



## THE FAILURE OF THACI'S "STORM"

That peace in the Balkans can easily relapse into conflict, or that one reckless move can annul all the positive results achieved on the normalization of relations - showed the recent events in northern Kosovo.

The crisis in the north began on July 26, after the Kosovo authorities sent special police units ROSA to take over two border crossings - Jarinje and Brnjak. Kosovo government treats the crossings to Serbia as international, while Serbs from Kosovo and Serbia recognize them only as "administrative" or internal. By taking the crossings, Kosovo Prime Minister **Hashim Thaci** wanted to establish complete control over the border and ensure implementation of the government decision passed on July 20 to ban imports of goods from Serbia, all in response to the decision of the European Union's mediator in Belgrade-Pristina negotiations, **Robert Cooper**, who has canceled further talks due to disagreements over the Kosovo customs stamps that Serbia does not recognize.

Kosovo's police special unit ROSU numbers about 600 members, exclusively Albanians, the most of whom are ex-combatants of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). As ROSU does not

enjoy the trust of the Serbian community, the attempt of violent takeover of border crossings caused conflicts with the Serbs, in which one ROSU member was killed. The escalation of the conflict between Kosovo's special forces, which managed to reach the border crossing, and the Serbs, who surrounded them by barricades, was prevented by KFOR (the international peacekeeping force with 50 thousand soldiers from 39 countries). After consultation between KFOR and Serbian officials, on July 27 the Kosovo special forces withdrew from northern Kosovo. The same evening a group of extremists set fire to crossing Jarinje. On July 28 KFOR took control over the two crossings declaring them military zones. The Serbian population reacted to this decision by setting up the barricades on roads leading to these areas thus preventing KFOR to supply their troops. After a few days in which the KFOR commander, German General **Erhard Biler**, threatened to forcibly destroy the barricades, the international peacekeeping forces opened the passage for people and all vehicles, except trucks. Currently, KFOR tolerates the barricades and exercises increased control of northern Kosovo. Hence was made room for the international community to work together



with Serbian and Kosovar leaders in finding a compromise solution to the crisis.

While looking for a solution, the world and the Serbian and Kosovo's public deals with who is responsible for the crisis in which one life was lost, and the negotiation process relapsed back to the beginning, which side benefited and which lost?

The most important question is whether Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, in deciding to send special forces to the north of Kosovo, had the support or at least tacit consent of some circles in the international community?

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Connoisseurs of conditions in Kosovo are convinced that it was so, because Kosovo's leadership ought to not independently make a decision on such a significant action. Since the United States of America (USA) has a greater impact on the political structures in Kosovo than the European Union (EU), the question is whether Thaci's action was backed by official Washington, or at least some influential Washington officials? This thesis was first publicly stated by Serbian President Boris Tadic, three days after the crisis' outbreak. He said that **"it's impossible to imagine such a naive scenario of ROSU appearing out of the blue"**.

Serbian President sharply spoke about the role of U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo **Christopher Dell "who more than once gave radical statements"**, as well as high representatives of civil groups in Kosovo, Dutch diplomat **Pieter Feith. "The administration in Pristina does not make that kind of decision independently, nor will in the future, there is no doubt in that either by me or the international community"**, Tadic said and asked **"to investigate who had which role in the whole process that could destroy a fragile peace and stability in Kosovo"**.

The fact is that the American Ambassador Dell is the most influential foreigner in Kosovo. This was convincingly demonstrated in early April when he appointed, deputy director of the Kosovo police **Atifete Jahjaga**, who was unfamiliar to general public, as the president of Kosovo. The opposition accused the Kosovo government that **"they learnt the name of the new president from a note by Ambassador Dell"**. It is unlikely that the ambassador who has the power to appoint or dismiss the president of the Minister wasn't informed of Hashim Thaci's decision. It is interesting that neither Christopher Dell nor Peter Feith responded to the allegations of the Serbian President. Still, a statement followed by U.S. Ambassador in Belgrade **Mary Warlick** saying that **"the decision of Pristina to send police forces to the north of Kosovo to take control of**



