



REFERENDUM

Only few days before the referendum in northern Kosovo, the government in Belgrade that opposes the referendum, decided to ignore it. The Serbian media report on the referendum only occasionally, the television do not report from the field as was the case last summer with barricades, and politicians are trying to avoid mentioning the issue. "The government's boycott" was partly motivated by frustration of the authorities who failed to convince Kosovo Serbs not to hold a referendum only two weeks before the decision of the European Council on the Serbian candidate status for EU membership. Another reason is that official Belgrade believes that ignoring the referendum is consistent with the policy that it is **"illegal for municipalities to declare themselves on a matter not within their jurisdiction"** and that it endangers **"the interests of the Republic of Serbia"**. So the official Belgrade believes that there is no need to respond, or that the media write about something "that does not exist." The problem with this decision is that Belgrade does not mean ignoring the referendum will take place, and that this act will have consequences.

While Belgrade behaves as if there's no referendum, in northern Kosovo preparations are taking place. **"The issue in the upcoming referendum on 14 and 15 February in northern Kosovo and Metohija shall be - Do you accept the institution of so-called Republic of Kosovo?"** was told to Radio - Television Vojvodina (RTV) by **Krstimir Pantic**, president of the largest Serbian municipality of Kosovska Mitrovica, which is informal leader of Serbs in northern Kosovo. He pointed out that about 40 thousand citizens have the right to vote and said that the referendum would cost very little – up to 100 thousand dinars (about 920 euros according to the official exchange rate) for all four municipalities. Serbian leader pointed out that the ballots were printed in Serbian and Albanian, and added that he expected about a third of Albanians living in northern Kosovska Mitrovica go to referendum. **"I would disagree that the outcome of the referendum is known in advance,"** said Pantic, adding that he expected **"a much larger turnout than in 2008 local elections, or over 60 percent"**. Pantic called **"OSCE and UNMIK missions to send observers, and thus confirm that the referendum was carried out according to law"**.

Official Belgrade has opposed to the referendum from the moment the Serbian leaders from northern Kosovo announced it.

The reason for this is that the decision to hold a referendum was made in response to local Serbs' agreement on integrated border management, behind which stood Belgrade, Pristina and Brussels. This agreement has been made several days before the December European Council declaration on granting Serbia the status of candidate for EU membership. This was immediately followed by a call by Serbian President **Boris Tadic** to Kosovo Serbs to remove barricades from the roads in the north that had been set in July 2011. Serbs set up barricades in response to a unilateral police action of Kosovo Prime Minister **Hashim Thaci**, who tried by force to take over the border crossings between Serbia and Kosovo which are located in the north, and inhabited by Serbs. Serbs in northern Kosovo have rejected the invitation of President Tadic to remove barricades and in response - called the referendum. It was a political response to the request of President Tadic. The leaders from the north thus avoided direct confrontation with him and let the people decide. President Tadic urged them **"not to hide behind the people but to make decisions by themselves"**. During December and January, the authorities in Belgrade tried to persuade the Serbs in northern Kosovo to give up their intentions, but without success. In the north of Kosovo, there are four municipalities - Kosovska Mitrovica, Zvecan, Leposavic and Zubin Potok - the assemblies of which and



local elected leadership was elected in 2008. Serbs in northern Kosovo boycott all elections that are organized by Pristina. Of the four municipalities, in three are opposition parties to the Serbian government, and in one is the ruling Democratic Party. However, all four municipalities have made a decision to hold a referendum. It was the defeat of the Serbian government, but in December last year some of the deputies from the ruling majority who live in Kosovo harshly criticized the policy of the Government towards Kosovo. For this reason, the Serbian Parliament is not discussing Kosovo. In addition, the Serbian Minister for Kosovo **Goran Bogdanovic** has held several meetings with leaders of Serbian municipalities in northern Kosovo trying to persuade them to give up on the referendum. Although there were some indications that the Serbian leaders could change the decision - it did not happen. Everything that happened alienated local Serbs from the Serbian government and brought them closer to opposition parties.

Apart from Belgrade, leading countries of the international community and Pristina decided to ignore the referendum and refuse to recognize its results.

That's what recently commented controversial head of the International Civilian Office in Pristina, **Peter Feith**, who said the referendum **"will simply not be recognized. The government here will not recognize it, the organization which I have the honor to represent will not recognize it, the EU will not recognize it, neither the UN. If no one recognizes it, it will hardly have some kind of material impact. I do not think it will change the course of events on Kosovo"**.

Here begins and ends the unity of all the factors related to the referendum and begin problems for Belgrade and Pristina, but also Brussels and Washington. Regardless of what people may think, referendum is a democratic declaration of citizens and one of the fundamental democratic rights. In addition, the referendum results will show whether the Serbian people in the north of Kosovo or not accept the independence of Pristina. If they do not accept Kosovo's independence, what is the next step? It is clear that the international community will not use force to persuade the Serbs in northern Kosovo to accept the authority of the Government in Pristina, and that something like that will not be allowed to Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci. The war adventure of Kosovo government behind which tacitly stood states which have recognized Kosovo in July 2011, ended by fiasco and almost caused a war. So, the political and democratic dialogue will need to be established with Serbs from northern Kosovo sooner or later. Therefore, there will be consequences from the referendum which "no one who admits". They will be indirect, but still long-term.

