

Helsinki bulletin



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PRIMORDIAL RESISTANCE TO LIBERAL VALUES



FOTO: FONET

Over the past decade Serbia has been constantly adjusting its legislation to the European: from this angle, therefore, the values proclaimed correspond to European criteria and standards. However what prevails in everyday life is ethno-centrism. Nationalism growingly sinks into tribalism. Pluralism, a major attainment of modern liberalism, is permanently called on the carpet. The policy of homogenization breathes life into a monolithic, insular

and exclusive culture that reflects governmental and social systems. This policy keeps the society in constant tension, intolerance and hostility for others.

Two value concepts clash with one another: the predominant, conservative and patriarchal on the one hand, and liberal on the other. Serbia parries liberal values. This explains permanent campaigns against the West, free market,



capitalism and, especially, human rights culture perceived as the West's imperial implant. Frequent assaults at human rights defenders crystallize this attitude towards human rights. Besides, economic stagnation additionally spoon-feeds the conservative option and populism that has been coming and going in waves in the past twenty years.

The political consensus on Serbia's movements towards EU – on the membership of EU without joining NATO – and the “collective state of mind,” the social atmosphere of predominant neo-conservatism, anti-Westernism and xenophobia, are incongruent. The strong, though informal movement for re-traditionalism orchestrates the public discourse and revives the threatening forms of harassment against all those advocating a modern Serbia, as a civil society based on anti-fascism and contemporary European values (universal human rights).

The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea laid bare Serbia's antipodes: to the government's ambivalent and relatively restrained response to these developments, the media and wider public reacted with overt affinity for and support to Russia and President Putin. “Serbia's only actual ally is President Putin,” said writer Dobrica Ćosić in his last interview.¹

This paradoxical situation is among the consequences of the change of the regime in 2014 that brought Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ to power. The party consolidated itself after the elections in 2014 enthrone Aleksandar Vučić the premier. The party leadership's EU option contradicts the value system of its electorate. Although its leader distance himself declaratively from his radical past, the party's nationalistic matrix actually remained the same. As it seems this is how many of its supporters

concentrated in right-wing organizations and groups such as “Naši,” “Dveri,” Serb Popular Movement 1389 and the like perceive it. Their mentors from the Serb Orthodox Church /SPC², academic and media circles still largely occupy the public scene. Formally, they do not have an “authentic” representative in the parliament (till 2012 they had been represented by Serb Radical Party and Democratic Party of Serbia, and in 2012-14 by Democratic Party of Serbia alone) by are represented at other levels of the government. They are active in many ways. The media considerably support them.

Yet another organization ambitious of politics has been formed in the meantime – Third Serbia, a recycler of the rest in fact, and of “Dveri” in particular. Its declared goal is to reconcile the “first” (nationalistic) and the “second” (civil) Serbia. Its program invokes Serbian tradition (starting from the Nemanjić dynasty) and patriarchal values. Indicatively, it was launched in Vojvodina where it formed a caucus in the local parliament of Novi Sad. Even more indicatively, its leadership includes many young and highly educated persons – most of whom born in mid-1970s and mid-1980s. If taken at its word, it stands for a “third course” for Serbia (a bridge between the other two). On the other hand, its representatives smoothly cooperate with SNS at local level where they are usually appointed managers of cultural institutions.

For quarter of a century the nationalistic-conservative bloc has been using same methods, lists of “public enemies” being the most

¹ Nedeljnik, April 24, 2014.

² In the special prayer on the occasion of recent floods Patriarch Irinej called this natural disaster „God's warning” to those many who „have chosen the path of vice and malice.” „Lawlessness and dark vice reign Belgrade, and many are proud of it and want democracy for themselves,” he said. The Patriarch obviously referred to LGBT population and the Pride Parade announced for late May (LGBT organizations have themselves cancelled the parade); Danas, May 16, 2014.

frequent among them. Human rights defenders, some journalists and, generally, public figures perceived as “anti-Serbs” and “auto-chauvinists” top these lists. They are being discredited in other ways too – publicly called to the carpet, slandered and insulted. The bloc tries to impose “an authentic model of language and alphabet” on the general public, the model that would not be undermined by “foreign words” and Latin script. It insists that people from ethnic minority groups speak the Serb language (the initiative for “language patrols”).³

What seriously questions the regime’s proclaimed course to Europe is its policy for the media that are even officially under its control and state-owned to large extent. This primarily refers to most influential opinion-makers such as *Politika* and *Vecernje Novosti*. Once it formed the ruling coalition, SNS appointed “anti-EU” figures editors in chief of these two dailies: in *Politika*, it appointed Ljiljana Smajlović, close to DSS, and in *Vecernje Novosti* Ratko Dmitrović, a notorious warmonger in 1990s and presently close to the pro-Russian magazine, *Pecat*.

