

THE INEVITABLE THEME

(Not) holding the Serbian local elections on Kosovo has become the theme at the finish of the pre-electional campaign in Serbia. It could be expected concerning the importance that the question of Kosovo has in Serbian society. It is exactly the reason why it is odd that the government let itself leave the announcement that the local elections will not be held on Kosovo for the very end of the campaign when it was quite clear to everyone even when the elections were scheduled that it is going to be so? This case has shown that the pushing of the problems „under the carpet“ has never been a good idea because sooner or later you have to pay the price for that. During the electoral campaigns it is better bad things to happen at the beginning of the campaign than at the end.

If we observe the situation according to the public poll survey held in the middle of March this year, the citizens of Serbia do not see Kosovo as the most important problem. At the question what should be the most important question of the pre-electional campaign even 63.5 % of the citizens answered – „ the unemployment“.

And in the poll where the examinees could give more answers ,as the main question of the elections 24.4 % of the citizens answered „ low living standard“, 19.9% „the corruption“, 15% „the economy“, 11.9 % „the agriculture“, and 8.7 % of the citizens stated „ criminal“. Only 8.3% of the citizens of Serbia stated „ Kosovo as the most important problem.“ It means that Kosovo is not the most important theme in the country but it is interesting that only 6. 8% of the citizens think that „ Serbia’s applying in the European Union (EU) „ should be the most important theme of the campaign. The other problems, such as „ social questions“ , „public health“ and „the education“ are obviously less important themes for Serbian voters. However, these results do not give the clear picture of the relation of the citizens of Serbia towards Kosovo. For them, Kosovo is not at this moment the most important problem but there is strong feeling of identifying with this theme. It is specially noticeable at the moment when the members of Serbian minority on Kosovo have got problems caused by Albanian majority or when the incidents happen. It can be confirmed by the data that even 66 % of citizens of Serbia considers that Serbian local elections should be held on Kosovo and on the question if „ the (not)holding of the local elections on Kosovo means the acknowledgement of Priština’s independence „ even 52.2 % of the citizens answered confirmatively and only 18.4 % of the citizens answered negatively.

Even 67 % of the citizens of Serbia believe that „ Serbia is going to be conditioned by admitting of Kosovo’s independence to become the member of the European Union (EU)“. Upon question what Serbia should do in that case, 46 % of the citizens answered that „ Serbia should reject the membership in the European Union“, and both 19 % of the citizens consideres that „ Serbia should blank accept the membership“ as well as that „the Government should do what it has to do because the benefits out of the membership are important for our country.“

Even 61% of the citizens are informed that Belgrade and Priština have acquired technical agreements in Brussels on free moving, mutual managing on the crossing border, and goods flow but only 7.4 % of the citizens are familiar with the content of these agreements , 29.6% of the citizens say that „ they are familiar with some details „ and 60.4% of the citizens claim that they are not familiar with the content of the agreement. On question if „ these agreements are good for the country „ 28% of the citizens answered confirmatively, 18% consider that „ agreements are not good for Serbia“ and 41% of the citizens say that „ they are not interested“. Only 13% of the citizens consider that the agreements between Belgrade and Priština „ will have positive effect on lives of ordinary people „ or that „some parts of the agreement will have positive effect „, 8 % of the citizens think that „ it is going to have negative effect „ and yet 65% of the citizens assume that the agreements will not have any effect on lives of ordinary citizens.

The results of this survey are clear message to the political parties in Serbia that this theme is not the most important to the citizens but that they have strong feeling of identification with Kosovo. It practically means that the citizens of Serbia want their politicians to solve this problem, that they are ready to support the agreements with Priština but at the same time they wish Kosovo or at least its parts where Serbs live to stay the part of Serbia. It is tough task for Serbian politicians, isn't it?

On Kosovo, to be precise on its northern part, there are four municipalities led by governments chosen at local elections organized by Serbia. To local governments in two municipalities , Zvečan i Zubin Potok the mandates have finished while in the other two municipalities, Leposavić and Kosovska Mitrovica, the elections were not held because there are still local government mandates lasting . The governments of these two municipalities were chosen on the repeated local elections. In other parts of Kosovo there are „ Serbian municipalities“ , in other words the governments chosen at Serbian parallel with the governments of the municipalities chosen at the elections organized by Priština, and in which mostly live Serbian people. For Serbian administration is very difficult to function in these parts of Kosovo because the Serbian areas are mostly situated in Albanian surrounding and the citizens are forwarded to the cooperation with Priština. That is why Serbian people from Kosovo , except for the north, have chosen to have the governments that are elected both at Serbian and Kosovo's elections as well as to use the benefits given by Belgrade and Priština. Despite the fact that Belgrade does not have the control over the areas where Serbs live except on the north of Kosovo, it still pays most of the Serbs through their salaries for work in public enterprises, state institutions, the educational and the health institutions. On the north of Kosovo, where there are four municipalities joined, the situation is different. They are leaned on Serbia, most of the citizens are Serbs, and the government of Priština does not exist on this territory, nor local Serbs show any intention of admitting its governance. That is why Serbia on the north of Kosovo is in a position to organize the elections the way it wants, but in other parts of Kosovo for the elections it needs the cooperation of at least the international community if not Priština as well.

