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*Ad hoc policy brief designed by Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) on the situation in northern Kosovo in the wake of the forthcoming European Council meeting; 30.11.2011.*

Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) welcomes the statement of the President of Serbia Boris Tadic in that he invited protesters in the north of Kosovo to have the barricades removed and engage themselves in a peaceful resolution of their problems. The statement, albeit delayed, was indeed necessary, yet insufficient. Bearing in mind the charged situation in northern Kosovo and in the wake of the challenging forthcoming European Council decision on Serbia's EU candidacy bid, CEAS invites the Western international community to consider our invitation to Serbian authorities to relieve citizens of northern Kosovo from the mandatory presence at the barricades disguised as a compulsory service, as a confirmation of the sincerity of Boris Tadic's invitation. Assuming that a majority of other conditions laid out by EU institutions and member states related to Kosovo and EULEX have been met by Serbian authorities, this gesture, that could be swiftly put into effect, could perhaps help EU to rule in favor of the confirmation of the Serbian candidate status.

CEAS has already, on 29 November 2011, formally invited public authorities of the Republic of Serbia to immediately engage all available (formal and informal) instruments to abolish compulsory service imposed on public servants - as well as on employees of the government-subcontracted private companies - in the north of Kosovo, whereby they are obliged to attend protests at the road blocks. The state of Serbia does not and should not cease funding all institutions in the north of Kosovo, in the health, social care and education sectors. Those cannot, at least not as yet, be considered "parallel" institutions. But the fact that the state provides salaries in those or other institutions in the north does not authorize / legalize bringing them into conflict with KFOR as the most powerful military alliance in the world, under the appearance of a "compulsory service".

If the state is up to provoking an armed conflict with the KFOR, then it should rather use professional soldiers who are paid and trained for that.

CEAS appeals to politicians in Serbia (primarily to the Minister of Interior Ivica Dacic) to immediately stop labeling the tensions with KFOR as a conflict with Kosovar PM Hashim Thaci, as a part of their increasingly irresponsible pre-election rhetoric. Current situation i.e. a prolonged emergency in Kosovo reduces the possibility of its further decriminalization and democratization. CEAS praises responsible and courageous political leadership exercised by those gathered around the newly established political movement Preokret (Reversal) which demands a radical change of the current government policies on Kosovo.

Only when Serbia abolishes the compulsory service that heats up the conflict with the KFOR, and when it ceases with the informal pressure on the citizens of northern Kosovo, imposed by members of the Serbian security services, it will be possible to clearly articulate problems that Serbs are facing and to rationally consider possible mechanisms for their solution. The abolition of the compulsory service will help efforts to clearly distinguish genuine fears and dissatisfactions of the Serbs from the north and distinguish them from the dangerous manipulation which comes no less from Serbia but, all the more obvious, from Russia as well. The presence at the barricades of the extreme nationalist, violent "patriotic" groups, coming from central Serbia or from the Republic of Srpska is a matter of our special concern. It is a common knowledge that they have been used as frontrunners of the uncontrolled parts of the secret services to spark violence on various grounds (ethnic, sexual, sporting, etc) during the democratic consolidation of Serbia (such as during the Gay Pride, etc). On the other hand, Kosovo Government, in which the elected Serb representatives used to participate actively, does not force Serbs south of Ibar to expose themselves to such dangers. Step by step, both sides are improving the situation. The long awaited restoration of the Serbian cemetery in Prishtina went as if unnoticed in Serbia.

If Serbia claims that it has no influence regarding this matter in a part of the territory where it organized local elections - whereby the winners now use citizens as a shield against tear gas and rubber bullets, in absence of any sort of feasible policy - then it has already *de facto* recognized the separation of a part of Kosovo. Serbs in northern Kosovo should clearly decide which country they want to belong to, and rationally review the options that a state, under the given conditions, can offer them. They have to come to terms with the fact that Serbia is in a tough economic situation. Freezing and risking casualties on both sides of the barricades will not help them prevent a forthcoming inevitable swap of entities that used to collect certain revenues, for the moment being collected only by the Serbian PTT and other Serbian entities. Without an immediate diffusion of the situation and a comprehensive dialogue, the option that those revenues in future could partially stay, not in the ever leaner RS budget, but directly in the north of Kosovo, remains weak. Serbian budget, which should continue to be a source of funding of certain public services in the north (schools, social services, health care), will be leaner without further support that comes from various Western institutions or governments, through donations or loans. At the same time Serbia, through its current ambiguous attitude towards the situation in the north of Kosovo, has brought itself to the verge of an armed conflict with those very same governments. Meanwhile, the promised financial assistance by Russian Federation is nowhere in sight.

Even though partially responsible for the very complex current situation, charged with security risks and unclear from the point of view of the international law, because it fails to assume common position on Kosovo's status and to provide more functional mechanisms for implementation of agreed policies, the western international community has exercised a lot of patience. Citizens of Serbia, as well as citizens in the north of Kosovo, should be aware of the prospect of international community losing patience and showing muscle sometime in future, in order to maintain its credibility. The international community still offers serious proposals which, though complicated to implement, are perhaps the only opportunity for Serbia to retain part of its functional links with the Serbs in Kosovo, of the kind that go beyond standard minority-mainland relationships. For instance, provisions of the Ahtisaari Plan cannot be implemented without a good faith on all sides and a strong public administration at all tiers of government. The most recent proposal coming from the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt, on additional talks about northern Kosovo, which has been lukewarmly welcomed even in the West, cannot be even considered seriously if the current situation does not change immediately.

Meanwhile, besides the threats to Serbia's European perspectives, some major issues - such as missing and/or murdered Serbs, or other issues related to transitional justice, or issues of public or private property, or protection of cultural heritage, or other - remain unaddressed. As if someone in Serbia and Russia is interested in keeping those issues off the agenda, without offering tangible alternatives.

CEAS invites the Western international community to pay due respect to those issues and address them as soon as possible, as a token of good will and understanding of challenging situation that Serbs in northern Kosovo and state of Serbia have been in. If President Tadić's appeal succeeds and if Serbia demonstrates maturity including abolition of compulsory service, it should be granted the EU candidacy status at the forthcoming European Council summit. That would provide support for genuine pro-EU forces within Serbia and pre-empt a drop in public support for the EU integration process in advance of the 2012 general election in Serbia. By postponing Serbia's candidacy prospects, both sides will lose. EU will lose a leverage on Serbia, which was successfully implemented through a balanced application of conditionality and incentives. Serbia will lose a reform momentum and risk involution towards the pre-2000 state of affairs. If the EU fails to grant Serbia the candidacy status, it will seriously endanger all the efforts it had so far invested, politically and financially, into both Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkans.

Belgrade, 30.11.2011.