Over the past months many inappropriate and insulting messages have been put across to Podgorica and Montenegrin leadership via Belgrade’s media scene. The “authors” have mostly been Russian officials to whose undiplomatic acts the host country failed to react. Such attitude largely devalues the official Belgrade’s pledge to improve relations with neighboring countries, including Montenegro.

³ DSS branch in Vojvodina said it would organize “language patrols” to patrol the towns in Vojvodina with the Hungarian majority and see whether local Hungarian knew how to speak Serbian. These patrol will not be raiding houses and apartments (for the time being), but will be testing citizens’ knowledge of the Serbian language “in public places, at counters, in shops, etc.,” says Milenko Jerkov of the DSS branch.

Though information about sources and amounts of financial assistance to certain right-wing organizations, movements and the media (*Pecat*) are not available one should not preclude the possibility of Russia as the main financier the more so since Russia has been supporting scores of extreme rightist organizations throughout Europe.

RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE

The media in Serbia have almost unanimously sided with Russia over the Ukrainian drama and Russia’s annexation of Crimea. In other words, they are uncritically transmitting Kremlin’s stances on domestic situation in Ukraine (claiming that Ukrainian right-wing fascists had provoked the chaos with ample assistance of Washington and Brussels, that illegal, “putschist” regime governs in Kiev, that Crimea has illegally seceded from Russia, and the like). Such reporting is not actually in line with the official Belgrade’s stance, which is ambivalent and more restrained. Since President Putin like to compare Crimea and Kosovo, Serbia claims that it supports sovereignty and territorial integrity of every country, including Ukraine. On the other hand, due to its friendly ties with Moscow Serbia would not pursue EU policy implying sanctions against Russia. Because of such attitude Belgrade is under considerable pressure from both sides.

While EU officials say they respect Serbia’s attitude for the time being, Russia is testing Serbia’s friendship: it keeps sending out its officials – including those blacklisted in EU member-states such as President of Duma Sergey Narikshin⁴ - to Serbia.

⁴ According to the *Danas* daily Serbia’s delegates to Moscow “waged a trench warfare” against Narikshin’s visit; and, should that be unavoidable, they tried their best to prevent him from meeting the “most powerful man” in

Among them was retired general Leonid Reshetnikov, director of the Russia's Institute for Strategic Studies. His book "Return to Russia" was ceremoniously launched to a large audience, including academicians and church dignitaries. Addressing the launch Reshetnikov called Montenegrin Premier Milo Đukanović a traitor of the Serbian people's historical remembrance. "Never in history have the Serbian people – and Montenegrins are part of them – stood against Russia. That's a high treason for which Đukanović will be doomed," he said.⁵ On the same occasion Archbishop of Montenegro Amfilohije hardly picked his words while cursing Đukanović (later on he sort of distanced himself from his speech). Russia is presently on the offensive that relies on restoration of "Russian values" and Eastern Orthodox civilization. In theory, it leans on Huntington's thesis about the clash of civilizations. In this context Russia has intensified its presence in all ex-Soviet republics but also in the Balkans. Serbia plays an important role in the Balkans from Russia's standpoint: most of Serbia's elite has not genuinely opted for EU integration.

At the same time Serbia hosted Russian MP Konstantin Kosachev who had come to discuss the restoration of Russian necropolis in Belgrade.

As Russia went on the offensive of sorts shortly after constitution of Serbia's parliament and government, everything coincided with visits by EU officials Catherine Ashton and Stefan Fule. After his meeting with Fule, Aleksandar

the country, Premier Vučić. Narishkin did pay a visit to Belgrade but not to Vučić; Danas, May 10-11, 2014.

5 A quote from Sonja Biserko's address at the launch of the book "Whitewashing Democracy" by Boris Varga on May 7, in Novi Sad. Several months ago, former Russian Ambassador Aleksandar Chepurkin also brutally insulted Montenegro and its leadership in Belgrade (calling them monkeys) after Montenegro applied to NATO membership.