Belgrade has managed to avoid the wrath the international community regarding the referendum. That was helped by Serb leaders from northern Kosovo in public confrontation with the Serbian government on this issue.

French Ambassador in Belgrade **Francois Xavier Denio** confirmed that by words **"given the fact that the Serbian government was not involved in this initiative, but publicly distanced itself"**, in his opinion **"there should be consequences"** for Serbia's candidacy for membership in the European Union. But problems for Belgrade begin after the referendum. Belgrade can expect increased pressure of countries that recognized Kosovo's independence to continue with the policy of distancing further from the Kosovo Serbs. This will be a problem for the Serbian government, especially since Serbia is a few months before parliamentary elections. The Kosovo issue is very sensitive to the Serbian public and the government simply cannot go beyond the decision to ignore the referendum, without political damage. In addition, the



confrontation with the leaders of the Serbs in northern Kosovo reduces the maneuverability of Serbian President Tadic for new compromises. As a politician, Tadic must take care not to be accused of "betraying Kosovo". Tadic and Democratic Party (DS) have a pro-European reformist public image, not patriotic.

Referendum in the north Kosovo is a message to the world that almost nothing has been done in the last 13 years to win the confidence of Kosovo Serbs in the international community and in the common institutions in Kosovo.

After the Serbian army and police left Kosovo in June 1999, nearly two-thirds of the Serbian population now lives in exile in Serbia. There are almost no Serbs in Kosovo's cities except in four towns in the north and this is particularly unpleasant fact for the Kosovo government and the international community. In Pristina, Kosovo's capital, in 1999 lived about 40 thousand Serbs, but now only 250. In Prizren once inhabited by about eight thousand Serbs, today there are only several dozens. For thirteen years, almost nothing was done to return the Serbs back to Kosovo. Serbs are symbolically present in the Kosovo institutions. Public enterprises in Kosovo do not comply with the provisions on the representation of the Serbs, and the whole decentralization reduced to several Serbian municipalities that have almost no original jurisdiction, but receive the money as a "charity" from the Kosovo government. This is the responsibility of international community in Kosovo.

Whatever the referendum is organized, it will be difficult for the international community not to respect the democratic declaration of citizens. Especially as the countries that are sponsors of Kosovo's independence considered legitimate and democratic voting of Kosovo Albanian referendum in the nineties, on independence from Serbia. An additional problem for these countries may be possible recognition of the referendum results by Russia or China. The international community in Kosovo cannot achieve anything by ignoring the views of the citizens in the north. This declaration should be a sign in which direction to make more effort to persuade the Serbian community in Kosovo to gain confidence in international institutions, to pressure the government in Pristina to offer new concessions to the Serbian community and together with the governments in Belgrade and Pristina insists on democratic and a compromise solution. Regardless of whether international community countries will support the independence of Kosovo or not - this referendum will show that the policy promoted by Feith and other influential representatives from Brussels and Washington - making of Pristina state by constant pressure from Belgrade on Kosovo Serbs to recognize the authority of Pristina – has suffered a fiasco.

The upcoming referendum is a message for the authorities in Pristina that Kosovo Serbs do not trust the Kosovo institutions. The Kosovo government should understand that the only way to establish cooperation with the Serbs is to give up the ambition of those elected leaders of the Serbs. If it wants to reach a compromise with the Serbs, Pristina government will have to accept those Kosovo Serb leaders that they choose themselves, and not to call them criminals. Neither the Serbs are happy to negotiate with Hashim Thaci, war leader associated with crimes against the Serbian population, committed by KLA in the period 1997 - 1999, but he is the choice of the Albanian people. In the same way, the Albanians must accept to talk with those who are the choice of the Serbian people, whoever that is. Simply, the conflict between Serbs and Albanians has lasted for centuries, and a compromise can be reached only by mutual respect and tolerance. The Government of Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci does not show that. One gets the impression that it promotes tolerance and peaceful coexistence with the Serbs just because the international community requires that and expects the world to persuade Kosovo Serbs to stay on Kosovo, or to make them a state.



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WEEKLY ANALYSIS AND FORECASTS

Finally, the referendum to be held in the north Kosovo will show that the Ahtisaari plan, by which was proclaimed independence of Kosovo - is dead. Simply, it wasn't accepted by the Serbs in Kosovo and it is a waste of time to persuade them that they should "**read the Ahtisaari plan**", as proposed ironically by Peter Feith. Instead, new solutions, acceptable to all in Kosovo, should be looked for, acceptable for Serbia and Priština. After all, no political solution anywhere in the world, cannot take root if not accepted by people. The referendum of Serbs in northern Kosovo offers no new solution, but is the chance for all who live in Kosovo and who are interested in this problem to start from scratch in order to find a lasting and viable formula for coexistence between Serbs and Albanians, as well as Belgrade and Pristina.