficient only if not contrary to the law and morals.”²

RESPONSES TO THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL’S DECISION

Serbia’s leadership tried to sweep under the carpet that the Council of Europe had not set a date for the beginning of accession negotiations. This was most evident in the attitude taken by Premier Dacic. On the other hand, Vice-Premier Vucic was more self-controlled: he praised the government for “having done what others had not.” And yet, he added that the decision was “below his expectations,”³ hence “not something to celebrate but surely something to be satisfied with.”⁴ President Nikolic said he believed the negotiations would open soon, but missed not to stress, “Serbia must continue to work rather than wait for charity.” “The decision by the European Council signals that we are welcome in and equal within EU,” he said among other things.⁵

Except for Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/, all parliamentary parties welcomed the news from Brussels, calling the decision historical. Vice-President of Democratic Party /DS/ and Premier of Vojvodina Bojan Pajtic referred to it as “good news for Serbia.” He added, however, he was sorry that parties ruling Serbia today have not supported the countries course to Europe in the past two decades.⁶ Vice-President of Liberal-Democratic Party /LDP/ Bojan Djuric remarked, “Serbia must not miss this opportunity and must implement all the agreements related to Kosovo.”

² Danas, June 28, 2013.

³ Danas, June 29, 2013.

⁴ Politika, June 29, 2013.

⁵ Blic, June 29, 2013.

⁶ Ibid.

Slobodan Samardzic, MP from DSS, argued that Serbia had not obtained a date and would never “unless it surrenders Kosovo as a whole, including properties and cultural monuments.”⁷

Academician Dobrica Cosic, who has been advocating “a historical agreement between Serbs and Albanians” (actually, partition of Kosovo) over the past fifty years – Serbia’s mainstream political and intellectual elites, including the present-day ruling coalition, had aspired to until less than a year ago (if so), “amnestied” the signatories of the Agreement saying, “I do not criticize them for being forced to accept the dictate from America and EU. The Brussels Agreement was unavoidable with imperialists in power.”⁸

BRUSSELS AGREEMENT AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the Agreement was supposed to begin in May following the government’s and the parliament’s verification. Not only has the government appointed Aleksandar Vulin⁹ the head of the implementation team – which was rather odd – but also the work groups from both sides made no progress

⁷ Politika, June 29, 2013.

⁸ Ibid. At the launch of his book “Kosovo: 1966-2013” Dobrica Cosic said, “I am also saddened with the Brussels Agreement as it is, because I know there had been political opportunities for settling the Kosovo problem by a compromise that would have been fair to both peoples: through territorial partition and ethnic demarcation.” It is interesting to note that sociologist and publicist Aleksa Djilas “excuses” domestic politicians in a similar way assuming they had not been dealt a strong suit of cards. He says, “This is why I will not criticize them. But what is to be taken for granted is that they will not be wreathed with glory.” Vecernje Novosti, June 30, 2013.

⁹ Vulin, head of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, resigned when the Agreement was initialed but withdrew his resignation only a couple of days later. He was the only member of the negotiating team in Brussels voting against the Agreement.

whatsoever throughout May while meeting in Brussels. This is why Ivica Dacic and Hashim Thaci met once again with Catherine Ashton, as a mediator, on May 22. The meeting resulted in the Plan for the Implementation of the Agreement. Four days later, the Serbian government gave it a go-ahead.¹⁰

The Plan (written in English, Albanian and Serbian languages) sets deadlines for all the steps Belgrade and Prishtina have to make by the end of 2013: legislations have to be adjusted, a community of Serb municipalities formed, the issues of police forces and the judiciary in North Kosovo settled, and ten earlier “technical” agreements implemented in full (for instance, KFOR still has to take Kosovo customs officers by helicopters to Jarinje and Brnjak border crossing stations since local Serbs are blocking roads).

By the end of May Serbia was expected to submit a detailed overview of all the payments it was making to Serb-run institutions in Kosovo. By mid-June both parties were supposed to adopt regulations necessary for smooth implementation of the Agreement, including a law on amnesty. By the end of May the two parties were to establish a management team for the establishment of an association/a community of Serb municipalities in Kosovo, as well as to form a work group for integration of Serb judicial bodies into the Kosovo judiciary. By mid-June Serbia was to submit the information about the number of its employees in judicial bodies in Kosovo, willing to work for Kosovo institutions, and so on. Deadlines for meeting other obligations – particularly those related to local elections under Kosovo laws or full integration of judicial and security structures into Kosovo system – are in the second half of 2013.

