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CHAOS AS *MODUS VIVENDI*

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FONET

Placed in a larger context a series of developments over the past weeks indicate that Serbia has reached the point where the schizoid "both EU and Russia" policy becomes hardly sustainable. Simply, Serbia has neither the capacity nor power to stick to its proclaimed "neutrality." Objectively, Serbia is under heavy pressure from both sides; and, the dynamics of and balance of powers at domestic scene could easily lead to chaos. For long has Serbia managed to skip the radar of the West, which made it believe its position was something special. However, that was only yet another delusion it will have to pay for dear.

In a month only Serbia hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin, a curtailed football match with the Albanian team, Albanian Premier Edi Rama, a meeting of the European branch of the Trilateral Commission,[1] Russian Patriarch

1 Just President of Kosovo Atifete Jahjaga turned down the invitation to the Triaterale Commission meeting in

Kirill, Chinese Foreign Minister Vang Chao and German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel; it had Vojislav Šešelj back from The Hague, Russian-Serbian military maneuvers, a monument to Russian Emperor Nikolay unveiled in downtown Belgrade, assassination attempt at one of the best known tycoons, Milan Beko, the arrests of Goran Perčević (SPS vice-president in the Milošević era) and Ljubiša /Čume/ Buha (once the boss of the Surčin clan) for family violence, and the assault at Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences Ilija Vujačić.

Serbia's political, media and social scene was notably disturbed by two mutually unconnected events of the series: Albanian Premier Edi Rama's visit and Leader of the Serb Radical Party /SRS/ Vojislav Šešelj's a sudden return from The Hague. These events, predominant in news stories and commentaries, laid bare the Serbia's society's ideological confusion, mostly resulting from the fact that there has never been a clear break with Slobodan Milošević's policy in 1990s. The visit of the Albanian Premier and the comeback of the "political father" of two incumbent leaders, President Tomislav Nikolić and Premier Aleksandar Vučić, were also the biggest challenges for the latter and for their proclaimed pro-European policy.

Vojislav Šešelj's comeback coupled with media spinning of plan for the country's destabilization only added to Serbia's fluid situation. His return, on the other hand, crystallized the prevalent social mindset. It remains to be seen in weeks and months to come what would be the effects, if any, on Serbia's political life produced by the return of Šešelj, the ruthless defendant before the ICTY. The region raised a hue and cry about his release thus testifying of the significance of facing up the recent past for its overall stability.

Belgrade, convened on the eve of Premier Rama's visit.

Russia's presence in Serbia grows practically on daily basis and in all spheres. Within one month only President Putin and Patriarch Kirill visited Serbia, and Serbia vas a venue of joint military maneuvers, discreetly announced till the very day. Symbolically, the state-church-military "trinity" puts across a major message. In the meantime Russia had announced that the construction of the South Stream pipeline was no longer at its priority list, while calling Serbia to pay its dues or else have gas supply cut by 28 percent.

The Belgrade meeting of the Trilateral Commission made Serbia see itself as a major geopolitical player. According to a leak, the West is about to invest 12 billion dollars in the region's infrastructure. The latest and most important in the series of visits by Western leaders was the one by German Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel. Addressing the press and on other occasions he called Serbia the most important partner in the Balkans and reminded his hosts of some 1.8 billion Euros Germany had invested in Serbia over the past fifteen years.

The assassination attempt at Milan Beko, the first genuinely serious assault at an outstanding figure's life, after the assassination of Premier Zoran Đinđić testified of the country's fragile safety. The assault at Dean Vujačić is also alerting. The arrest of Goran Perčevič and further arrests announced in this context follow up the "policy of arrest" launched in the case of Miroslav Mišković, the case without an epilogue in the court of law so far. To all appearances, the government is too weak for a showdown with tycoons and bringing them to justice.

Premier Vučić has not found reliable partners at home for his European policy. On the contrary, he has totally marginalized those who had stood for the option for years or worked on their destruction (the opposition, above all

the Democratic Party, the media and a part of the civil society). Moreover, he has sided with the right-wing (his true being), which once and if consolidated could oust him on the account of his European policy. The Democratic Party of Serbia and the Dveri movement have already demanded Serbia's recognition of Crimea within Russia.[2]

All this testifies that Serbia is in turmoil that may turn violent. Disorientation and the policy of "sitting on two chairs" threaten Serbia's future. Serbia needs to catch up with its neighbors and focus on the region without which neither it (nor the rest of the countries) has any negotiation potential whatsoever. Judging by present-day regional relations, mutual trust at the level of societies burdened by prejudice and animosity will be a long-term process. It will challenge not only political elites in formal dialogues while willy-nilly (under the pressure from abroad) advocating reconciliation and regional cooperation, but also other social structures, that of culture, education, civil sector, etc.

