



## WHEN PEOPLE HAVE A SAY

At Merdare crossing, former Head of the **OSCE** verification mission **William Walker** attended the protest of Kosovo Albanians' movement Self-Determination. As he said, he was there to see the police response with respect to claims that last week the police used excessive force. Walker, a former U.S. diplomat, known for the report on the village of **Racak** in 1999 on **Kosovo**, considered the main factor for the bombing of **Yugoslavia**, said to Kosovo's television Koha that he had come to the crossings to make sure of the verity of the information that the Kosovo police resorted to excessive force during the previous protest of the movement Self-Determination. Today it is calm at the crossings Merdare and Bela zemlja, where supporters of Kosovo Albanians Self-Determination movement are gathering, as reporters say. No truck has passed the crossing Merdare from central Serbia, but a few cars with foreign license plates. There are about 200 protesters on the main road Pristina - Nis, seven kilometers from the crossing, and there are forces of the Kosovo police, as well. As reported by news agency Beta, larger groups of police officers are located on every hundred meters of the road.

That northern Kosovo municipalities would consider delaying the referendum scheduled for 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of February at which the Serbs from this part of Kosovo should declare whether they want Kosovo institutions on their territory, was announced by the mayor of Kosovska Mitrovica, Krstimir Pantic, after a meeting with the Minister Goran Bogdanovic, According to him, they do not want to make any decision that would be inconsistent with state and national interests.

***"If it turns out that delaying the referendum will alleviate the position of the Government and President Boris Tadic, we are ready to talk about rescheduling the deadline", said Pantic and reminded that the decision to hold a referendum had been brought by the municipal assemblies and that it was their sole authority to put ineffective or that delay.***

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In a press release issued after the meeting from Bogdanovic's office was said that at this moment referendum was unnecessary, but that political representatives of Serbs from the north should act in coordination with the Government in order to achieve the most acceptable solution.

Representatives of municipalities, as added, noted to Bogdanovic that the forthcoming elections should be held in Kosovo and Metohija as well.

As stated further in the press release, at the meeting was dealt with the stabilization of the situation on the ground and finding ways of controlling the ongoing tensions in the north of the province in order to avoid further complications. The meeting was attended by mayors of Leposavic, Kosovska Mitrovica and Zvecan - Branko Ninic, Krstimir Pantic, Dragisa Milovic, Deputy Mayor of Zubin Potok Srdjan Djurovic and District Chief of Kosovska Mitrovica Radenko Nedeljkovic.



Pantic and Milovic said to daily *Politika* they agreed with the minister that full cooperation with the state leadership or the relevant ministry was necessary in order to find a solution.

“Given the prevailing view in Belgrade that referendum damages national and state interests then we invite ministers, ministries’ officials and state leaders at a joint meeting of representatives of all municipalities and present their views. As mayors we are not legally authorized to put aside the decisions of our assemblies”, said Pantic.

Milovic said that northern Serbs came to the brink of the wall. "Belgrade is pressuring us and the international community with 'prep teams' working on organization of Pristina and Kosovo elections. In conversation with Minister Bogdanovic I couldn't distinguish what was controversial regarding the referendum. If he and representatives of official authorities consider it in collision with the interest of the state, then let them come and present it in front of the people", Milovic is categorical.

Unlike them, Branko Ninic, Mayor of Leposavic, whose board members (from DS) did not attend the session at which the decision to hold a referendum was brought, said, in line with the Government, that at this time referendum was unnecessary. "Although there is a parliamentary decision, it is necessary to be coordinated with representatives of state leaders, who believe that the referendum may be detrimental to national interests," explains Ninic.

Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Ivica Dacic said, according to news agency *Tanjug*, that the gap between the policies of the state leadership and Serbs in northern Kosovo can be fatal for Serbian interests. He said "no one should be convincing no one", but the steps should be agreed upon. Dacic said that "a plan should be developed urgently on how to proceed acting in the interest of Serbia".

***Editor in chief of "New Serbian Political Thought" Djordje Vukadinovic, believes that Serbs are entitled to hold the referendum on which the Serbian authorities can give an opinion. "If they did something more than that, they would only give room to Pristina and the international community to further exert pressure on Belgrade. In some other situations, the argument that Belgrade cannot control the actions and attitudes of Serbs in northern Kosovo will not seem plausible. At best the referendum could be delayed and it would be a kind of compromise", said Vukadinovic.***

In his opinion, the referendum cannot affect Serbia's candidacy, because it doesn't depend so much on meeting the conditions, but more on how much it would suit to Berlin and Brussels to approve it. "We should not be poking a finger in the eye, but also not making concessions larger than they should be", assessed Vukadinovic.

While some Belgrade media are speculating that the Serbs in northern Kosovo are willing to give up or at least postpone and revise the decision on the referendum due to the official Belgrade, on the ground we hear that preparations for the declaration of Kosovo's institutions are ongoing.



There are some Kosovo Serbs who do not show the least willingness to compromise. "Preparations for the referendum in the north of Kosovo are not canceled. The referendum will be postponed only if any of Belgrade officials persuades us that Serbia would be bombed again as in 1999 and that there is a danger that the U.S. throws atomic bomb on our country", said Vice president of the Association of Serbian Municipalities and Settlements in Kosovo and Metohija, Marko Jaksic.

On Monday, a meeting should take place in Zvečan at which the mayors will inform heads of MPs groups of the last meeting with Bogdanovic and state leadership positions. As daily *Danas* reports unofficially, the meeting should be attended by State Secretary for Kosovo and Metohija Oliver Ivanovic. There is still no official confirmation on the possible arrival of the minister in charge.

Krstimir Pantic, president of Kosovska Mitrovica, told *Danas* that Bogdanovic hadn't been promised anything, but informed that mayors "have no legal authority to change or influence the decisions taken by the municipal assemblies and that they are binding for them". Pantic expects that someone from the state leadership "will appear at the meeting to present arguments for the postponement of the referendum".

"If we are convinced that the referendum is not in the national and state interest, we will consider the requests. Two days ago in Belgrade we had a constructive discussion with Bogdanovic, who, not denying our right to declare, reiterated the Government's attitude, but no one explained to us why the referendum is unnecessary at this time. We will continue consultations in order to avoid misunderstandings. It is clear that with no institution, the Serbs in Kosovo cannot survive, and our goal is to work with the state", says Pantic.

Sources of *Danas* argue that there is no way not to hold a referendum, although the signals coming from Belgrade indicate that their tough stance could be understood as an act directed against Serbia's progress in European integration to which authority would allegedly be able to respond by non-recognition of the referendum results.

***While Belgrade and northern Kosovo lead the "battle" for (not)holding a referendum, in Priluzje near Vucitrn was started a petition in which Serbs request from the state authorities to call for parliamentary, provincial and local spring elections in Kosovo.***

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The whole Kosovo situation seems a bit schizophrenic, which that doesn't the least help representatives of official Belgrade in a conditioning situation for EU candidacy, severe economic and social climate in Serbia, only a few months ahead of parliamentary, provincial and local elections. Perhaps after the war in 1999 we are now approaching the hottest Kosovo Serbian spring. Everything smells like it.