¹⁰ Danas daily carried the integral version of the Plan. Danas, June 15-16, 2013.

Belgrade and Prishtina have not yet reached agreements on telecommunications (including international phone code for Kosovo) and energetics.

The inadequate tempo of the Agreement's implementation – for which Prishtina is also to blame – should change in the weeks and months to come. This implies that all steps taken should be clearly explained to citizens of Serbia and, particularly, to Serbs in Kosovo North defying all the arrangements reached so far.¹¹ Only a couple of days after European Council's decision on accession negotiations with Serbia, Serbs in Kosovo North, assisted by Belgrade's conservative circles, established the "Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija." The act itself is contrary to everything Belgrade authorities have been proclaiming. As such it will test their promises for dismissing parallel institutions in Kosovo.

As it seems, authorities are keeping in the dark things accomplished so far. The media ran just short stories about the police station that had been closed down in Leposavic – police officers moved out while clerks remained at premises to issue IDs.¹² Quoting unofficial sources, the Politika daily published a story about the police stations to be "sealed off" in Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Kosovska Mitrovica.¹³

In the meantime Prishtina accepted Belgrade's candidate for the regional police commander in Kosovo North (appointing Nenad Djuric). Serbia and Kosovo also agreed on the composition of the management team of the

¹¹ Borislav Stefanovic, former head of Serbia's negotiating team and now the head of Democratic Party's parliamentary caucus, says that Serbs in Kosovo North have not been informed that this fall, under the Agreement, they will have to register their parties participating in local elections in Prishtina. RTV B92, June 30, 2013.

¹² Politika, June 15, 2013.

¹³ Ibid.

Community of Serb Municipalities to operate, as envisaged under the Agreement, till holding of local elections in Kosovo. Indicatively, none of the well-known political activists from the ranks of Serbs in the North or a chief of any parallel institution will be in the team in this crucial transition period.¹⁴

On June 17, Belgrade and Prishtina "exchanged" liaison officers to be seated in EC premises in Prishtina and Belgrade, respectively.¹⁵

ANTI-EUROPEAN BLOC

From April 19 till June 28 the media were campaigning for the significance of the "date." Serbia's leaders were fueling unrealistic expectations, promising this or that, getting angry with European officials, threatening – all in all, they were doing a great disservice to themselves should the "verdict" on the date from Brussels be different. And this had a boomerang effect. Not only had they put their credibility at stake but they also helped the conservative bloc to collect its thoughts and gain ground.

In the meantime, the leadership considerably neutralized dignitaries of Serb Orthodox Church by playing on scandals shattering it (corruption, pedophilia and the like). On the other hand, pronounced anti-Europeans – from Djordje Vukadinovic, Cedomir Antic and

¹⁴ DSS representatives in Kosovska Mitrovica argue that members of the management team are "political anonymities." The party's MP, Slobodan Samardzic demanded the government to tell the criteria by which these members had been elected, considering "a serious task they will have to cope with, themselves without any representative capacity." Politika, June 19, 2013.

¹⁵ Dejan Pavicevic (former member of the negotiating team) was appointed Belgrade's liaison officer in Prishtina. Prishtina appointed Llullzim Peci, but only two days later replaced him by Valldet Sadiku, ex-Ambassador to Croatia.

Dusan Batakovic to Miroslav Lazanski – missed no blunder or faux pas to discredit the ruling coalition.

One should bear in mind here that almost three decades “state-national goals” have indoctrinated Serbia. A U-turn implying adoption of a new value system can be hardly expected overnight. This is why today’s public scene is so confused and schizophrenic. For instance, papers are supporting the regime and its “Europe-wise steps” on front pages only – the rest serve as a rostrum wherefrom all the steps are argued against.