EDI RAMA IN VISIT TO SERBIA

International circles in the West commended the Serb-Albanian summit of heads of government paved through intensive diplomatic "persuasion" action (by Germany in the first place). And this was diametrically opposite to the way the public in Serbia perceived it – for it, that was nothing but a fiasco.

The public mostly reacted strongly at the diplomatic-protocolary incident at Rama and Vučić's press conference where Rama said that Serbia should "recognize the realities" and Kosovo's independence. To this Aleksandar Vučić retorted, "Kosovo and Metohija are parts of Serbia… have always been and will stay forever…I will not allow anyone to humiliate Serbia."[3] However, the visit proceeded according to the program as "a mark of Serbia's hospitality." This also referred to the second-day visit to the municipalities with Albanian majority population in South Serbia. (Never before has Serbia been so angered at similar statements by Western leaders.)

Edi Rama's address – the Belgrade media commented on in insulting terms such as "Edi Rama, A Shameless Shiptar"[4] – further laid bare Belgrade's frustration. In Preševo, Edi Rama said that local Albanians in Serbia's south[5] had less rights than Kosovo Serbs, adding, "Albania will do its best to have the solution to the problem of the Preševo Valley crucial for Serbia's movement towards the EU, and would not allow assimilation of the Albanians in that region."[6]

Speaking of the situation of the Albanian and other minorities, Serbia keeps ignoring the fact that the Serbs in neighboring countries have been granted maximum rights and that it is only logical that others ask quid pro quo.

The Serb-Albanian dialogue demonstrated again the heavy, centennial burden of history oppressing bilateral relations. Serbia is additionally frustrated with the course history has changed in the past two decades: after centennial humiliation, terror, political and other violence (in Kosovo) and communist reign of terror (in Albania) the Albanians have clearly charted their road to European integration.

2 Politika, November 18, 2014.

3 Radio-Television of Serbia, November 10, 2014.

4 Front-page banner, Informer, November 11, 2014; the front page of the Pečat magazine carried Rama's picture captioned „Defacation of the Balkans," October 14, 2014.

5 The Albanians in South Serbia face many problems such as recognition of diplomas, the use of Albanian textbooks, etc. Nothing has changed for the better so far despite all the agreements on problem-solving.

6 *http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/510223/Rama-Albanci-u-Srbiji-imaju-manje-prava-od-Srba-na-Kosovu*.

Though declaratively opting itself for the European Union, Serbia has not yet made this fundamental choice.

On the account of the incident at the football match (October 14) the visit of the Albanian Premier scheduled for October 22 was postponed till November 10. The tension in the aftermath of the match and ensuing mass violence against members of Albanian community especially in Vojvodina has not relieved in the meantime.

In the public discourse anti-Albanian sentiments were kept alive with the helping hand of the media: no matter whether fueling the revived thesis about the so-called Greater Albania, the "Albanian dream," or commenting on UEFA decision to register the canceled match in Serbia's favor but to take three points from Serbia's team. The media created the atmosphere in which the visit by a high-ranking official from Tirana was perceived as unnecessary, or, as Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić put it, "It's easier for Rama to come than for us to welcome him."[7]

Only a handful of domestic analysts and commentators interpreted the upcoming visit from a different angle. Among these exceptions was a commentary by Zlatko Paković the Danas daily published under the headline "Putin and Edi Rama."[8] "A genuine U-turn in Serbia's policy can only rest on completely renewed relations with Tirana and Prishtina. This is why Edi Rama's visit is by far more important that the visit by Vladimir Putin," says the author, reminding that that Serbia, except for a break or two, has been following the "logic of destruction" launched by "the murderous anti-Albanian policy of Slobodan Milošević."[9]

Director of the Forum for Interethnic Relations Dušan Janjić called the statements by the two premiers at the press conference petty-political comments manifest of both politicians' fear of their electorates. "In my view, these petty-political commentaries by both sides reflect both politicians' fear of negative response by their respective electorates, and both of them have way to go till the next elections to bother with such considerations."[10]