Serbian government has decided not to hold the local elections on Kosovo. This decision is in accordance with the Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council (UN) from the June 1999. which regulated the governing of Kosovo by the international community after the retreat of Serbian security forces. Serbia actually did not, by the year 2008., even organized the local elections in opposition to the parliamentary and presidential elections which were regularly held. That year, as a reaction to the self- proclaimed independence of Kosovo with any agreements with Serbia and the acceptance of this independence by the most of western countries – Serbia organized local elections on Kosovo as well. In two municipalities on the north of Kosovo, Kosovska Mitrovica and Leposavić, the local elections were repeated later. So, by not holding the local elections on Kosovo, Serbia proceeds in accordance to the Resolution 1244 of the United Nations and does not violates the Constitution of its country. However, that same Resolution gives the right to Serbia to organize parliamentary and presidential elections on Kosovo as well. That is exactly what Serbian government needs because enabling Serbs from Kosovo to vote for the Representatives of the National Assembly and the President of the Republic amortizes the dissatisfaction due to not organizing the local elections. This way the government would defend against the accusations that it gave up Kosovo, which is quite hard mortgage in Serbia that no political party wish to face with, especially in the time of the elections.

The international community has decided to enable Serbia hold the parliamentary and the presidential elections on Kosovo. It was clearly announced to the government of Priština. For the European Union (EU) and for the USA it is quite important that Serbia does not organize local elections because that way the municipality representatives lose their legitimacy on the north of Kosovo. After that, there are going to follow the pressures on Serbs from the north of Kosovo to accept the local elections organized by Priština. No one in Brussels or in the Washington does not cherish the hope that local Serbs would give their votes and trust to someone else but their current leaders at the local elections. Still, it is important for them that these leaders get the support at the local elections organized by Priština because it indirectly means that Serbs on the north of Kosovo accepted the government of Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Tachi.

The answer of the Serbs from the north of Kosovo was expected – they decided to independently organize the elections for the municipalities of Zvečan and Zubin Potok in which the mandates of local representatives have finished. There will not be any problems for Serbs to organize these elections because in these municipalities there are no Kosovo's government, and besides, the international community approves the organizing of the parliamentary and the presidential elections. That is how we are going to have a paradoxal situation on the north of Kosovo that probably the same electoral boards are going to administer „ legal and by all approved elections,, for the Serbian Parliament and the President and „ the illegal“ elections for the local parliament? One next to the other, side by side, are going to be put the „ illegal ,, and the two ,, legal ,, electoral boxes.

Local Serbs on the north of Kosovo have formed the municipal electoral commissions and most of Serbian parties (all Serbian political parties have their own provincial boards, the municipality party boards and the membership at the Kosovo's territory) have applied their electoral lists.

Serbian leaders from the north announced to the international organizations on Kosovo, on the first place to KFOR that their mandate is to „enable peace and the safety for all citizens of the Province which also includes the day of the holding the local elections.“ The president of the municipality Kosovska Mitrovica Krstimir Pantić reckoned that not holding of the local elections would mean „quiet emigration of Serbs, among first those south of the river Ibar“ and then from the north where they are majority, and said that not holding of the elections would lead to the new admittings of Kosovo’s independence. Pantić, the representative of the oppositional Serbian Progressive Party, said that he expects that „the new government of Serbia will admit the results of these elections.“ And also said for the current government that „it did all it could not to organize elections on Kosovo“. „This definitely shows that the leaving government did not want to hold the elections on Kosovo and Metohy as well as that it slowly leaves the province to the Albanians.“, said Pantić. Serbian Minister for Kosovo Goran Bogdanović stated that there will not be local elections held on Kosovo because the UNMIK (the civil government of the United Nations that exists according to the Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council but which is after the self-proclamation of the independence of Kosovo and the coming of the same mission of the European Union named EULEX lost its importance and exists only because Serbs from the north of Kosovo admitt only UNMIK) did not approve their holding but that it does not mean „the end of all Serbian institutions in the Province“. Bogdanović messaged to the local self-governments on the north of Kosovo that it is not good for them to organize local elections on their own, despite the attitude of Belgrade.

