



## BORDERLINE CANDIDACY

As we approach December 9, the day when the European Council should decide on the recommendation of the European Commission (EC) to grant Serbia candidate status for membership in the European Union (EU), the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina are speeding up. It is certain that on November 21 in Brussels will be announced that Serbia and Kosovo reached an agreement regarding the two crossings in northern Kosovo populated by Serbs. This agreement, which includes an integrated border management with Serbian and Kosovar customs officers and representatives of EULEX present on the transitions, has been put forward before Belgrade and Pristina by the EU, according to the principle - take or leave it.

As usual, when the European Union shows determination, both Belgrade and Pristina cooperate.

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So it was a few months ago when the EU created the customs stamp design, over which Belgrade and Pristina had been unable to agree for three years, and offered it to both sides by the same principle - take it or leave it, with clear repercussions if the proposal would not be accepted. The proposal was accepted, which resulted in abolishment of Kosovo's ban of imports of goods from Serbia to Kosovo which normalized the trading. So, there will be no negotiations in Brussels on November 21, only the official announcement of the agreement reached by smiling negotiators Borko Stefanovic and Edita Tahiri in front of the cameras and giving winning statements each to its own public.

That the announced agreement in Brussels had been already "agreed" was confirmed by the Government of Kosovo which announced the "**approval of joint management of the border with Serbia**". Are the reasons for this to prevent criticism by the opposition that sought the agreement with Serbia to be ratified in the Kosovo Assembly and that Serbia is first to recognize the borders of Kosovo (statement by the President of the Assembly of Kosovo **Jakup Krasniqi**), or to show to Kosovo Serbs that Belgrade made the arrangement behind their back, or to create a problem for the Serbian government which is under pressure of the opposition and ruling coalition parties due to the agreement with Pristina? Whatever the motive for this announcement - it created a problem as the official Belgrade hasn't yet confirmed the agreement on joint border management. Reasons for this are many, but mainly in that moment the Serbian negotiator was yet to meet with representatives of Serbs from northern Kosovo to inform them about the details of the agreement on integrated border management.

The government in Belgrade knows that the agreement on joint border management is not the European Union's goal. This solution is in line with European practice, but Brussels expects from Belgrade to remove the barricades. Thus, the border agreement is only means to achieve the ultimate goal that is - the removal of barricades.

If the local Serbs are assured that the border issue is resolved, the barricades will be removed. But, then emerges a problem for Belgrade. As much as Brussels and Washington believed that Belgrade stands behind the barricades, they can only be removed by local Serbs.

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Belgrade needs the support of local Serbs for this agreement and it is therefore very important for them not to assume that the agreement had been made prior to consultation with them. That the representatives of Serbs from northern Kosovo would not accept the agreement was clear after their unsuccessful meeting with Stefanovic on November 17 in Belgrade. One of the leaders of local Serbs, president of the largest Serbian municipalities in Kosovo - Kosovska Mitrovica - **Krstimir Pantic** said that a delegation of Serbs from northern Kosovo informed Stefanovic that the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the Record Books was "**not lawful**" and that "**the community of Serbian Municipalities on Kosovo will file a criminal complaint against him, as head of the Serbian negotiating team**".

"**We do not accept the presence of any customs at the administrative crossings Jarinje and Brnjak. We are obliged to that by the attitudes and decisions of our Assemblies and it is presented to Stefanovic**", said Pantic. According to him, the Kosovo Serbs would not participate in the implementation of the agreement that may be achieved in Brussels. "**The decision on whether the barricades remain at the administrative crossings will be brought by the citizens. They elected us as representatives of their municipalities and we will respect their decision**", he said. The views of representatives of the Serbs are not a surprise given that the Assembly of Serbs from Kosovo (consisting

of elected councilors in local governments) on November 11 decided to seek reviewing the continuation of dialogue with Pristina without implementing the agreements reached so far. The representatives of the Serbs in northern Kosovo seek the upcoming and all subsequent elections in Serbia to be called for the territory of Kosovo respectively, behind which is apparently the intention to preempt rumors in diplomatic sources that Serbia will be asked not to announce the upcoming elections for the National Assembly and local authorities in Kosovo in order to get the date of negotiations' commencement on EU membership.

For the government in Belgrade it is very important to convince the local Serb leaders that the agreement on integrated border management is in their interest.

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Otherwise, if something does not change, Serbia will accept the agreement in Brussels, but the local Serbs will reject it. The question is for how long Serbs can withstand on the barricades without the help of Serbia, but the outcome of this situation would be very unfavorable for the government less than six months before the election. The government would be too exposed to attacks by the opposition for betraying the Serbs in Kosovo for the sake of obtaining candidacy for EU membership. Such a scenario is not the least desirable for the ruling Democratic Party. The government's negotiator Stefanovic, who is also aware of this, after meeting with representatives of the Serb admitted that there were still disagreements regarding decisions concerning the administrative crossings in the north and many other issues.



However, the Serbian government has other problems when it comes to Kosovo. The Report on Kosovo, which was addressed to the National Assembly wasn't even on the agenda because it was returned to the Government by the parliamentary committee for Kosovo. In addition, it appears that some parties in the ruling coalition do not support government policy regarding Kosovo. Together with pro-European but also the opposition Liberal Democratic Party they gathered in the movement "Reversal" which requires Serbia to recognize Kosovo's independence. If it is known that the resolution of Kosovo problem is a condition for Serbia to get the candidacy for EU membership, which should be an important electoral asset for the authorities, the situation is even worse.

Truly speaking, the unity of government and the opposition in Serbia has never been true or honest when it comes to solving the Kosovo issue. It was based on the fact that all parties knew that was not popular to recognize Kosovo's independence, and on that fact they shared their responsibility. The problem was that Serbia did not offer solutions, which was acknowledged by the leader of the ruling Democratic Party and Serbian President **Boris Tadic** on November 13 visiting the popular talk show with words "**there was unity because there was no solution**".

Belgrade is in a hurry to meet all EU requirements to apply for membership. This was confirmed by Borislav Stefanovic who made a statement for the daily *Danas* announcing that the "**Government still awaits the adoption of regulations on Cadastre and freedom of movement**". "**The agreement on the customs stamp and supporting documentation, which is status neutral, is already being implemented. It is yet necessary to reach an**

**agreement regarding the crossings Jarinje and Brnjak in northern Kosovo, which will be in accordance with Resolution 1244, six-point plan of Ban Ki-moon and the Serbian Constitution**", said Borislav Stefanovic. Thus he briefly explained the plan of the official Belgrade which aims to receive support by all EU members to become a candidate on December 9.

Will the ruling Democratic Party manage to win the race against time and ensure the application for membership in the European Union? Without the candidate status the Democratic Party stands much less chance in the upcoming elections. The biggest problem for the ruling Democrats is that the Kosovo policy, which has been implemented for 12 years has become exclusively a party politics of the Democratic Party. In this situation, no problem can be solved and the solutions offered will not be permanent or good for the Kosovo Serbs, or for Serbia. The Kosovo issue is too important for Serbia to be an issue of either of the parties independently. Therefore this problem can very easily escalate to inflict greater damage than in the past 12 years, since the Serbian army and police left Kosovo in June 1999.