**border posts wasn't made in coordination with the international community nor the United States".** Ambassador Warlick said that the decision had been made **"solely by Pristina"**, and that **"The United States express regret for all that occurred last week in Kosovo.**

For the USA, Kosovo and Serbia are two different countries and it is very unusual that events that occurred in "one country" are commented by Ambassador from "another country", although it must be admitted that this case is specific, because the authorities in Serbia do not recognize Kosovo's independence. The question is whether the United States in this case operated independently, that is, behind the back of their partners in the European Union? It is unlikely, because the U.S. and EU have a common policy towards the Balkans, even though they do not agree in all details. If the Balkans is primarily a European issue, it is unlikely that the United States participated in causing the crisis and creating problems with their European partners. U.S. supports Kosovo's independence exerts pressure on other countries in the world to recognize Kosovo's independence, but they are less and less present in Kosovo. The world's largest force in Kosovo has a military base Bondsteel, but with increasingly less soldiers, and we hear rumors of its closing.

In fact, the U.S. has big problems in the Arab world after the "Arab spring" that toppled several governments which had been more or less American allies. The war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, the problem with Israel, the struggle with global terrorism and ultimately Iran are the U.S.' foreign policy priorities. If we add relations with Russia and China, Latin America and the economic problems at home - it is clear that the Balkans and Kosovo are away from the eyes of official U.S. policy.

However, the problem with the influence of the United States in Kosovo is that the U.S. government does nothing to put pressure on Pristina to become looser in the negotiations with Belgrade. There is a pattern in the U.S. that diplomacy all done by the Kosovo side is good, and everything done by the Serbian side bad.

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Therefore, a scenario in which some U.S. diplomats were familiar with the action of Kosovo's specials in Pristina, believing that it was consistent with U.S. policy, should not be surprising. However, there can be no question of their coordination with the State Department regarding this action.



It is now clear that American diplomats in Pristina, under the condition that they knew about the action of the Kosovo government, misjudged possible consequences regarding the destabilization of the region. How will this affect the careers of these diplomats, remains to be seen. Not long ago, the U.S. has replaced its ambassador in Serbia, **William Montgomery**, due to interference in politics and incorrect estimates. So the first consequence of this crisis will be altered behavior of the United States in Kosovo. The world's largest force will have to more consult more with its European partners when it comes to the Balkans and Kosovo, or - take their share of responsibility and more positively influence the Kosovo side or completely withdraw from Kosovo.

The EU was completely taken aback by events in the north Kosovo. Pristina's daily *Koha Ditore* reported that Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci had requested the support by EULEX, but got the answer from the head of the European mission **Xavier de Marnhac** "**not to even try such a thing**". If the EU wasn't acquainted with Thaci's intention, the question remains whether some EU member countries were? On the day when the action began the French ambassador in Pristina **Jean-Francois Fitou** declared "**we should respect the decisions of the Government of Kosovo,**" because it "**undertook the decisions that belong to it and therefore, it should be**

**respected, liked it or not**". Ambassadors of other EU members on Kosovo remained silent, while it's noticeable that the French foreign ministry hasn't reiterated the words of their diplomat.

The European Union has entrusted the management of this crisis to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy **Catherine Ashton**, who after the meeting of the EU Political and Security Committee, sent the representative **Robert Cooper** to Belgrade and Pristina. Ashton said that "**the return of the dialogue remains the only way to Belgrade and Pristina to resolve open issues. The European Union expects a rapid and necessary progress to happen**". She urged "**both Pristina and Belgrade to take the full measure of what is at stake, show maximum restraint, avoid further escalation and engage constructively with a view to finding a peaceful, negotiated solution without further delay**".

The impression is that the EU is keen to reach a negotiated solution which would, to begin with, enable each side, Kosovo and Serbia, to live together. However, one should always bear in mind that the common policy in the EU is very difficultly formulated because some members haven't recognized Kosovo, while majority did.

Therefore, powerful EU members like Germany, Britain and France that strongly advocate the independence of Kosovo, formulate a policy under which Belgrade has to show maximum cooperation to the existence of the Kosovo state, to facilitate its survival, and in turn to get access to European integration.

