** United Nations Office in Belgrade**

**Daily Media Highlights**

**Tuesday, 25 February 2014**

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**LOCAL PRESS**

**Vulin: Fast formation of Union of Serb Municipalities in Serbs’ interest (*RTS*)**

Outgoing Serbian Minister in charge of Kosovo and Metohija Aleksandar **Vulin** has stated in Strpce, southern Kosovo and Metohija, that the announced elections for the Kosovo Assembly might slow down the forming of the Union of Serb Municipalities. We will be persistent and work hard to form the Union as soon as possible, and we will be insisting with the EU that political issues do not affect it, because the position of the Serbs in Kosovo is not a matter of individual political parties, but a civil issue, Vulin stressed. Also, he said that the diminishing of the number of reserved seats for the Serbs in the Kosovo Assembly would send a bad message to the Serbs in the province.

**Rakic requests Ivanovic’s release (*Beta*)**

In a letter to the EU special representative in Kosovo, heads of UNMIK, OSCE, EULEX and KFOR, the Mayor of northern Kosovska Mitrovica Goran **Rakic** recalled that today is the 29th day since the leader of the SDP Civic Initiative Oliver **Ivanovic** has been detained without cause. “Considering the fact that his detention expires on 26 February, as the Mayor of Kosovska Mitrovica – north, and on behalf of the residents of Kosovska Mitrovica – north and I personally request competent bodies to release Oliver Ivanovic pending trial,” wrote Rakic. He said that accepting his request was of great importance since it will have positive impact on political stability in northern Kosovo and ease tensions among citizens, caused by the unfounded arrest.

**Next – Union of Serb Municipalities (*Radio Serbia*, by Andjelka Marisavljevic)**

Northern Kosovska Mitrovica has got its mayor in fourth attempt, and it is Goran **Rakic**, the candidate from the Serbian (Srpska) Civic Initiative list. It means the completion of another phase that leads to the main goal – establishing the Union of Serb Municipalities. At first glance, it seems the hardest part is now behind, but so far nobody is yet able to say what the Union could really stand for.

It is clear that the forming of the Union of Serb Municipalities is the process that should lead to the new way of organization, and which, as often stressed by outgoing Prime Minister Ivica **Dacic**, will be recognized by everyone. It is not as clear, however, why the position of the Union has not still been defined in relation to Pristina and Belgrade. It was announced that the competencies of that body would cover the domains already envisaged in the Brussels agreement, but its position in the Constitutional order is still vague. And there are at least two reasons for that. First, Belgrade and Pristina were in a hurry to accomplish any kind of result in the negotiations, as the European integration of both sides was depending on it. It requires stepping into the unknown, solving problems on the strategic level, so many disagreements were left to be tackled later. Second, once the negotiations had commenced, the chief negotiators also wanted to score some personal political points. In itself, that does not have to be bad, as tensions have been relieved, but it also left room for the process to be blocked at some point, i.e. that the results be interpreted differently.

The process in Brussels will resume after the elections in Serbia proper and Kosovo, maybe with new negotiators, and they will have the task to resolve such differences. On one hand, Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim **Thaqi** claims that the future Union of Serb Municipalities will have limited jurisdiction, without any essential breach into the statehood of Kosovo. The Serbs, on the other hand, hope they will have the competencies of an entity and be firmly tied to the state of Serbia. That should be solved through several constitutional and legal changes, so that the Union could be a legal creation at all. Therefore, its formation will be neither quick nor simple as expected.

A delegate in the Serbian parliament and hitherto president of the parliamentary Committee for Kosovo and Metohija Milovan **Drecun** has explained the sequence of moves for Radio Serbia. He says that first the statute of the Union needs to be finished; then the Assembly will be called; the statute adopted; the Union is declared; and finally its bodies are formed. Also, a constitutional law ought to be passed in Belgrade, in order to enable the Union’s connection with Serbia, Drecun specifies. However, he says openly that the Union would have to be “firmly positioned within the constitutional order of Pristina.”

