Helsinki bulletin

NO.117 // JUNE 2015

HELSINKI COMMITTEE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA
address: Kralja Milana 10,
Belgrade, Serbia
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;
e-mail: office@helsinki org.rs
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

# SREBRENICA: SERBIA'S UNWELCOME MIRROR

REUTERS/DADO RUVIC

The denial of the Srebrenica genocide, its relativization or attempts to justify it by earlier crimes committed against Serbs, are leading Serbia and its people toward moral abyss and isolation. Serbia has been reacting strongly at every anniversary marking the Srebrenica genocide. Serb elites were angered with the Great Britain's latest draft resolution on Srebrenica to be submitted to the UNSC on the occasion of the 20th anniversary. All of the international community's attempts to persuade Serbia to admit the genocide have been met with the thesis about a plan to have Republika Srpska disintegrated and Serbia's interests undermined. The international community sees the possibility of Aleksandar Vučić's attendance at the commemoration in Srebrenica as an event that would symbolize regional stability and reconciliation. This is why – and despite the latest developments in the case of Naser Orić's

arrest – the international community insist on Bosniak Member of B&H Presidency Bakir Izetbegović's personal invitation to Vučić to Potočari.

The resolution is meant to open the room to regional reconciliation, but also to draw the international community's attention to the need for preventive strategy – incorporation of the genocide into school curricula in the first place. Srebrenica is not only a regional but a global issue, a symbol of all genocides committed in late 20th century, especially in Europe. Its draft speaks of compassion for with all the victims of the Bosnian war and reminds of the sad lesson about the failure to prevent the Srebrenica genocide. Hence, by adopting it UN and all the parties whose inaction contributed to the tragedy would admit their mistake at long last, pledging themselves to never let it happen again.

Belgrade's policy for Srebrenica has always been the one of sweeping it under the carpet inasmuch as possible in the media, since it took that whatever said about it would be bad for Serbia, says psychologist Zarko Korać. "Acknowledging it would mean acknowledging ICTY decisions on genocide, and condemning it as it should be condemned would mean dragging Serbia in the mud. That's the reasoning. And if you say genocide or a serious crime never took place, the whole world would go against Serbia."[1]

Historian Dubravka Stojanovic stresses out that Serbia has never understood that Srebrenica had become a global issue ever since the crime was committed. That was, she says, the first genocide in Europe since WWII and a hard blow to the whole world. "That was something that made people think again about the dimensions of evil."[2]

So far Premier Vučić's reactions were mere jugglery – quite inappropriate to the nature of the crime. "Extending one's hand" or "bowing one's head" are in no way a concession to Bosniaks but a moral and decent attitude toward the crime Serbia had supported logistically. Flirting with the issue of whether or not someone would go to Srebrenica is bad taste to say the least; the media under the government's control should speak up in some other language about this horrendous crime at long last.

## OFFICIAL REACTIONS

Premier Vučić's first reaction to the draft resolution was impulsive, testifying that he knew not how one should react. Namely, he said, "If someone wants genuine reconciliation, it's common knowledge how it is being built. Surely not with political blows coming from one side…Serbia is not a mop they could wipe their floor with whenever its suits their domestic policies. Serbia is a proud country not allowing being thread upon. I implore all the friends in the region not to even to think that we would ever allow them to treat us as a mop. Not on their life!"[3] A couple of days later, he said, "No good can come of the resolution. Therefore, the Serbian government will not support it. I will readily bow my head to show my attitude toward Srebrenica victims…That means, if Bosniaks would want me there, if that would not bother them, I will readily pay homage to Srebrenica victims despite of all."[4] "A mass and

1 http://pescanik.net/beograd-i-srebrenica/.

2 http://www.sandzacke.rs/vijesti/teme/stojanovic-srebrenica-je-svjetsko-a-ne-lokalno-pitanje/.

3 *http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/vucic-smiren-odgovor-na-rezoluciju* .

