

Helsinki bulletin



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SERBIA: NO ALTERNATIVE TO EUROPEAN OPTION



The process of Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration is complex and ambivalent. To have the first negotiating chapters with EU opened Serbia had to give up its regional aspirations and simultaneously assume the responsibility for the war crimes committed in 1991-99. Hence, regional cooperation and cooperation with the ICTY had been main criteria for the official opening of negotiations.

Ever since 2003 and the Salonika Summit EU has been encouraging the integration of the entire Western Balkans. And since then these countries have been undergoing processes of adjustment to EU standards and norms. Given that all of them are, more or less, at post-conflict stage, and with unconsolidated democracies, their movement towards EU is snail-paced and, occasionally, dramatic. Their economic recovery is uncertain: as such, it often generates

regressive trends and extremely authoritarian tendencies.

The global context unavoidably influences the dynamics in the Balkans. The Ukrainian and the refugee crises, terrorism, tensions between the West and Russia – all this made EU and NATO realize that instability in the Balkans threatens their own security. This explains NATO inviting Montenegro to its membership, EU's decision to open first negotiating chapters with Serbia, and offer the SAA to Kosovo, as well as initiate another round of talks for "cutting" the Bosnian "knot."

Russia's spreading presence in the region also sped up some NATO's and EU's decisions meant to prevent new territorial disputes beyond the "Yugoslav frame." Namely, the war in Syria and the refugee crisis, and the involvement of fighters from the territory of ex-Yugoslavia in Middle East pandemonium, directly connect the Balkans with the Middle East context and, in this sense, not only question solutions reached so far but also inflame new aspirations. It is most important, therefore, not to give up the criteria for tying the Balkan region closely to European integrations.

SERBIA'S PERMANENT DILEMMAS

Serbia is characteristic for its two parallel though totally different courses – the one of domestic and the other of foreign policy; the discrepancy between the two culminated in late 2015. The period of Serbia's putting finishing touches to its chairmanship of OSCE and opening first negotiating chapters (35 and 32) with EU coincided with a most disturbing, almost chaotic situation created at home. Some commentators named the incongruity of the country's foreign and domestic policy "a bipolar

disorder."¹ And this was more than manifest in the alleged threat of "a coup d'état"² on the eve of a major international event in Serbia in the past thirty years: the OSCE Ministerial Conference to be attended by foreign ministers of US, John Kerry, Russia, Sergey Lavrov, Turkey, Mevlut Cavasoglu and many others.³

The said incongruity testifies of Serbia's blurriness at both domestic and international scene. The gap between its formal commitment to European course and its traditional closeness to Russia grows deeper and deeper. And this is the more so considering pro-Russian feelings among the great majority of citizens⁴ and the country's strongman's, Vučić's, proneness to authoritarianism evident in his rule based on manipulation, intimidation, permanent production of affairs and scandals, paranoia... Apart of that, his closest associates have been behaving with unprecedented arrogance and irresponsibility.

Serbia's unwillingness to make a geo-political choice is a part of its tradition and political history. "Serbia has chosen Vučić as it lacked strength for opting for anything else: Europe, Russia, liberalism, socialism, for definite resistance or for actual capitulation," notes Đorđe

1 Jasmina Lukač, Danas, December 5-6, 2015.

2 The story about the coup d'état threatening Premier Vučić was launched by the editor-in-chief of the Informer tabloid who appeared as a guest talking for hours at the national broadcasting service, TV Pink; the station's owner Željko Mitrović, and the editor of the Informer, Dragan Vučićević, have been supporting the Premier and the incumbent government cap in hand.

3 The Premier himself alleviated the tensions over the "announced" coup d'état while appearing as a guest at RTV of Serbia two days before the opening of the OSCE Ministerial Conference; he claimed that the situation in Serbia was stable and that this stability differed Serbia from other countries in the region. December 1, 2015.

4 Hardly over 20 percent of citizens support the membership of EU should it be predonditioned by recognition of Kosovo; in the case of the latter more than 70 percent of citizens stand for closer ties with Russia.

Vukadinović of the New Serbian Political Thought.⁵

Unsustainable in the long run, Serbia's geopolitical inconsistency was faced with new challenges in 2015. The Balkan Peninsula came into the focus of major global players – United States and Russia. Though back in mid-2015 US Secretary of State John Kerry noted that the countries of the Western Balkans (Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo) were in the "frontline" the dynamics of developments in the Middle East made this uncomfortable position into an even more delicate one. Throughout 2015 Russia was doing all in its power to strengthen its presence in the region – mostly in Serbia and Republika Srpska, but in Macedonia as well – by expanding its "soft power:" in the media, publishing, scientific and, generally, artistic spheres.