Simply put, the European Union believes that Serbia's EU accession is the most important political goal of Serbian President Tadic, who would, sooner or later, subordinate everything to that goal.

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Realistically speaking, the elections in Serbia will be held in nine months, and European integration remains as the biggest asset to the ruling coalition confronted with a difficult economic situation. The EU is aware of this so we can expect to see a carrot and stick policy when it comes to Serbia. As far as Kosovo, we can expect the EU to try to find a mechanism to influence the administration of Kosovo, not to be surprised by another move such as sending special forces to the north. The future EU policy has been clearly described by the foreign ministers of Germany and Great Britain, Guido Westerwelle and William Hague in a joint statement issued on August 2 when they expressed "serious concern about the recent outbreak of violence at the border between Serbia and Kosovo" and stressed "the necessity

to respect the territorial integrity of Kosovo". The two ministers added that "tangible progress in all these areas will play a role in the EU's discussions in the autumn". Westerwelle and Haig sent a message and to the Kosovo authorities by condemning any use of violence.

*How will the Kosovo crisis reflect on the Serbian and Kosovo's political scene?*

The position of Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, who until a few days ago had been exposed to fierce attacks by the opposition because of negotiations with Belgrade, is temporarily strengthened. By sending special police in northern Kosovo, Thaci has silenced his political opponents who accused him of betraying the interests of Kosovo through negotiations with Belgrade and made a move that was popular among the Albanian population in Kosovo.

**Kosovo society supports the agreement with Belgrade, but it is not ready to accept any compromise, because in the minds of the Albanian citizens in Kosovo they are victims in a decades long conflict with Serbia. It is believed that the "compromise" consists in the fact that Belgrade is to recognize Kosovo's independence, and that there is no need for Kosovo to make any concessions.**

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Kosovo was granted independence after the bombing of Serbia by NATO, security was guaranteed for tens of thousands of soldiers from all over the world, independence was declared in agreement with the U.S. and the EU, and the biggest countries in the world have practically convinced dozens of other countries to recognize Kosovo. The people of Kosovo are simply used to the benevolent attitude of the international community which will not request anything from them. That is why the Kosovo society is not ready for any compromise with Serbia, even at the cost that it provides a durable peace and coexistence. Simply, Kosovo Albanians expect someone else to put pressure on Serbia to recognize Kosovo. So today, Hashim Thaci does what most of the people of Kosovo want. However, sooner or later will come a moment for concessions. Here the problems begin for the current Prime Minister of Kosovo as the police action sparked a hope for Kosovo Albanians that the north of Kosovo can be integrated by force. So now every compromise with Belgrade will be very difficult accepted by the Kosovo society, and politicians who make it will be marked as traitors. This is the scenario awaiting Hashim Thaci.

The escalation of the crisis also worsened relations between Albanians and Serbs. In the last 12 years those relations were being built and rebuilt with difficulties. The north of Kosovo is populated by one hundred thousand

Serbs, and nearly as much Serbs live in other parts of Kosovo. Serbs living in the north are more radical than the Serbs from other parts of Kosovo, because they have no need for any cooperation with the authorities in Pristina. Unlike them, the Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo are moderate, because they must co-exist with the Albanians. In several past election cycles, Serbs are part of the Kosovo government, they have their representatives in the Kosovo parliament, and it seemed that cooperation with the moderate Serbs was the way for the Albanian majority to repair the relationship with the Serbian community.

By organizing police attack in the north of Kosovo Thaci has nullified all that his government achieved in gaining trust by the Serbian community, and instead the moderate Serbs, he chose - the extremist Serbs. His partners in the Serbian government he's brought into almost impossible position in which the only thing they can do is vote against the parliamentary resolution proposed by Thaci's government and leave the Assembly of Kosovo.