In Belgrade, there are increasingly frequent mentions of constitutional changes after the elections, but those are delicate issues that require a high degree of political consensus. Professor Predrag **Simic** from the Belgrade Faculty of Political Science warns that Pristina will have no scruples in attempts to diminish the jurisdiction of the Union. He sees the arrest of distinguished Serb politician Oliver **Ivanovic** and assassination of a delegate in the municipal assembly of Kosovska Mitrovica Dimitrije **Janicijevic** in that context. Simic believes that the final word will belong to EU representatives, as they have the mechanisms to impose the solution.

At the moment, nobody wishes to forecast the pace that the process of forming the Union of Serb Municipalities will take. In case of a speedy declaration, the problem of actual functioning remains. The act of declaration itself will have no effect, save the encouragement among the Serb population, which is under pressure. That is why patience is necessary, and the unrealistic expectations should not be boosted. After all, it is perfectly clear that there can be no peace or successful continuation of the Brussels process without a stable solution for the Serb community in the province.

**Kosovo Assembly to be dissolved in March? (*Novosti*)**

The Kosovo Assembly will most probably be dissolved in March as it is impossible to collect enough votes for the adoption of EU decisions that Pristina finds very unpopular, such as the formation of a court to try members of the former KLA for war crimes, the mandate of EULEX and the status of the Union of Serb Municipalities, the Pristina press writes, adding that Kosovo authorities will try to buy time by dissolving the assembly and leaving to the next one to deal with those laws. The law stipulates that new elections be held 45 days after the assembly is dissolved.

**Borhart: No list with names of 5,000 Kosovo Serbs to be arrested (*Politika*)**

EULEX Head Bernd **Borhart** denied the allegations of some Pristina media about a list with the names of 5,000 Kosovo Serbs to be arrested and said that the guarantees the Serbian government has given for four Serbs currently detained in Kosovo would be decided upon when the detainment is discussed next time. Commenting on some statements that **Ivanovic**’s arrest represents an attempt at creating a balance with the arrested Kosovo Albanians, Borhart said EULEX had no statistics about the ethnicity of persons who have been convicted or acquitted.

**Kurz: Whoever wins, continues to talk with Pristina (*Danas*)**

“I wished to visit Serbia and all other countries of the Western Balkans as soon as possible after I took office as foreign minister in December and thus show clearly what my priorities are. Austria is sure that the EU integration project is incomplete without the countries of the Western Balkans, and hence loyally supports the region’s EU perspective. With my visit, I wanted to reaffirm this message,” ***Danas*** was told by Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian **Kurz,** whowill visit Belgrade, then proceed to Pristina on Thursday, the first time since taking office.  
**In your opinion, what will be the main tasks of the new Serbian government this year?**

“It will be up to a new Serbian government to set its priorities, but when it comes to the EU path, it is clear that reforms must continue with renewed energy and the dialogue with Pristina must continue and its results must be implemented.”

**What do you expect in the next phase of the Brussels dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina?**

“Despite the election campaign in Serbia, both prime ministers continue to meet in Brussels. That is a positive sign, and their decisions must be applied appropriately. I am certain this will continue after the elections, regardless of whether a new Serbian government will comprise the same or some new actors.”

**REGIONAL PRESS**

**Radmanovic: Decision to recall Pecanac destructive of vital interests (*RTRS*)**

The Republika Srpska (RS) parliament confirmed the statement of the RS member of the B&H Presidency Nebojsa **Radmanovic** that the decision to recall the B&H Consul-General in the U.S. Brane **Pecanac** is destructive of the vital interests of the RS. Seventy-three MPs voted for confirming Radmanovic’s statement, and no one was against or restrained. The decision of the B&H Presidency to recall Pecanac will not go into force. This decision was adopted at the 63rd extraordinary session of the B&H Presidency. Radmanovic was outvoted when the Presidency brought this decision. Radmanovic said that Pecanac was in his second mandate. “I am ready to come to the RS parliament once a month to speak about foreign policy and to present the biographies of our people working in the B&H Foreign Ministry,” Radmanovic told MPs. He stressed that there are quality B&H ambassadors from among the Serbs who are not members of the SNSD. “I was discussing with SDS leader Mladen **Bosic** the appointment of a number of ambassadors. The RS is not without key representations in the B&H diplomatic-consular network,” Radmanovic said. He reiterated that the B&H Constitution needs to be respected. After the vote, parliamentary speaker Igor **Radojicic** concluded the special session.

