

Kosovo Serbs Caught in Crossfire from Three Points

75% reject the institutions of the so-called Republic of Kosovo

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The debates over Serbia's bid for the status of a EU candidate, which are due to open in Brussels in March, will likely provoke a new round of destabilization in the Serbian districts of the province. The February 14-15 referendum in four Serbian communities in northern Kosovo confirmed the obvious: their populations continue to overwhelmingly reject the Albanian ethnic rule. A total of 99.74% of those who attended the poll in which the turnout reached 75% replied "No" to the question whether they accepted the institutions of the so-called Republic of Kosovo headquartered in Pristina.

The official Belgrade was clearly allergic to the initiative spinning off in northern Kosovo as president B. Tadic charged that the referendum organized by the leaders of the Serbian municipalities of Kosovo was harming both Serbia and the Serbian communities in the province. No doubt, Belgrade's already permanent pressure on the Kosovo Serbs will peak if the EU Council which is so far divided over Serbia's aspirations manages to hammer out a compromise and Belgrade is allowed to buy the official EU candidate status at the cost of new concessions on Kosovo.

According to Kosovo Serbian leader Marko Jaksic, the unprecedented turnout at the northern Kosovo referendum meant that the Serbs defied Belgrade's call to refrain from getting involved. "The people felt that not showing up would have been a form of betrayal", explained Jaksic who also stressed that for Tadic the vote came as a political slap in the face for acknowledging an ever-widening array of Kosovo statehood attributes like passports, driver licenses, college transcripts, etc. and that the Kosovo Serbs who cast the ballots made it clear how they felt about Tadic's increasingly connecting to Pristina. Kosovska Mitrovica mayor Krstimir Pantic expressed the same view when he said that, given the outcome of the referendum, those at the helm in Belgrade along with the Kosovo Albanians and the international community have to realize with utmost clarity the extent of the determination across the Serbian community of northern Kosovo not to bow to Pristina. "We are defending Serbia in Kosovo", said Pantic.

The geopolitical implications of the referendum in northern Kosovo may prove far-reaching. One gets a distinct impression that the Kosovo Serbs are in the process of switching to a completely independent role in the Balkan politics, challenging Pristina, Brussels or, if necessary, Belgrade.

The recent referendum was not the first Serbian attempt to place their resistance to Albanian separatism into a legislative framework. In May, 2008, three months since the unilateral proclamation of Kosovo independence, north Kosovo Serbs voted in favor of

establishing the Assembly of the Community of Municipalities of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija based on the constitution of Serbia. Until some time ago, the Assembly had been politically supported by Belgrade.

The parameters of the situation began to drift in the fall of 2011 when the Kosovo Serbs resorted to force to prevent the agreements, which Belgrade and Pristina sealed without taking their position into account, from being put into practice, while the European Commission dished out the first ever more or less positive assessment of Serbia's application for the EU membership. When the December EU summit shifted its further review to March, 2012, Belgrade was left to face the dilemma of choosing between some sort of an urgent accord with Pristina or a collapse of its plan to sneak into the EU. Moreover, Germany, which, as a relatively healthy economy, emerged as an informal leader of the crisis-ridden Europe, demanded that Serbia not only drop its objections to Kosovo's participation in international forums under its own flag but also assist the Albanian administration of the province in erasing all forms of Serbian self-government in the northern part of Kosovo.

Judging by the scarce information displayed, at the moment Belgrade remains undecided over the de fact ultimatum issued by Brussels and Berlin, and there are indications that cracks appeared in Serbia's ruling coalition over handling the problem. In the run-up to the referendum KFOR commander Gen. Erhard Drews bluntly warned in an interview to Focus that Albanian nationalists would possibly be led to target the Serbian minorities in isolated enclaves outside of northern Kosovo in response but, seriously speaking, no radicals in the province would dare to commit outrageous acts unless blessed by the EU and NATO. The latter may be the reason why Kosovo Albanian top commentator Adrian Collaku slammed the Pristina administration as "impotent", saying that "this referendum reconfirms for the umpteenth time that Kosovo cannot establish control over all its territory". The paradox, therefore, is that the biggest threat to the Serbian statehood in Kosovo currently emanates from Belgrade and the Kosovo Serbs locked in the Belgrade-Pristina-Brussels geopolitical triangle can only rely on themselves.

A somewhat predictable twist in Serbian politics was observed just days ago when, in a clear attempt to blackmail the EU, the first deputy premier and internal affairs minister of Serbia Ivica Dacic took to citing Russia in the context of the republic's Eurointegration hopes. The point made by the Serbian official was that Europe would make a huge mistake if it turns down the Serbian bid for a candidate status next March since under the scenario "it would be normal to expect that a political faction directed more toward Russia would come into power". The statement unequivocally signals a sense of crisis within the ruling coalition. It should be borne in mind considering Tadic's standing that in 2008 the West lent him a hand to derail the formation of a patriotic coalition in Serbia, but these days much more pressing problems can push Serbian affairs to a fairly low line on the EU and NATO agendas. Symptomatically, a fresh statement released by Lithuanian foreign ministry spokeswoman Margarita Butkiene contained a biting remark that Belgrade failed to comply in full with any of the preconditions set forth by the December EU summit, though up to date Lithuania, in contrast to Germany, Austria, or Finland, was not seen in the camp opposing the admission of Serbia to the EU.

Overall, Belgrade with its current geopolitical course increasingly steers Serbia into dire straits, and chances are that in the next elections Serbian voters would deliver to the polling booths immensely soberer views on how to shape the future of their own statehood.

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