It is interesting that the two most powerful parties in Serbia, the governing Democratic Party (DS) of the former president Boris Tadić and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of the oppositional leader Tomislav Nikolić, have got the identical attitude toward the question of the organization of local elections on Kosovo – they consider that the elections should not be held. It is probably the only question that these two parties agree about in this more and more fiery pre-electoral campaign. It is obvious that these two biggest parties have got the greatest responsibility as well as that they are under the pressure of the western countries that Serbia does not organize local elections on Kosovo. Other parties, the governing as well as the oppositional, do not give their opinion on this, for Serbian circumstances, quite sensitive question. Still, the question remains, how strong influence do Serbian parties have on their local boards on Kosovo. That it is so, confirms the case of Zvečan municipality where the electoral lists for the municipal elections were first given by the municipal organisations of the parties governing in Serbia.

The additional tensions are brought by the nervous moves of Belgrade as well as Priština, fearing not to be accused of „the betrayal of the national interests“, by making compromises about the elections on Kosovo. So Priština first arrested a few Serbs from Kosovo that were employed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Serbia, then Belgrade answered by the arresting of a few Albanians accused of war crimes who traveled, using the possibility of recently signed agreements, through Serbia only with their identificational cards because the Serbian authorities do not admit „Kosovo’s passports“.

In the meantime, there was an incident in the northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica, situated by Serbs, when in the settlement „ Three Buildings „ (in which Albanians live) was murdered one Albanian from Kosovo and around forty Albanian families moved out while around the whole Kosovo a lot of armed attacks were recorded on Serbs from Kosovo. KFOR (the International military security forces under the command of NATO) answered by sending the additional troupes on Kosovo. The international forces in the last minute stopped the attempt of Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Tachi and his warlike Minister of Internal Affairs Bajram Redžepi to send on the north of Kosovo the special Kosovo police force ROSU consisted particularly of Kosovo's Albanians, mostly former members of the Kosovo's Releasing Army (OVK) which is „ notorious“ among the Serbs. The last Tachi's trial of that kind in July last year ended with almost general war on the north of Kosovo, with the barriers of Serbs on the north of Kosovo, and the armed conflicts in which one policeman from Kosovo was killed. The last of the incidents happened recently when the Kosovo's police arrested the chief of the Kosovo's district Goran Arsić (districts as the institutions of local self-government are Serbian authority institutions and the chief is named by the Government) because he was „ inviting local Serbs to come and vote to the elections that are going to be held on the 6th of May. „ Arsić is the member of governing Tadić's Democratic Party and only a day before the arresting he said „ to organize the local elections contrary to the wish of Belgrade would be the opposite of the interests of the state and would endanger the safety of Serbs on Kosovo.“ This arrest can not be explained otherwise but as a provocation because Arsić has just called local Serbs to vote on the parliamentary and the presidential elections with which holding , under the pressure of the USA and the EU, Priština agreed while he did not publicly approved the organizing of local elections – just the same as Tachi's government who arrested him?

There is an impression that the problem of holding the local elections on Kosovo can escalate and influence the elections in Serbia as well as the unstable situation on Kosovo. At this moment it is least needed as for the governing Democratic Party of Boris Tadić as well as for the Kosovo's Prime Minister Tachi. Because if it comes to the conflicts on Kosovo and it becomes the central theme at the finish of Serbian electoral campaign, Tadić is going to be accused by the voters of leading to that situation by his policy towards Kosovo.

In spite of the fact that it is not quite correct, Tadić as the President took over the responsibility for leading the Kosovo politics, and now the consequences on the electoral result of the governing democrats could be very difficult.

On the other hand, the international community will not by persistent ignoring of the attitude of Serbs on Kosovo who do not accept the governance of Priština achieve its goal – keeping up the stability on Kosovo as well as on the Balkans. The designers of the politics towards Kosovo, in the Washington as well as Brussels will once have to understand that they can not ignore democratically expressed will of Serbian people on Kosovo, however they do not agree with it. The local representatives that are going to be elected on the north of Kosovo, even at not approved elections, are the democratic expression of the will of the citizens.



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That is why this is the last moment to be understood that the Serbs on Kosovo can not be forced to accept the governance of Priština. Instead, it is necessary to talk to local Serbs about the concession and the autonomy they are asking. As for the start, the international community could take over the organizing of the local elections on the north of Kosovo as they would not formally be under the patronage either Belgrade or Priština. That would enable Serbs on the north of Kosovo to get local authorities whose legitimacy would be accepted by everyone, and after that everyone would have legitimate dialogists for the further discussions on the future of Serbs on Kosovo.