**INTERNATIONAL PRESS**

**Exclusive interview with Serbia Prime Minister Ivica Dacic: ‘We haven’t had stability in the Balkans for 100 years – but now we have the same goal, joining the EU’ (*The Independent*, by Andrew MacDowall, 25 February 2014)**

*In an exclusive interview, the Prime Minister of Serbia – and former Milosevic aide – Ivica Dacic tells Andrew MacDowall how his country is embracing the European dream*

The Balkans have the chance of peace and stability for the first time in more than 100 years, and Serbia, a pariah a decade ago, can be at the heart of this transformation, the country’s Prime Minister, Ivica Dacic, told The Independent yesterday.

The former spokesman for strongman Slobodan Milosevic rose to prominence in the early 1990s as Serbia became embroiled in wars in Croatia and Bosnia, in which the country was widely seen – correctly or otherwise – as the main protagonist behind conflict and ethnic cleansing. Mr Dacic heads the Socialist Party once run by Milosevic.

But today Mr Dacic is leader of a resurgent country which began EU membership talks last month, and hopes to join the bloc in 2020.

As he braces for elections in March and a battle to hold on to his premiership, Mr Dacic is keen to project a message of peace for his battle-scarred region – just before the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, which was triggered by a shot fired by an ethnic Serb in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

“Unfortunately, looking back 100 years, and even further, I don’t think we ever had stability established [in the Balkans],” Mr Dacic said as a burly aide lit one of his cigars in the somewhat shabby surrounds of Serbia’s Belgravia embassy.

“For this reason, I think it’s good that the countries in the region have the same goal – membership of the EU.”

He said Serbia had transformed its image abroad and could be “a factor for stability and peace within the region”.

Only two of the seven successor states to the former Yugoslavia have joined the EU: tiny Slovenia, which was almost untouched by war, and Croatia, which became a full member last July. Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania are even further from the EU than Serbia, which faces years of difficult and unpopular judicial, economic and political reform.

Progress will also have to be made on Serbia’s troubled relationship with Kosovo, which Belgrade regards as a renegade breakaway state.

Last April, Mr Dacic signed an EU-brokered deal with Kosovo, effectively ceding control of the region to the Kosovan authorities in Pristina, but stopping well short of recognition, which is also blocked at UN level by Russia.

“Opening EU accession talks is a historic moment for Serbia, because in this way our path for next 15 to 20 years has been determined. It is our agenda to be ready and to become a full-fledged member of the EU by 2020.”

EU membership is generally thought to be unlikely without further compromise on Kosovo, probably de facto recognition of independence. Mr Dacic – who was born in Kosovo – refuses to rule out full recognition, but says that “we doubt any change in our standpoint”. He argues that the talks in Brussels are not directly related to Kosovo’s status.

Ethnic Serbs in north Kosovo continue to shun Pristina’s institutions and regard their region as part of Serbia.

“A final and long-lasting solution to the Kosovo issue, cannot be achieved without an agreement with Serbia, especially in regard to the UN,” says Mr Dacic. “For this reason it is very important for the dialogue to continue. Up until now we have not had any requirements of recognition of Kosovo in return for our membership.”

Belgrade also has troubled relations with Croatia. Each country as filed claims of genocide against the other at the International Court of Justice. Some EU members continue to regard Serbia with suspicion but, broadly, its international relations are improving. It is strengthening ties with Russia and China as well as Brussels and Washington.

Investment such as a €1bn Fiat plant in central Serbia point to the economic potential for a country with low costs close to the heart of Europe. Mr Dacic points out that the average monthly salary is just over €400 (£330).

Whether Mr Dacic will continue to preside over the country’s resurgence remains to be seen. He will need all his famous tenacity and political nous if he is to remain in office. He faces a strong challenge from his Deputy, Aleksandar Vucic, whose party looks set to sweep the polls.

Mr Dacic is not universally popular in Serbia. Both he and his party failed to win more than 15 per cent of the vote in 2012 elections. But he became Prime Minister in the new government, largely staffed by a conservative party headed by former ultra-nationalists, and held on to his post as Interior Minister, a position which wields considerable power.