4 *http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/vucic-spreman-sam-da-odem-u-srebrenicu-rezoluciju-necemo-podrzati* , June 19, 2015.

heinous crime was committed in Srebrenica," he added.[5]

Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said Serbia would not accept the resolution on Srebrenica and, in this context, circulated a letter to permanent members of UNSC. Serbia will continue protecting its national interests and encouraging peace in the region, he added.[6]

Commenting on the resolution, ex-President Boris Tadić said, "The nature of the resolution could redefine and undermine Serbia's international standing. This is why the government should employ maximally agile diplomacy to have the contents of the resolution adjusted to the country's interests. The resolution itself is not hostile to Serbia but some of its segments could always be used against Serbia's interests and lead toward the country's condemnation.[7] Milovan Drecun, SNS MP, said, "The draft resolution reflects Brussels' and Washington's one-sided policy over the past decade…This is a typical case of misusing a crime for political purposes."[8] Borislav Stefanović, head of the DS opposition caucus, held that Serbia should join in the condemnation of the crime, that ignoring it could solve nothing and that it should be represented at the commemoration of the 20th anniversary. "That's would be only civilized," he explained.[9]

Serbia's official reaction to the draft resolution does not come as a surprise. Belgrade's letter to permanent members of the UNSC quotes, among other things, that the British draft would destabilize the region and political situation of Serbia proper. No resolution could possibly contribute to regional reconciliation; on the contrary, it could only raise tensions, cause skirmishes and further destabilize the region, wrote the Serbian government, adding that the legacy of the past should not stand in the way of common future.[10] Vice-Premier Zorana Mihajlović alone supported the resolution at the governmental session. Afterwards, at social networks people were calling for her burning at the stake and expulsion from Serbia. A group of 400 students of private and state-run universities (from Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska) appealed to the President and the Premier not to go to Srebrenica on July 11.

Over the past twenty years Serbia has been pressed several times to take a stance on the Srebrenica genocide (especially after the ruling of the ICJ in 2007). President Boris Tadić attended the commemoration twice, while the Parliament adopted a resolution (2010) avoiding to mention genocide explicitly but only invoking the ICJ decision. The resolution was adopted with much ado since the entire opposition (the present regime) voted against it.

Although half-spoken the resolution was welcomed by the region. Sadly, regional developments regressed in the meantime, especially since the Progressists came to power. Academic circles have been busy publicizing quasi-scholarly books trying to present Srebrenica as a war crime against far less victims, while insisting on Serb victims in the village of Bratunac (not far away from Potočari). A monument to Bratunac victims was erected to parallel the symbolism of Srebrenica, and July 12 was proclaimed the Day of Remembrance.

5 *http://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-region/6318-vucic-spreman-sam-da-odam-pocast-srebrenickim-zrtvama* , June 19, 2015.

6 *http://beta.rs/vesti/politika-vesti-srbija/6469-dacic-nismo-jos-dobili-odgovor-na-pismo-upuceno-stalnim-clanicama-saveta-bezbednosti-un* , June 21, 2015.

7 *,http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/568218/Tadic-Zakasnilismo-s-reakcijom-na-rezoluciju* ,June 16, 2015.

8 *http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/568172/Poslanici-o-rezoluciji-o-Srebrenici-Da-li-je-Srbiju-iznenadio-sneg-u-januaru* , June 16, 2015. .

9 Ibid.

10 http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=06&dd=22&nav_category=11&nav_id=1007318

Systematic denial and not by political elite alone is proportional to the crime that will always be a traumatic point and a reminder of the Bosnian war. Serbia has been claiming that it was "a civil war" in which "Serbia did not take part" and that all the sides were committing crimes. It has been treating numerous ICTY and ICJ decisions as anti-Serb.

## ICJ FIRST DECISION ON GENOCIDE

In her statement on the ICJ decision on the case Bosnia vs. Serbia and Montenegro Judge Rosalyn Higgins said FRY "could, and should, have acted to prevent the genocide, but did not…it did nothing to prevent the Srebrenica massacres despite the political, military and financial links between its authorities and the Republika Srpska and the VRS." She reminded of states' obligation, under the Convention on the Prevention of Genocide, to take all measures to prevent genocide as soon as it learned about its planning or commitment, which Serbia failed to do although ordered to by the Courts back in 1993, whereby violating the obligation in the Genocide Convention. Nevertheless, the Court decided that Serbia cannot be held responsible for the Srebrenica genocide despite its ties with Republika Srpska.