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Kosovo's prime minister will suffer the greatest loss in the international community. Simply, noone in the world needs a politician who creates problems. One of the reasons why until now he enjoyed the support of the international



community was a belief that he was "Kosovo's strong", capable of making compromises that will follow, regardless of his controversial war past, international investigation into his involvement in the trafficking of human organs of Serbs and alleged links with organized crime. If Thaci bases his influence in Kosovo on pandering to voters, if he creates problems instead of offering solutions, and if he is not ready to compromise with Serbia, as well as implement the agreement - then the international community will find a less compromised politicians to represent Kosovo.

In short, alone or with assistance from the international community, Prime Minister Thaci gambled - and lost. Had the special forces managed to takeover and retain two border crossings, he would've present the Serbs and the international community with a fait accompli. Had he succeeded, no doubt the international community would've "turned a blind eye" in the same way it did in 1995 in the case of the "Storm" - action carried out by Croatia against the breakaway territories where Serbs lived. However, he failed, and special forces had to withdraw from the north. Now he faces a difficult process in which, if he refuses to be constructive in talks with Belgrade, he will be rejected by the international community. If he negotiates with Serbia, he will be rejected by the society. So the big question is what more can Thaci do and how much he is

ready to be constructive? This is indicated by his statements that serve to collect cheap political points like "**there's no turning back**", "**Kosovo will not give in under pressure**" or "**red lines have been set which the Kosovo government will not cross**", "**Kosovo's sovereignty is restored in its entire territory**", etc. It is self-deception, because what kind of sovereignty he has as Prime Minister when he can not walk in the north of Kosovo?

Unlike Kosovo, Serbia has reacted wiser. However, the crisis has shown what will be Serbian problems in the future and reduced the maneuvering space of the Serbian authorities to postpone difficult decisions. Everything that has happened in Kosovo came in a very bad time for Belgrade. Namely, this year Serbia has arrested and extradited to the Hague Tribunal the former Bosnian Serb military commander General **Ratko Mladic** and former Croatian Serb leader **Goran Hadzic**. Their arrests completed Serbian cooperation with ICTY and removed an important obstacle to the continuation of Serbia's journey towards the European Union. Serbian President Tadic's plan was to use that moment to put pressure on the EU to win candidate status in October, as well as to determine the starting date for negotiations with on joining the EU. "**We have fulfilled our duty, now it's your turn**", Tadic said after the arrest of Mladic and Hadzic.



The events in the north have completely nullified the positive effects of the completion of cooperation with The Hague. Of course, Serbia has removed the obstacle, but other than getting the candidate status in October, there will be no other "benefits".

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Another problem is that somehow Serbia became a hostage to the Serbs in northern Kosovo. Several times we said that the Serbs in northern Kosovo are more radical comparing to the Serbs living in other parts of Kosovo. The impact of those Serbs and their leaders has been significantly reduced in Serbian politics after the 2008 elections in which former conservative Prime Minister **Vojislav Kostunica** was defeated. In fact, almost all the leaders of the Serbs in northern Kosovo belong to political parties that are the opposition to the government of President Tadic. This also applies to mayors (Serbs in Kosovo elect their local government at the same time of the elections in Serbia, boycotting the elections organized by the government in Pristina).

Now, owing to the reckless action of Hashim Thaci, leaders of north Kosovo Serbs had a big come back to the political scene in both Kosovo and Serbia. The problem with them is that they do not agree to any compromise. For them, the only possible solution is - Kosovo part of

Serbia, or at least northern Kosovo, where they have power.

Serbs in northern Kosovo currently support the government in Belgrade, for it is doing what they want. However, the first compromise that Tadic will reach with the Government in Pristina will cause their conflict with the government in Belgrade. Belgrade could not choose Serbs in northern Kosovo to become its interlocutors again, but it is partly to blame for this situation. The government in Belgrade led by events in the north completely forgot that there are Serbs from other parts of Kosovo. Simply, it could've been at least tried to include their leaders in the negotiations. The good news for the government in Belgrade is that the Serbs in northern Kosovo do not have a decisive influence on public opinion in Serbia, which is important if there is a conflict. The media in Belgrade take care not to publicly promote anyone other than official representative of Belgrade **Borislav Stefanovic** and Minister for Kosovo and Metohija **Goran Bogdanovic**. However, in the election campaign, no one needs accusation of treason by Kosovo Serbs, so the government in Belgrade will pay special attention not to enter into conflict with them unless necessary.