The public learned from the media (prior to Rama's visit) that Albania vetoed of Serbia's Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO (IPAP).[11] Actually this was what Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić told a press conference while announcing signing of the partnership agreement. He explained that the said agreement had not been signed in the first round (on October 31 in Bratislava) because of "Albania filed a complaint."[12]

The media were speculating that the U.S.A was in the background of Albania's motion. Accordingly, "a powerful member-state" expressed its dissatisfaction with Vladimir Putin's visit to Belgrade through Tirana.[13] Vladan Živulović, the president of the Atlantic Alliance of Serbia, said he doubted the United State had a finger in it "because we smoothly cooperate with the US in this domain."[14]

7 Politika, November 2, 2014.
8 Danas, October 26, 2014.
9 Ibid.
10 Politika, November 10, 2014.
11 Experts hold that IPAP stands for the highest level of cooperation with NATO within PfP.
12 „The agreement was not signed because Albania filed a complaint...I told the Bratislava meeting that we had been urged to join NATO but once we agreed to sign the cooperation agreement they turned us down," said Foreign Minister Dačić; Politika, November 2, 2014.
13 Politika, November 5, 2014.
14 Ibid.

REACTIONS AT THE VUČIĆ – RAMA MEETING

The outcome of the first Serb-Albanian summit and the developments preceding it was measured by a different standards: from compliments from the international community (Edi Rama's visit would be probably canceled were it not for Angela Merkel's intervention), through harsh criticism or reservation at the domestic arena.

Washington commended the two leaders' commitment to a new chapter in bilateral friendship and cooperation.[15] Brussels said about the same. Regardless of the events accompanying the visit, said Head of EU Delegation to Serbia Michael Davenport, "it's good that Belgrade-Tirana dialogue was resumed."[16] He also complimented Aleksandar Vučić' "readiness to arrange the visit."[17]

Scores of domestic and foreign reporters, including numbers of them from the region covered the Vučić-Rama meeting. All of them were practically focused on the verbal duel between the two premiers or, as the Politika daily called it, "another Albanian provocation."[18] The Sarajevo-based Dnevni Avaz emphasized the regional significance of the meeting, while the Podgorica-based Vijesti noted that "the tense atmosphere marked a historical visit."

The harshest criticism came from Banjaluka. RS President Milorad Dodik said that he would have asked the Albanian Premier "to immediately leave the country."[19]

And this was how Belgrade dailies intoned their ensuing stories. "The bottom line of a visit as such is that it shouldn't have taken place at all," wrote Veljko Lalić, editor of the Nedeljnik magazine, arguing on the other hand that Serb-Albanian relations were crucial to regional peace, while the Serb and the Albanians were the "only two peoples with unsettled national issues."[20]

Svetomir Marjanović, the editor of the Blic daily, commented cynically Serbia's international position in the context of Rama's enforced visit. "Rama is not to blame. He just reminded us of our place from the aspect of those who had sent him to Belgrade. /They see us/ seated in Europe's back burner together with Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo learning to speak Turkish. And we shall be in this place until we become smarter and economically and military better capacitated."[21]

Ljiljana Smajlović, the editor-in-chief of the Politika daily, thinks about the same about Serbia's international position. "Edi Rama's blatancy in Belgrade" actually reflects Serbia's and Albania's ratings in Washington where "the Albanian star is still shinning," she argues.[22]

Premier Edi Rama refused to meet with President Nikolić.[23] The President's press department released, however, that the meeting had been cancelled because of Rama's provocative

15 Politika, November 14, 2014.
16 Danas, November 15–16, 2014.
17 Ibid.
18 Politika, November 11, 2014.
19 Politika, November 12, 2014.
20 Nedeljnik, November 13, 2014.
21 Blic, November 11, 2014.
22 „In Belgrade Rama just demonstrated how superior and at home he felt in America's embrace, and couldn't care less about Serb-Albanian relations for the alleged improvement of which the Americans hypocritically complimented Serbia and Albania." Politika, November 15, 2014.
23 Predsednik Nikolić was watching the Serbia-Albania football match from a VIP seat and so he watched the drone with Albanian flag over the stadium (some tabloids criticized him for not having reacted at the spot); commenting the incident later on, he said, „It will take centuries for Albania to turn into a normal country."

behavior.[24] Anyway, this also adds to the dilemma about the relations between the President and the Premier the media have been speculating on for long.