Theses about “moral bankruptcy” of incumbent leaders “whose souls have turned into mud holes”¹⁶ and androids “from Brussels promising a semaphore light”¹⁷ or “a victory of realpolitics and the defeat of sacred European values”¹⁸ permeate headlines (such as “Kosovo for a Semaphore”)¹⁹, commentaries, columns, etc. Historian Cedomir Antic argues that the regime’s attitude towards Euro-integration is the biggest hypocrisy of all.²⁰

Editors of some influential dailies have been replaced in the meantime. Ratko Dmitrovic, infamous warmonger of 1990s, was appointed editor-in-chief of Vecernje Novosti, conservative, “patriotic” paper. Dmitrovic is a regular columnist of the Pecat weekly. Politika, close to the government, also got a new/old editor – Ljiljana Smajlovic. During her earlier term as the paper’s editor-in-chief she had not managed to cover up her ideological closeness to Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ and its leader, Vojislav Kostunica, despite all her

¹⁶ Politika, June 22, 2013.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Danas, June 12, 2013.

¹⁹ An allusion to “a green-light” for accession negotiations instead of a fixed date Serbia was hoping for. Nase Novina, June 11, 2013.

²⁰ Politika, June 13, 2013.

professionalism and pages she opened to different stands.

DSS fiercely criticizes the administration. It argues that Kosovo was given up for some foggy promises (about an accession date or membership of EU). “It would have been totally unconceivable had anyone asked an EU member-state, big or small, what Serbia is asked now – to give up a part of its territory for a date,” says Kostunica.²¹

Most people think the same although fewer and fewer vote for DSS and its ratings are on a downward curve. This paradox intrigued observers and analysts, including Goran Vesic, former official of Democratic Party (during Djindjic’s era). “The answer to the riddle is that citizens – even those who share DSS views – perceive the party leader, Vojislav Kostunica, as someone incapable of solving any problem whatsoever.”²²

PROSPECTS

EU officials commended the government’s “courage” and “resolution” to turn the back to the past and step towards the future. President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy himself put across encouraging messages while visiting Belgrade only a couple of days after EU summit. Belgrade then hosted Jelko Kacin, European Parliament’s rapporteur for Serbia and Carl Bildt, foreign minister of Sweden. Stephan Fule, European commissioner for enlargement, penned an article for the Politika daily. “This step forward is of major importance to Serbia and the entire region of Western Balkans. Serbia entered a new phase of its relations with EU at the point another country in the region, Croatia, joins EU, and that is worthy of respect,”

²¹ Pecat, No. 258/ 2013.

²² Danas, July 1, 2013.

he wrote.²³ He missed not to point out, however, that “today’s success is also to be ascribed to persistent endeavor of various Serb leaders in the past twelve years, starting from the late premier Zoran Djindjic.”²⁴

Belgrade’s true intention to implement the Agreement will be manifest in the weeks and months to come. For decades has Kosovo been instrumentalized by all governments. Therefore, implementation necessitates a thorough “decontamination.” The months to come will also show the true cost of manipulation of citizens and instrumentalization of leaders from the four Kosovo municipalities with Serb majority population.

On the US Independence Day, deputies of four municipal assemblies (with disputable legitimacy) formed the “Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija.”

²³ Politika, July 2, 2013.

²⁴ Ibid.

Premier Ivica Dacic called this action unconstitutional and illegal.²⁵ His genuine intentions will be tested in this context. For, as German expert for the Balkans, Johanna Daimel, put it, “Serbia still has to gain trust.”²⁶

On the other hand, Kosovo parliament did not adopt the amnesty law (July 4). The law that can be adopted with two-thirds majority vote was voted in by over one-half of total MPs. The law preconditions integration of judicial and security structures in Kosovo North into the country’s legal system, which is in itself a major element of the Brussels Agreement.

All this illustrates complex challenges both sides are facing. But no matter how complex there are neither side can be skipping over them until Brussels administration or German Bundestag remind it of its duties.

²⁵ Asked about Kosovo Serbs’ self-organization, Dacic replied, “I cannot comment non-existent things. Serbs should not shoot themselves in the foot.” Nase Novine, July 5, 2013.

²⁶ Danas, June 29-30, 2013.

CONCLUSION

Considering Serbia’s deep-rooted skepticism about Europe and Western values, challenges facing the incumbent regime – itself at the “change of heart” stage – are not to be underestimated in the period to come.

Used to skip over or totally ignore obligations it has taken upon itself, the administration once again risks having the date for the beginning of accession negotiations postponed. This is why EU and Serbia’s civil sector need to continually supervise its steps.