Commenting on the decision Professor Vojin Dimitrijević called it far-reaching given that it was for the first time ever that an international court – and not a criminal one – was deciding on the issue of genocide and decided that genocide was committed in Srebrenica. "It is most important that the majority of 15 judges voted for all the counts, regardless of their origin or countries they were from." He also indicated to another implication of the decision, saying, "From now on, the Srebrenica genocide is undisputable and as of February 26 /2007/ denial of this heinous massacre equals denial of Holocaust."[11]

## REACTIONS BY BOSNIAN SERBS

B-H authorities have not reached even a minimal consensus on Srebrenica. Serb representatives claim that there was no genocide and that Srebrenica should not weight on the future, while their Bosniak counterparts argue for a UN resolution. For, as Director of History Institute in Sarajevo Husnija Kamberović puts it, "there is no more room for genocide denial and no more opportunities for those who committed the crime of genocide to go unpunished."[12]

Unlike his predecessor Dragan Čavić who called Srebrenica "the black chapter of the history of the Serb nation," President of Republika Srpska /RS/ Milorad Dodik takes that the resolution has nothing to do with reconciliation and confidence. "Bosnia-Herzegovina is in chaos," he says,[13] adding that he would not oppose the resolution should it call Srebrenica a venue of genocide against Serbs and Bosniaks alike. For him, such formulation would lead toward reconciliation rather than to constant discord and conflict.[14]

All RS leaders agree with Dodik. President of B-H Presidency Mladen Ivanić says, "What we need is respect for the victims but all those who conceived this /resolution/ are working against interests of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They say they do, but they do not. It cannot be expected from us to reach an agreement in such

11 http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=489580.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/bih-i-rezolucija-o-srebrenici-nepostovanje-prema-zrtvama/27075604.html.
14 http://www.tanjug.rs/full-view.aspx?izb=184631.

circumstances."[15] Bosniaks are emerged in history but the policy for the future must leave out emotions, he says. No one can deny Sarajevo the right to be emotional about the war and consider itself the biggest victim, but these feelings must not burden the future, especially the future of Bosnia, he concludes.[16]

President of the Helsinki Committee of RS Branko Todorović said, "The Srebrenica genocide is continually denied, relativized and politicized, thus rubbing salt in the wounds of victims. The ethnic gap in Bosnia-Herzegovina is deeper and deeper, people are frustrated and distrust one another…The process of facing the truth has been eliminated from the institutions of those responsible for crimes, and there has been no lustration." According to him, the international community has also failed because instead of working on reconciliation it "made partners of persons with blood on their hands, now denying the Srebrenica genocide."[17]

Dušanka Majkić, MP, argues that the British initiative creates the truth by the will of the powerful rather than the righteous, and labels it "a one-sided stance on the tragedy that took place in Bosnia-Herzegovina." "Should they apply the same standards to these developments, everyone would realize that victims were from all nations, and that is the fact to be judged on."[18]

Serb leaders in Bosnia reacted strongly when Party of Democratic Action /SDA/ announced to initiate revision before ICJ. Milorad Dodik said that Serbs and Serbia were eager to have normal relations between the two countries and peoples, but SDA initiative testified that Bosniak political representatives were of a different mind. "It seems that they do not even want to have neighborly relations between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina."[19]

Bosniak councilmen of Srebrenica have adopted a resolution same to the one passed by the European Parliament.

## CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The denial of the Srebrenica genocide ends, as a rule, in conspiracy theories against Serbia and RS. One of these theories argues that the international community was eager to find at least one crime committed by Serbs to have it proclaimed genocide: that would picture Serbia as an aggressor and deprive RS of its legitimacy while it struggles to survive; the Balkans is a junction of Europe, and most convenient for destabilizing not only Europe but the entire world; having control over the Balkans, one can control all the relations with Turkey and destabilize all the other countries, etc.[20]

Dragoljub Anđelkovic of the Politika daily argues, "The lie about Srebrenica has prepared the terrain for the aggression against Serbia and occupation of Kosovo in 1999, and was used to justify the West's policy for inciting wars in the territory of the former Yugoslavia and establishment of Kosovo's gruesome quasi-state. And that was only a small section of the terrain for NATO's Srebrenica artillery… The Srebrenica resolution tests our readiness to sign unconditional capitulation. If we sign it, there will be Serbhood no more. In almost no time Serbhood will turn into a crippled Serbiahood. So we are faced with no choice. We must stand up and say no. Otherwise, we shall be a