Questioning the sense of the presidential release about not meeting Premier Rama, the Politika argues that it was superfluous given that "after Rama's provocation, the President thought it most important to tell citizens why was it that he refused to meet with the Albanian Premier."[25] This was what Stanislava Pak, the head of Presidential PR department, called a provocation,[26] adding, "Do you really think responding to such a provocation was possible at all?"[27]

ŠEŠELJ'S COMEBACK

Everyone noticed that President Nikolić was out of Belgrade (in visit to the Chilandary Monastery, Mt. Athos) when Šešelj landed in Belgrade. Most people believe that America was instrumental in his release from "The Hague dungeon" intent to put across a warning to Aleksandar Vučić for his ceremonial welcome to Russian President Putin.

The theses has been argued for even by some independent intellectuals (such as Jovo Bakić, for instance). However, most explicit in the argument was Minister Aleksandar Vulin. He not only claimed that it was the US that released Šešelj (as it controls the ICTY) but also that it was using him as a mouthpiece when he promises to oust the treacherous Nikolić-Vučić regime.[28] This is also why Serbia should reconsider its foreign policy and priorities, says Vulin.[29]

The Politika daily also sees "the American finger in the pie" of Šešelj's comeback. It interprets Vulin's argument as the government's response to the pressure from Washington "intent to influence our foreign policy."[30] Analyst Dragomir Anđelković also refers to America being "sick and tired" of patience and places Šešelj's comeback into the context of "geopolitical space to maneuver in" that was allocated to Serbia that "overstepped the bounds."[31]

Šešelj's return also revived animosity for the ICTY and hence the usual criticism of the Tribunal. The fact that the Tribunal was rather at loss in his case only strengthened the argument. The majority used to applaud his rhetoric such as the figure of speech about the Tribunal being "a wounded globalist beast murdering and destroying the lives of Serb politicians and military leaders."[32] The media were picturing him as "a martyr" spending twelve years in "The Hague dungeon" and, with few exceptions (Danas and Vreme), avoiding to remind of the indictment raised against him.

No doubt that his return was most embarrassing to his former comrades in arms, the Premier and the President. The moment his plane landed in Belgrade Šešelj announced he would take vengeance. However, his allegations have hardly found an echo so far. The majority of citizens perceived his comeback as a show. And Vučić's opponents saw it as an opportunity for his ouster.

24 Politika, November 11, 2014.
25 Politika, November 12, 2014.
26 „Did the release had to stress that the President had denied the meeting as he knew there would be some provocation, since that could be interpreted as his criticism of the Premier for having met with Rama?" Politika, November 13, 2014.
27 Ibid.
28 Naše Novine, November 13, 2014.
29 Ibid.
30 Politika, November 14, 2014.
31 Ibid.
32 *Politika*, November 13, 2014.

The neighboring countries were rather annoyed by his statements. So Croatian President Ivo Josipović said his country should alert the ICTY of Šešelj's breach of release given that he had been reviving his policy of hatred of 1990s.[33]

The Russian Foreign Ministry seized the opportunity of Šešelj's release to comment, "Unfortunately, the trial of V. Šešelj exemplifies the Tribunal's ongoing trend of protracted proceedings. Protracted trials before the ICTY, like the one of V. Šešelj, testify of the Tribunal's systemic shortcomings, which, among other things, result in gross breaches of defendants' right to fair trial, and violate the standards of proper legal proceedings."[34]

Ambivalent reactions to Šešelj's release never touching on his track record indicate that his interpretation of the past has been normalized, the more so since his once closest associates are now in power.

SERBIA: HOSTAGE TO RUSSIA'S GEO-STRATEGY FOR THE BALKANS

Frequent visits to Serbia by Russia's high-ranking governmental, religious and military officials show that Russia's presence is not temporary but in the service of its conflict with the West. According to the Spiegel paper, Germany is rather concerned by "the aggressive, anti-Western policy" in the Balkans. Elmar Brock of the Christian-Democratic Union /CDU/ told the paper, "Putin wants to exert pressure on all the Balkan states and make them distance themselves from the membership of EU or to influence on its policy as its pro-Russian members."[35] Christian Schmidt, the minister of agriculture, says, "It seems that Russia tries to influence the entire Bosnia-Herzegovina through Republika Srpska,"[36] while Michael Roth of the Foreign Ministry holds that Germany has to explain to Balkan states, over and over, why it is that the membership of EU is in their own interest.[37]

Russia has also been fortifying its stance in the Balkans through its intelligence network. It has moved its biggest intelligence center in the Balkans from Sophia to Belgrade. In addition, explaining that "the region needs to get the Russian angle as well," its international news agency Russia Today is about to open (in 2015) a Belgrade branch with 30-odd employees.