Critics say the government – and Mr Dacic’s Interior Ministry – remain instinctively authoritarian.

Media freedom is a bone of contention, with Freedom House remarking in a 2012 report that, while legislative reforms have been made, on the ground, “the media environment remains constrained by political pressures, pervasive corruption, a climate of impunity, regulatory setbacks, and economic difficulties”. Few feel the situation has improved.

Has Milosevic’s poacher really turned liberal-democratic gamekeeper? At this question, the previously languid Mr Dacic becomes more animated and intense, leaning forward and making sustained eye contact for the first time.

“The time of Milosevic has long passed. The policy of the party of today is based on totally different grounds. We have a pro-European programme. The fact we were the leaders of this change and those who introduced and helped Serbia enter the EU, speaks of this change.”

**Serbia, Croatia Fail to Drop Genocide Lawsuits (*BIRN*, by Marija Ristic, 24 February 2014)**

*Serbian and Croatian officials insisted they wanted to leave the past behind but could not drop their lawsuits against each other, which begin next week at the International Court of Justice*

Serbian deputy prime minister Aleksandar Vucic and his Croatian counterpart Vesna Pusic met in Belgrade on Monday and agreed to work together in the future despite the mutual genocide lawsuits that will have their first hearing on March 3 at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

“There were wishes and efforts from both sides to resolve the issues outside of court, but unfortunately that didn’t work out,” Pusic said after the meeting.

“We still have the issue of missing persons on the table,” she explained, referring to Zagreb’s demand for information about 1,689 people missing since the war in Croatia as a precondition for dropping its genocide suit against Belgrade.

Vucic said however that Serbia had no more information to give and so could not avert legal action.

“Croatia thought that the conditions were not met, Serbia thought it did its best. We are not running from the fact that we need to find all those who committed war crimes,” he said.

Croatia filed genocide charges against Serbia at the International Court of Justice in 1999, also demanding that Belgrade punish all perpetrators of war crimes during the 1990s conflict, return looted cultural property and pay for wartime damages.

In response, Serbia submitted a counter-claim in 2010, maintaining that Croatia was guilty of genocide against Serbs during and after the war.

The two countries will start defending their cases next Monday. Croatia is to present evidence and hear witness testimony first, followed by Serbia. The sessions are expected to last a month, while the verdict is expected by the end of the year.

Both deputy prime ministers said on Monday however that the genocide lawsuits were an issue from the past and should not burden the neighbours’ future relationship.

As a gesture of goodwill, Belgrade officials gave their Zagreb counterparts aerial footage of Croatia from 1991 which was confiscated by the Yugoslav People’s Army at the beginning of the conflict. Pusic said that it would help to resolve some 8,000 applications to register properties that have been built since the war.

Pusic also said that other issues dating from the collapse of Yugoslavia that remain unresolved between Zagreb and Belgrade, such as refugees’ property rights and the demarcation of the border, would be death with bilaterally and would not create an obstacle in Serbia’s EU membership talks.

**Bosnia unrest is ‘local fire’ that can be put out: PM (*Reuters*, by Marc Jones, 24 February 2014)**

LONDON - The recent unrest in Bosnia is a local "fire" than can be quickly put out by moves to raise living standards, Prime Minister Vjekoslav Bevanda said on Monday.

Speaking at an EBRD conference, Bevanda played down the impact of this month's protests in parts of the Balkan country that have seen government buildings set ablaze in what has been the worst violence since the 1992-95 war.

"I believe this is a local fire and we will be able to extinguish it very quickly," Bevanda said, adding that measures should be taken to improve Bosnians' quality of life.

Observers, including Paddy Ashdown the former top international official in post-war Bosnia, have called for outside intervention to ensure the situation does not deteriorate into a more dangerous crisis.

Protests have subsided in recent days, but the grievances at their heart - unemployment, corruption and political paralysis - have their roots in the deal that ended the war, divvying up power to stop the fighting between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks.

It has created a highly-decentralized and dysfunctional system of power-sharing woefully unfit to steer Bosnia through economic transition or the process of integration with the European Union, to many their best hope of prosperity.