15 Ibid.
16 http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/region/Nisam-siguran-u-Putinov-veto.sr.html.
17 Ibid.
18 http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Srebrenica-opet-podijelila-BiH/293318.
19 http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/region/Nema-Srbina-koji-bi-podrzao-tuzbu-BiH-protiv-Srbije.lt.html.
20 http://www.pravda.rs/2015/06/16/srebrenica-rezolucija-svrha/.

shame to our ancestors, and deserve not to be called Serbs."[21]

The thesis about the resolution actually mirroring the Great Britain's anti-Russian policy ever since 1912 is interesting too. According to it, in its anti-Russian strategy the Great Britain relies on the "Albanian factor" which was why it recognized Albania's self-proclamation in 1912. Hence, the British draft resolution – affecting Serbia and RS, Russia's influence on the region, regional developments and the Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina – is not ungrounded, considering the indisputable constancy of its longstanding policy.[22]

## RUSSIAN REACTIONS

Serbia asking Russia to veto the resolution has been speculated since the moment the draft was publicized. So far Serbia has asked nothing from Russia. And Russia will obviously seriously consider its action in UNSC. As for Milorad Dodik, he had already asked Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to veto the resolution.

At a meeting with Dodik in St. Petersburg the Russian Foreign Minister called the resolution's tone "definitely anti-Serb." Lavrov takes that the resolution could trigger off new inter-ethnic conflicts in the Balkans considering the upsurge in nationalistic sentiments in that part of Europe. He promised Russia's consequent safeguard of basic principles of the Dayton Accords, and said homage to all victims, regardless to their ethnic origin, should be paid.[23]

Chairman of Duma Committee for International Relations Aleksey Pushkov said that Russia had always supported Serbia openly and stood up for its security and sovereignty. For him, Serbia is a rift zone between Russia and Western countries, "not the only country at this watershed, but probably the most conspicuous one." "Serbia is at the watershed between two big geo-political formations not only because it has been subject to aggression but also for being the only country in Europe aspiring to EU membership but refusing to impose sanctions on Russia."[24] The resolution, says Pushkov, signals some Western circles' utter dissatisfaction with Serbia. It tries to undermine relations between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, confront Belgrade with Muslims in the Balkans, and justify again NATO aggression against Yugoslavia.[25]

Russia's Ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina Peter Ivancov agrees that homage should be paid to all victims of the conflict – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats – but one should take into consideration the consequences /of the resolution/ in Bosnia. He denied saying that genocide was committed in Srebrenica, as reported by the Dnevni Avaz daily. "The Russian Federation," says Ivancov, "does not hold Serbs and RS responsible for the Srebrenica crime." "Let's not talk about the past, but about the future, reconciliation and trust that precondition the country's normal development."[26]

21 Ibid.
22 Politika, June 24, 2015.
23 http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Lavrov-Rezolucija-je-apsolutno-antisrpska.sr.html.
24 http://www.alo.rs/vesti/politika/rezolucija-o-srebrenici-pritisak-na-srbiju-zbog-rusije/102257.
25 Ibid.
26 *http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2015&mm=06&dd=19&nav_category=167&nav_id=1006049* , June 19, 2015.

## CONCLUSION

Two independent international courts confirmed that the law defines the Srebrenica crime as genocide, and that it has been proved beyond doubt that genocide was committed in Srebrenica;

The resolution's objective is to ensure lasting stability, progress and peace in the Western Balkans; therefore, it is most important to precisely denote the nature of the conflict in the territory of the former Yugoslavia;

Serbia's relativization of the genocide in counterproductive to Serbia itself; by denying it Serbia presents itself as a country having no respect for highest UN institutions and the one with selective attitude toward justice;

Ongoing conspiracy theories further isolate Serbia as they hinder social dialogue and, more importantly, preclude younger generations from it;

The denial and relativization of the Srebrenica crime only compromises the government and isolates Serbia from the region, but the world as well, and fuels self-isolation and xenophobia.