



Weekly Briefing

Serbia political briefing:
SUMMARY OF THE INTERNAL POLITICAL SITUATION
IN REPUBLIC OF SERBIA IN 2018
IIPE

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

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Abstract

Through 2018 year main topic in political development was situation with Serbian southern province Kosovo and Metohija. End of 2017 and beginning of 2018 brought several challenges to situations in Kosovo that by the end of 2018 led to escalation of political conflict in relations between Belgrade and Priština.

At the beginning of year 2018, after the elections, political development in Kosovo resulted with peculiar situation. Government in Priština for the first time became dependent on the support from local Serbian parties that made astonishing decision in supporting Ramush Haradinaj as the prime minister although considered in Serbia as a war criminal. The second factor was increased pressure by the Western states on Serbia to “normalize” its relations with Kosovo, which besides usual “stick” for the first time contained a “carrot” – an explicit promise of Serbia’s membership in the European Union until 2025 if it meets some political conditions, among them signing a legally binding agreement with Priština in which it would pledge not to block Kosovo’s membership in international organizations, including the UN. Finally, the third factor was the “internal dialogue” on Kosovo, which President Aleksandar Vučić launched last summer. This third factor in summer of 2018 definitely collapsed, and Serbian Government didn’t get final opinion on definite solution for Kosovo and Metohija. A brutal murder of Serbian Kosovo politician Oliver Ivanović on January 16 (most likely perpetrated by criminal gangs in North Kosovo, but with political motive) also remained unsolved.

While leaders of Kosovo and Serbia anticipate the grand finale, few believe that Serbian and Kosovo leaders can reach an agreement that will resolve bilateral disputes, and establish good neighbourly relations. In the best scenario, governments may agree, but implementation would take years and may fail to resolve disputes. Recent history of negotiations shows that Belgrade and Pristina are capable to reach agreements on paper but fail to implement them.

Consultations carried out by the President Vučić in the United States during the last decade of March didn’t give rise to optimism, as well as difficult negotiations with the Kosovo. Although unofficial, European Union’s officials pressure is still and it doesn’t make easier the position of Serbia.

In addition to described difficulties in achieving a satisfactory solution between Serbia and Kosovo, there has been an incident in Kosovska Mitrovica on March 26, 2018. Namely,

during the visit of Marko Đurić, Director of the Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija, to Kosovska Mitrovica, he was kidnapped by Special police force called “ROSU” which Brussels Agreement doesn’t recognize as a force that has jurisdiction over North of Kosovo and Metohia.

During April, President Vučić conducted a series of consultations with foreign leaders in order to achieve a better solution regarding the Kosovo issue. According to his statements, their support either is missing or has remained formal in nature. This is not unexpected because it’s in line with the efforts of the United States and the European Union to finally resolve the Kosovo issue and suppress the influence of Russia on the Western Balkans. President Vučić has repeatedly pointed out that he does not expect a good solution, so it can be assumed that his efforts are aimed at reducing the harmful effects of a future final solution.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that the agreement would be the object of declaring the people, although he did not specify what type of voting would be. Since the negotiations of two sides remain without a visible solution, and the events in the field further diminish its achievement, it is not likely that it will be adopted for now.

The last months of 2018 have brought an intensification of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Pristina imposed customs duties on products from Serbia. New taxes are 100% of price. The introduction of a taxi caused the shortage of medicaments, food, baby nappies... Also all printed media on Serbian language are forbidden to enter on territory of Kosovo and Metohija. Humanitarian aid can’t come to endangered people.

This was reason why President Aleksandar Vucic decided to stop negotiations with Pristina. Pristina decide not to pull up decision of Taxes until Serbia admit Kosovo independence. Serbian Government said that Serbia will never admit that independence.

Pristina announced creation of Kosovo Army. This act would be illegal, according to International Law (UN Resolution 1244), Brussels agreement, and at the end, with Pristina’s Constitution. Many political representatives from the international community said that Pristina has no right to create Army.

Second significant issue in internal political situations was local elections for Belgrade City Assembly and political game for position of Mayor of City Belgrade. In consolidated democracies, local elections, even if held in the capital and by far the biggest city in the country, hardly can be a national issue of the first degree.

By some opinions, this campaign for local elections started before the official announcement. It was mostly based on pseudo-events and coverage about confrontations between parties, with a lack of analytical approach, creativity, vulnerable groups’ visibility and

tolerance. Monitoring of local media outlets showed the interface of media ownership and the manner of reporting on election campaign. The elections for the City Assembly of Belgrade, brought the following results: The Serbian Progressive Party won 44,99%, the opposition group of Dragan Đilas 18,93%, an independent candidate Šapić 9,01%, and the Socialist Party of Serbia and United Serbia 6,13%. In the elections participated 51.3% of total number of registered voters. This election result will further strengthen the position of the Serbian Progressive Party on the one hand, but will ensure good cooperation between the state and the City of Belgrade on the other. Some political analysts deem that during the pre-election campaign, dominance of the ruling party in the media was visible. By their opinion, this is not a coincidence but a logical result of the almost complete takeover of media influence by the Serbian Progressive Party. Serbian Progressive Party constituted local government in City of Belgrade, and Prof. Zoran Radojicic become a first man of Belgrade. Prof. Radojicic was the director of the University Children's Clinic called "Tirsova" and throw his mandate he shown his manager skills.