A conflict between the authorities in Belgrade and the Serbs from the north is, however, inevitable if Serbia wants to enter the European Union.

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The crisis has revealed the determination of the European Union for Serbia to become a member only after solving the Kosovo problem. The EU difficultly formulates a unified position on an issue, but once formulated, it hardly changes it. The entry of a new EU member can be blocked by any member. In such a situation Serbia can not be helped by EU member states that haven't recognized Kosovo. The most influential members of the European Union nations - Germany, France and Britain managed to impose that "**Serbia needs to resolve problems with its neighbors before entering the EU**". None of the EU officials will say that it means an explicit recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, but still it is a step expected of Belgrade before joining the European Union.

Truly speaking, the authorities in Belgrade have been aware of that since 2008. Belgrade's plan was to reach a solution through negotiations with Pristina that would allow the government to show its citizens that certain success has been achieved. Unlike Pristina, Belgrade isn't burdened with the expectations of the society.

For long Kosovo hasn't been among the top priorities of the citizens of Serbia - show public opinion polls, and the majority opinion is that "Kosovo is lost."

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However, this does not mean that citizens do not require from politicians to fight for the survival of Kosovo. The Kosovo myth is very powerful among the Serbian people and its weight shouldn't be underestimated. That is why politicians do not want to be the ones to tell their own people what we all know and expect - that Kosovo is no longer Serbia. All this provides an opportunity to the Serbian authorities, because they need little success in the negotiations to announce to its citizens that certain success is achieved. For this reason Belgrade honestly negotiates because it sees its chance. Truth be told, for Belgrade it is much easier to participate in the negotiations because its present position is very weak. It is much harder for Pristina, because it has everything, which means that it has to give up on something, while pressed by high expectations of the citizens. So the key to success lies not in Belgrade but in Pristina. From the success of the EU to force the Kosovo authorities to agree to concessions depends on whether the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina will be successful or not. Waiting for the "success" Tadic is now publicly saying that "**Serbia will**



never recognize Kosovo's independence". It seems that the international community has found the formula for the solution to the Kosovo knot. However, no one is counting on the possibility that the present or a future Serbian government, faced with the intransigent attitude of Pristina that there is no trade-offs and the inability of the international community to put pressure on Kosovo's leaders, decides to declare that Serbia gives up membership in the EU?

As a country that is a candidate for membership and that is almost completely surrounded by EU member states, Serbia can survive and live quite well as a country which doesn't need to be an official member of the EU. In this case, the whole strategy of Western countries falls into the water, leaving the Balkans' conflict permanently frozen and the issue between Serbia and Kosovo unresolved.

With his moderate stance on the crisis President Tadic won the sympathy of the international community. Serbia's position "not to wage war" sent a message of a responsible and predictable member of the international community. However, the international community's support is not enough, and not even crucial to victory in elections expected in nine months. Tadic's party faces major problems in the

country and citizens' dissatisfaction with the economic situation. That's why the ruling parties base the election campaign on "European story", or candidate status. Also, the countries which want to solve the problem created by accepting unilateral recognition of Kosovo through the process of Serbia's EU accession. It is very well aware of. Consequently, the authorities in Serbia can expect additional pressures and conditioning in the coming months.

The crisis in the north may accelerate the solution of the Kosovo problem if all agree that compromises are needed for the both sides to reach an agreement. However, the international community that mediates in the process needs to know that the time is running out. Each day without a solution forces Belgrade and Pristina to be more radical. Events in the north have shown how fragile the stability of Kosovo is. It is therefore important to create a mechanism to prevent either party to withdraw hasty and radical moves. This applies not only to Belgrade and Pristina, but also to the international community and KFOR. A new crisis, a new conflict, the dead or injured people, soldiers or police officers could set fire on Serbia and Kosovo with unforeseeable consequences for the future of the region.