Vučić told the press that "talks were tougher than he had expected."⁶ From this journalists concluded that Brussels had asked Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia. "Serbia respects territorial integrity of every country, including Ukraine," said Vučić, adding, "I pleaded against sanctions on the account of Serbia's traditional, historical and other ties with Russia."⁷ Stefan Fule then said that "EU respects Serbia's attitude towards Moscow."⁸

THE MEDIA: CHAMPIONS OF ANTI-WESTERNISM

Having reported developments in Ukraine during pro-European demonstrations at the Maidan Square rather objectively, the media in Serbia – tabloids and the so-called serious papers almost without any exception - changed their tune after Russia's intervention and annexation of Crimea. The media used US President Barack Obama's statement about Kosovo's referendum on independence having been in line with the international law, while the Crimean had not, to spread anti-American feelings.⁹ They began reinterpreting the Maidan developments and accusing US (and their secret services) and Ukrainian right-wing organizations of having organized the protests. They also started criticizing the West's sanctions against Russia claiming the purpose was not to help solving the crisis Ukraine but to punish Russia.¹⁰

Right-wing organizations, for their part, started calling human rights defenders and some

6 Politika, May 6, 2014.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 It was the Kosovo Parliament that declared independence without calling a referendum on the issue.

10 "It is Russia rather than Ukraine that concerns the West. And if Ukraine has to be sacrificed in the showdown with Russia, its /Ukraine's/ friends in the West would only be glad to oblige," quotes the editorial headlined "Russia Haunts Europe;" Politika, May 6, 2014.

media outlets on the carpet. In this context, an editorial penned by Ratko Dmitrović, editor of *Vecernje Novosti*, stood up as a drastic example. Under the headline “Kristijan and Some Others,”¹¹ Dmitrović called for a ban on Jelena Milić’s (director of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies) and Sonja Biserko’s (chairwoman of the Helsinki Committee) public appearances, calling them notorious “anti-Serbs” and “traitors.” What motivated his editorial was a hue and cry raised about frequent appearances as a guest in talk shows of Kristijan Golubović, a convicted criminal and drug dealer. Why shouldn’t then the authorities ban the two civil society activists’ from appearing in talk shows considering their “anti-Serb” stances, wanders Dmitrović.

Michael Davenport, head of the EU Delegation to Serbia, reacted at the editorial.¹² He called the overall state of the Serbian media unsatisfactory and some phenomena “very unpleasant and unacceptable.”¹³ Here he referred to comparisons made between civil society representatives and criminals, saying that was “a clear breach of human rights, as well as rights of these individuals and organizations.”¹⁴

In the name of freedom of speech and expression, *Politika* promptly retorted to Michael Davenport’s statement: it compared it with Central Committee releases in the socialist era, which “were hurriedly parroted and quoted by everybody.”¹⁵

11 *Večernje Novosti*, April 26, 2014.

12 On the account of Serbia’s cooperativeness in the matter of Kosovo EU officials have been lenient about domestic situation, including breaches of fundamental standards of ethics and professionalism in the media.

13 *Politika*, May 12, 2014.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Politika*, May 14, 2014.

Director and editor of *Pečat* Milorad Vučelić was the first to suggest that the media should simply ignore outstanding human rights defenders such as Sonja Biserko. His weekly overtly advocates against Serbia’s membership of EU taking that its /Serbia’s/ place is “in the East.” Compared with other weeklies this one has enviable circulation and influence on general public.

The word has it that Russia directly subsidizes *Pecat* for its overt support to it and its foreign policy, and especially its favoring Vladimir Putin, and that it supports some right-wing organizations for the same reasons. Should that be the case the financial support would be rather non-transparent (unlike Western donors that finance non-governmental organizations and insist on transparency of the grants and expenditures). Be it as it may, Milorad Vučelić vehemently denies everything, claiming that his weekly get “nothing special from Russia” and that in his opinion “business circles in Moscow and their companies in Serbia have never demonstrated that they are aware of him at all.”¹⁶

It is common knowledge, however, that Russia provides logistic and financial support to scores of right-wing organizations in West Europe, including pro-fascist parties, although it has been articulating – and especially since the outburst of the Ukrainian crisis – its concern over the rise of fascism in Europe. (“We shall not allow fascism to resurrect in Europe,” says Sergey Lavrov adding, “Europe has been turning a blind eye to the reawaken fascist ideology for long.”) According to *Politika*, Moscow wants to instigate a political Internationale that would lead towards a “Euro-Asian confederation of free nations” by the means of “nationalistic impulses” that had found an echo among extreme rightist circles.¹⁷

16 *Danas*, May 12, 2014.