March bring on political scene a public debate on amending the Constitution in the field of justice and new measures in the field of population policy. Looking at some of the solutions proposed by the Ministry of Justice as the basis for a public debate, it is not difficult to conclude that they lead to a stronger influence of the Parliament, that is, the ruling majority in the Parliament, in relation to the current solutions. In particular, the main remarks by judges, prosecutors and lawyers suggested that the proposed constitutional amendments will lead to a dominant policy influence on the appointment of judges and prosecutors through a new way of selecting members of the High Judicial Council and the (new) High Council of the Prosecution. Since the independence of the judiciary would be even worse, the consent of the legal profession is not expected. Is the harmonization of domestic legislation with *acquis communautaire* a way to strengthen political influence in the judiciary, or should it strengthen the independence of the judiciary? Many ask this question. Public debate on amending the Constitution in the field of justice takes place in the shadow of major political events in the country, and there is no doubt that the ruling majority in Parliament can adopt all legal solutions that suit her. The results of the previous legislative activities in the Parliament, and especially the implementation of laws and regulations, do not have their counterpart in the assessments on the rule of law in Serbia. Without exception and for many years, all reviews and reports by international organizations, the European Union, as well as domestic legal associations and experts contain a request for strengthening the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law.

On June 22, 2018, the Venice Commission unanimously adopted an opinion on the Draft Amendments to the Serbian Constitution in the field of Justice. In this opinion, the Venice Commission made six remarks on the solutions that should be corrected. The Commission recommended a correction of the amendments relating to the following: 1. the selection of non-judicial members of the High Judicial Council; 2. the composition of the State Prosecutorial Council; 3. the method of dissolution the High Judicial Council; 4. dismissal of judges and prosecutors due to incompetence; 5. unification of case law; 6. selection of prosecutors.

The Ministry of Justice published the fourth and final version of the Draft Amendments on its website on November 15, 2018. According to the Ministry of Justice's statement, this version is aligned with the comments of the Venice Commission and the expert public. To do that, the activities of the Ministry of Justice on the revision of the Constitution began in May 2017. Since then several Draft Amendments versions have been made and several rounds of public consultations and debates have been held.

President Vučić announced a series of measures aimed at boosting population growth. The main tools of this policy are financial support to mothers, especially those with more children. Previously, there were similar attempts, some of which were not implemented. Public responses to these announced measures are different, both from individuals and from social groups. In a situation of low standard of living any help is welcome, but the question remains whether this is sufficient to achieve the desired goal. The experiences of other countries, especially neighboring ones, which face a decline in the population, suggest different conclusions. It can also be a useful Russia's experience in the last decade that has succeeded in reversing the negative trend towards a positive population growth. The reaction of many women and their groups to the presidential initiative is negative.

Tiny issue of ownership of the Airport Constantine the Great in Niš was the cause of the conflict between the citizens of Niš on the one side and the Serbian Government and representatives of the Serbian Progressive Party on the other. This issue occupied political opinions in April. Experts from various profiles as well as representatives of the opposition parties were included in this discussion. As it can be assumed, the arguments on both sides are contradictory, and none seriously documented. The Government claims that the Airport in Niš has been successfully developed thanks to state investment and taking over passengers from Belgrade Airport Nikola Tesla. The fact is that the number of passengers at the Airport in Niš increased from 1,335 in 2014 to 331,582 in 2017. Such a drastic increase in the number of passengers has been achieved by giving favorable conditions to low cost airlines, but also by developing cargo services.

CONCLUSION

There are no serious changes in the political scene of Serbia. The Government and President Vučić will in the near future have to take responsibility for making difficult decisions. There are also a number of current issues that have been addressed.

The ruling Serbian Progressive Party consolidates its position in all areas where it is possible, while in relations with Pristina and abroad, the Government's activities align with possible solutions. The question is, would something more significant be different that some of the opposition parties are in power? However, many strategic issues of country and society development remain unresolved, or are resolved with half-success.

Situation in relations between Serbia and Pristina got in to dead end. Pristina will not pull up decision about 100% Taxes of Serbian goods, and Serbia will not continue negotiations. Serbian people on the North Kosovo are in hard position. They don't have medicines and food. Albanians from Kosovo start smuggling a lot of goods, but Serbian people can't buy those products. At the end of 2018 Pristina announced creation of Kosovo Army, contrary to International Law, Brussels Agreement, and own Constitution.

Political situations in Serbia in 2018 is not much different than few years before, but brought some new moments in relations with Pristina, some changes in legal system, and new Belgrade City government.