

Serbia Loses Out on SAA

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But the European Union offers the country a raft of other concessions. European Union members Belgium and the Netherlands this week refused to back down and allow Serbia to sign a key agreement which would bring it closer to joining the union.

However, while the EU did not allow Belgrade to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement, SAA, it did offer the country an interim political accord to implement student exchanges with member countries and discuss free trade and liberalised visa restrictions.

Although other EU member states want to open the way for Serbia, the Dutch and Belgian foreign ministries insist that Belgrade cooperate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, and deliver Bosnian Serb war crimes fugitives Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic before any agreement is reached.

On January 28, EU chiefs presented the interim agreement, which they have invited Belgrade to sign on February 7, as a step towards Serbia gaining membership of the 27-member bloc.

"This is a text that will open up doors for Serbia to the EU," said Slovenia's foreign minister Dimitrij Rupel, who currently holds the EU presidency.

The office for Dutch foreign affairs also welcomed the outcome, despite its reservations about Serbia joining the EU before Mladic and Karadzic are on a plane to The Hague.

"The Dutch government is pleased with the result," Bart Rijs, spokesman for the Dutch foreign ministry, told IWPR.

"We also think that the EU should extend a hand to Serbia. But that also means you have to fulfill European standards...and, in practice, that means cooperating with the ICTY."

At a time when political focus in Serbia over cooperation with Hague tribunal had seemed to give way to wider concerns, particularly the future of the breakaway province of Kosovo, this latest move is seen as progress in terms of negotiations.

"There was a dialogue before...this political dialogue is now being intensified," said Rijs.

The offer has also received a warm welcome from Serbia's pro-western government. After meeting EU ministers, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said, "We are very, very pleased with this breakthrough. Today is a very important day...on the path to full EU membership for the Republic of Serbia."

But not everyone in Belgrade is convinced of the significance of what has been agreed. Jovan Teokarevic, director of the Belgrade Centre for European Integration, is sceptical about what the offer actually means.

“None of us, including the government, has seen the draft of the agreement. These are just announcements from Brussels, nothing more concrete,” he told IWPR.

Meanwhile, the Serbian government, headed by pro-western president, Boris Tadic, is treating the agreement as a landmark in a bid to gain votes over his nationalist rival Tomislav Nikolic in presidential run-off elections on February 3.

“The government is trying to present [the agreement] in a much brighter light than it really is. Saying that it is the first document in which the EU has explicitly offered membership for Serbia into the EU - which of course is not true,” said Teokarevic.

EU head of foreign policy Javier Solana has rejected criticism that the union was trying to influence the election by indirectly encouraging Serbs to vote for Tadic and a European future.

The EU is hoping for a Tadic victory on February 3 in order to enhance Serbia’s European aspirations before an expected declaration of independence by Albanian leaders in the breakaway state of Kosovo.

Although around 75 per cent of Serbs are in favour of EU membership, many support Nikolic because they see his approach to the union as preserving Serbian interests, such as retaining Kosovo as part of Serbia.

The elections are forecast to be the tightest ever, with the Serbian Radical Party candidate narrowly beating Tadic in the first round. With the margin set to be just a few per cent, announcements of this kind from Brussels could make all the difference.

“I think it would add a few per cent to his [Tadic’s] side,” confirmed Teokarevic. “Although nobody here is sure how the elections will end.”

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