17 *Politika*, May 9, 2014.

The paper also says that “Russia’s right-wing favorites” are the National Front in France, Flanders Interest in Belgium, Italy’s Northern League, Austria’s Freedom Party, Hungary’s Jobik and Bulgaria’s Ataka.¹⁸

THIRD SERBIA: RECYCLER OF CONSERVATISM

The Third Serbia (assembling former members of the right-wing movement Dveri) stepped on the political scene after the 2012 elections and SNS parliamentary and presidential victory. Up to then, as a new grouping going “after reconciliation between the first and the second Serbia,” it had acted from the margins little known to general public. However, the “recomposition” of local government in Novi Sad – when SNS dethroned DS – opened a window of opportunity to the Third Serbia to delegate its members to governmental institutions. With two MPs in the provincial parliament it formed a parliamentary caucus.¹⁹ The Third Serbia is actually an informal coalition partner to the present regime, which deploys it whenever it either cannot or would not expose itself. Hence its considerable presence in the media, in Vojvodina in particular.

Its officials are preoccupied with the alleged problem of “Serb self-denial.” And here they specifically emphasize Vojvodina as a “paradigm of Serb self-denial.”²⁰ According to Andrej Fajgelj, a high party official mostly exposed in the media, “the culture of self-denial has been developed for more than a hundred years.” “This cultural war broke up when a new generation stood up for Serbhood, the generation that stands a good chance to finally defend it.”²¹

18 Politika, May 9, 2014.

19 The party did not pass the electoral threshold in the early parliamentary elections in 2014.

20 Danas, May 16, 2014.

21 Politika, May 4, 2014.

To all appearances, Andrej Fajgelj considers himself a part of that generation. After the “recomposition” of the local government in 2012 he was appointed director of the Novi Sad Cultural Center instead of Laslo Blašković. His first move in the new post was to replace the Latin script in the Center’s name and logo with Cyrillic. This announced the course of his policy. Then he banned a painting by a young artist (Danijela Tasić) from an exhibition because, he explained, the painting insulted citizens’ religious feelings (the painting represented Jesus dressed in banknotes). His action raised a hue and cry about censorship.

For his part, Fajgelj called his critics to account for not protesting against “censorship” when the launch of a book relativizing the Srebrenica genocide (“The Srebrenica Fraud”) was suspended. The launch scheduled in the Center of Serbian Army had been suspended at the request of the Humanitarian Law Fund.

What earmarks the Third Serbia’s program are “traditional Serb values,” the family in the first place. For the time being it mostly acts in Vojvodina. It considers itself an engine of development but its stances are close to those of the most conservative intellectual circles. True, the party does not advocate annulment of Vojvodina’s autonomy. On the other hand, it insists that the question about “whether we really need an autonomous province” should be raised.²² “We should also raise a question of whether all this implies elements of a quasi-state, and whether citizens of the province really need banners, emblems, statutes, academies of science and the police of their own, or they need a flexible and modern governance integrated into the whole of Serbia’s system,” says Fajgelj.²³

22 Aleksandar Đurdev u autorskom tekstu za Danas, 16. maj 2014.

23 Isto.

CONCLUSION

The idea of (ethnic) purity negates democracy and liberal values. Therefore, a state is obliged to cherish diversity and aspire to harmony rather than to uniformity. Unfortunately, Serbia stands for it in words only. In fact, Serbia is an extremely ethno-centric society.

The Serbian society badly needs another wave of democratization to promote liberal values; it needs to focus itself on education and promotion of liberal values (freedom, truth, pluralism, tolerance, diversity) through the educational system.

Serbia needs a systematic, alternative education based on these values.

The media that promote liberal values need to be supported.

Protection of human rights defenders is imperative – as they symbolize the “otherness.” A youth network to react against all forms of extremism and advocates of intolerance and a uniform and closed society is also an imperative.

Over the accession negotiations with Serbia EU should pay more heed to education and promotion of liberal values. In this context, EU should be more present in the Serbian society.