"People have the right to express their unhappiness with the social situation," Bevanda told Reuters. "However, the situation has simmered down and there's less than 100 people protesting in Sarajevo.

"The situation is going to calm down, there will be negotiations and discussions that will solve the problems."

With governance frequently hostage to ethnic politics, the economy has struggled to keep up with its ex-Yugoslav peers. More than one in four of the Bosnian workforce is unemployed.

Failure to reform the constitution has frozen Bosnia's bid for accession to the European Union, which neighboring Croatia joined last year.

Six other prime ministers from the Western Balkans were at the EBRD event as the region bids to bolster investment prospects. Some referred to the need for stability in the region, and Bevanda said they were all behind his country's efforts to stem the recent unrest in Bosnia.

"We've been in contact the whole time during the protests, and they have given me their full support," he said. "They've had similar situations organized in Croatia and Montenegro."

Bevanda, a Bosnian Croat, heads a largely administrative central authority which coordinates the work of more powerful regional governments. They in turn are split between a mainly Bosniak and Croat region and a Serb Republic.

The former warring sides have little common vision of Bosnia's future. While Bosniak leaders want greater centralization, Croat hardliners are pressing for their own entity, while Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik says he sees no future for Bosnia at all.

**Petition Boosts Macedonian President's Chances (*BIRN*, by Sinisa Jakov Marusic, 25 February 2014)**

With less than two months to go before the presidential elections, a group of prominent public figures has backed the re-election of current President Gjorge Ivanov.

A group of more than 50 prominent politicians, clerics, doctors, athletes and artists has urged the centre-right VMRO DPMNE to again endorse the candidacy of Gjorge Ivanov in the April elections.

The petition increases the likelihood that the incumbent President will run for a second five-year term.

The party previously said it would choose its presidential runner at a convention on March 1, adding that anyone who sympathizes with its cause could apply.

Ivanov has not yet answered the party's call for applicants to declare themselves, nor has he said whether he will enter the race. He has until Wednesday to submit his candidacy to the ruling party.

“We have received the petition and we can confirm that prominent party members have joined it,” VMRO DPMNE said on Monday, “but we have not yet received a personal application from Gjorge Ivanov [for the party's endorsement as presidential candidate].”

On Monday, the ruling party confirmed that many of its senior figures had joined the initiative to back Ivanov.

Among them is Vice Prime Minister Zoran Stavreski, who was previously mentioned as a possible presidential candidate, the Mayor of Skopje, Koce Trajanovski, and other officials.

In the absence of any official word from the incumbent President, Vladimir Misev, from the Institute for Democracy, a think tank, sees the petition as part of his re-election campaign.

“I am guessing that this is part of his campaign to announce his candidacy, to show that prominent intellectuals, sportsmen and other professionals are behind him,” Misev said.

Ivanov won his first presidential term in 2009 after being endorsed by VMRO DPMNE. A university professor, he was seen as a freshman in politics who has since stayed close to the policy of the party.

So far, only university professor and longtime VMRO DPMNE member Jove Kekenovski has announced that he intends to answer the party’s call for presidential candidates.

However, Kekenovski is considered an outsider compared to Ivanov, largely because of his often critical views of the current party leadership.

The increased likelihood that Ivanov will run for the presidency for the ruling party has boosted speculation that parallel early general elections will also be held in April.

Ivanov is not a favourite among members of the junior party in the ruling coalition, the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, who have asked for another joint presidential candidate to be agreed between them and VMRO DPMNE.

The DUI on several occasions described Ivanov as unfit to satisfy the interests of the Albanian minority, which makes up a quarter of the population.

If there is no agreement for a joint candidate, the DUI has threatened to boycott the presidential elections altogether, which could cause a rift in government and increase pressure for early general elections to be held in tandem with the presidential vote.

Various recent polls suggest that the ruling party of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski will do well if early elections take place. Polls also show that the presidential candidate backed by VMRO DPMNE will have the best chance to win.

The main opposition Social Democrats are being equally secretive about their presidential candidate. Unofficially, they say they are waiting for the ruling party to declare its hand.

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