

Serbia is making efforts for the commencement of accession negotiations with the EU

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The Serbian government is declaring its chief priority is the continuation of the integration process and a quick start of accession negotiations with the EU. To this end, it has been making efforts primarily to normalise its relations with Kosovo. A breakthrough in relations between Kosovo and Serbia took place on 19 October, when the prime ministers of the two countries, Ivica Dacic and Hashim Thaci, met for the first time since Pristina proclaimed independence. The three meetings of the prime ministers (the last one was held on 4 December) resulted for example in a decision that an agreement on Integrated Border Management scheme (IBM) would come into force on 10 December and exchanging liaison officers. At the same time, working groups are busy implementing the other agreements which the previous government entered into (for example concerning the mutual recognition of documents). Serbia has also stopped boycotting meetings of regional co-operation organisations.

Commentary

- When the right-wing coalition of groupings of an anti-EU and anti-Western background took power in Serbia in summer this year, the future of Serbia's integration with the EU became unclear. However, actions taken by the government so far have proven that EU membership is still a high priority issue for Serbia. At present the government, despite its employment of right-wing rhetoric, is taking tangible actions to reach an agreement with the government in Pristina, which the previous government had avoided, fearing it would be accused of betraying national interests.
- The government, and especially the key grouping in the coalition – the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader Aleksandr Vucic – see judicial reform and combating organised crime and corruption as important tasks. Although this is an element of coming to terms with the past cherished by the previous cabinet, this goal corresponds to the priority recommendation from the EU—the demand that the rule of law be reinforced and that controversial privatisations which have been taking place over the past twenty years be cleared up.

- The government is also making attempts to tone down anti-European rhetoric and to prevent the escalation of anti-EU sentiments in the society, while public dissatisfaction has intensified due to verdicts passed by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), under which Albanian and Croat commanders were found not guilty of war crimes committed against Serb civilians.
- Measures taken with the end of facilitating integration with the EU, which mean significant concessions to the government in Pristina, are contrary to the declarations made by the governing party before the elections and are being taken in unfavourable social conditions (for example, the controversial verdicts of the ICTY, the declining interest in EU enlargement, the threat of the re-introduction of the visa regime in connection with the increasing number of asylum seekers in EU member states for economic reasons). However, it appears that, given the current bad economic situation, the government believes that only a success linked to EU integration can guarantee it continues to enjoy public support.
- The durability of the pro-European line in the Serbian government's policy and in the implementation of agreements with Kosovo will depend on a positive response from the EU. The government in Belgrade hopes that the nearest session of the Council of the European Union (13–14 December), will bring the promise that accession negotiations will commence with Serbia in the first half of 2013. This would allow the ruling class to maintain its credibility in the eyes of the Serbian public.