Russia is most focused on putting across emotional messages. In this the two traditionally close churches play major roles. The exhibition titled "Russia and Serbia: The History of Spiritual Ties from 14th to 19th Century" was opened in Belgrade. While unveiling and blessing the monument to the last Russian emperor, Nikolay II Romanov, in the Maiden Park in Belgrade (neighboring on the Russian Center) Patriarch Kirill said, "The friendship and brotherhood of Russian and Serb peoples is not in words only, something that has nothing to do with life, but permeated with historical truth built on the blood of both nations."[38] For his part Serb Patriarch Irinej said, "Being a small nation the Serbs must tie their boat to the big Russian ship on the open sea of this world."[39]

Andrey Shari, editor of the Free Europe's Russian Service, reminds that serious Russian commentators take that Kremlin tries to take something else it needs from Serbia, and improve its relations with it. "Whether Kirill or some politician will be dispatched to Serbia makes no

33 Danas, November 17, 2014.
34 *http://ruskarec.ru/news/2014/11/15/msp_rusije_sudjenje_seselju_ilustruje_probleme_35019.html*.
35 *http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/511713/Spigel-Putinova-balkanska-strategija-alarmirala-Berlin*.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Danas, November 17, 2014.
39 Ibid.

difference."[40] The church in Russia is strongly tied with governmental policy in major issues such as Ukraine, relations with Serbia or anything else, he says.[41]

Interestingly, Patriarch Kirill arrival to Serbia coincided with the first Serb-Russian military maneuvers in Srem. Within the joint anti-terrorist tactical exercise titled "Srem 2014" Russian troopers for the first time raided two armed vehicles BMD-2.

Given Serbia's debt amounting to 224 million dollars Russia could cut its supply of gas by 28 percent. Putin's visit created the impression about some special relationship between the two countries. However, the threat of less supplies of gas indicates that Russia behaves very rationally in money matters. Besides what also came as a surprise was when Aleksey Miller, the director of "Gasprom," said that "the West route" (of the pipeline to China) would become functional before the "Eastern," and that the South Stream was no longer at his company's priority list.[42]

40 http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/beograd-posle-putina-kiril/26692252.html.

41 Ibid.

42 *http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/13/Ekonomija/1746610/Komersant%3A+%22Ju%C5%BEni+tok%22+vi%C5%A1e+nije+prioritet.html*.

CONCLUSION

Serbia is in a complex situation marked by controversies and confusion on the one hand, and absence of leadership of vision and public dialogue on the other. Premier Aleksandar Vučić is the major authority to a certain extent only: disappointed electorate can always question his authority for the promises made but not met. Permanent social homogenization on the thesis about a nation threatened either by domestic or foreign (Western) enemy opens the door to radicalization with unforeseen consequences. The Premier himself is most to blame for such atmosphere.

Edi Rama's visit to Belgrade is a breakthrough in bilateral relations regardless of strong feelings and incidents that earmarked it. No wonder that the visit was under the public pressure from both sides considering the burden of the past. However, Serbia can in no way get rid of its responsibility for the 1990s wars in which it was not only defeated but left with the albatross of mass crimes and genocide round its neck. This is the outcome that frustrates its neighborly relations.

Against the present-day backdrop Belgrade-Tirana relationship is the backbone of regional stability and progress. To answer these challenges both countries must act with patience and wisdom, and be open to cooperation in all domains. Serbia should bear in mind that the Albanians are now the most dynamic nation in the Balkans, and see this as an advantage rather than the other way round.

Serbia cannot waver on the mantra "Both the EU and Russia" for much longer: it neither has capacity nor political cohesion to hover between the two. It must make the choice that best meets national and state interests. Bearing in mind its neighborhood's orientation, Serbia should go for the EU more resolutely.

Šešelj's comeback further revealed the ambiguity of the strategic orientation of ruling parties' (SNS and SPS) considering their traditional ties with Russia.

Relations with Russia should be placed in the context of the realities; Serbia should not allow Russia to use it as a tool for competing with the EU. However, what is open to question is the extent to which Serbia can possibly confront Russia; here one must take into account that Serbia's elite is not up to such challenge, mostly because it is in dark about Russia.