THE WEST ENCOURAGES EUROPEAN INTEGRATIONS

Escalation of the Syrian conflict (Russia's has joined other international players with "hard power" of its own since October) and the refugee crisis spilling into Europe via the so-called south route, made the region even more important in geo-political sense; and mostly important to US that, unlike Russia, recognized its interests there several years ago, which it had neglected for some other sensitive hotbeds of crisis. In 2014 Aleksandar Vučić was twice in the official visit to Washington. And then, US Vice-President Joseph Biden attended the regional conference Brdo-Brioni (held in Zagreb following a long break), while Secretary of State John Kerry attended the OSCE Conference in Belgrade.

⁵ Vreme, 5. decembar 2015.

Visits by two American high officials to the region – Biden and Kerry – within the period of seven days only testifies of the significance Washington attaches to the Balkans at this point. Namely, as Croatian media noted, Americans were so frequently coming to the region only at the time of the 1990s wars. The fact that Secretary of State John Kerry – holding a more important office than Biden's vice-presidency – came to Belgrade, argue Croatian analysts, puts across a clear-cut message that "Serbia is more interesting than Croatia from the security angle, considering Russia's strong influence on it."⁶ "No doubt that by Kerry's visit America is trying to pull Serbia out from the Russian zone of influence," notes Prof. Žarko Puhovski.⁷

At the meeting with Serbian President Nikolić in Zagreb (that was Nikolić's first visit to the capital of Croatia since his election), Biden emphasized his support to Serbia on its course to Europe. After the meeting Nikolić told the press that Biden "was well aware that Serbia intends not to apply for the membership of NATO – and had nothing against it – but will encourage other countries emerging from ex-Yugoslavia to apply."

Regional cooperation is still problematic. The incumbent regime is inconsistent and insincere in its attitude towards neighboring countries and the region as a whole. On the one hand, bilateral (including joint governmental sessions) and multilateral meetings are more regular than before, forums of regional cooperation such as Berlin or Brdo-Brioni processes have been energized, messages of friendship put across and gestures of reconciliation made (such as the Premier's attendance at the ceremony marking the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide or the visit of the tripartite Bosnian Presidency to Belgrade). On the other hand, stereotypes and interpretations

⁶ Danas, November 26, 2015.

⁷ Politika, November 26, 2015.

poisoning bilateral relations are continually spread in the media and at the biggest part of the public scene. The welcome ceremony staged for Gen. Vojin Lazarević at his arrival from The Hague where he had served his sentence for command responsibility for mass crimes against Kosovo Albanians in 1999, is just the latest illustrative instance.

MONTENEGRO IS STILL THE TARGET OF PAN-SERBIAN ASPIRATIONS

Serbian nationalists saw NATO invitation to Montenegro as a hard blow to Serbia's interests, although Montenegro's membership of the Alliance can only strengthen and consolidate regional security. Protests against the government and Premier Milo Đukanović aimed at enforcing a state of emergency had been staged for days on the eve of an official invitation to Montenegro. Had the state of emergency be called, Montenegro would have been left without the invitation to the membership of the North Atlantic Alliance. Protests were orchestrated by Serbian pro-Russian opposition parties and the dignitary of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Metropolitan Amfilohije. The official Belgrade and the media under the government's control remained neutral about developments in Montenegro. But other media – and not tabloids only – were wholeheartedly cheering to protesters and calling for the ouster of the legitimately elected government of the neighboring state. The said circles see Montenegro's membership of NATO not only as something against Russia but, above all, against Serbia's position.⁸

⁸ „Everyone in the neighborhood is just waiting to tear us apart. Whoever failed to realize that from the what Filip Vujanović said about no one would ever occupy Montenegro any more, or from the theatrical spreading of NATO flag in Cetinje, understands nothing,” quotes the editorial of the Nedeljnik weekly and lists other „Serbian arch enemies” such as Albanians, Bosniak (looking

Shortly before NATO Summit when Montenegro was invited to membership, the highest official of the Alliance, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, visited Serbia for the first time. The manifestation of the successful cooperation between the Serbian Army and NATO fueled the traditional animosity for NATO of the conservative, pro-Russian bloc and most of the general public alike.

Continued protests of a part of the country's opposition indicate that these parties have not given up the plan for provoking a political crisis. The opposition takes that the political crisis would obstruct Montenegro's course to NATO. Russia and some of Serbia's centers of power are encouraging this scenario.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE ANNOUNCED “COUP D'ÉTAT”

The announced “coup d'état” allegedly planned by “the tycoon-mafia lobby,” some ministers but “foreign embassies” as well, has dominated the media scene for as long as two weeks. Motivation and reasons behind “the affair” and its background remained unclear. Everything was dramatically launched by editor-in-chief of the Informer tabloid Dragan Vučićević in the talk show at the TV Pink⁹; and everything was “calmed down” by Premier Vučić himself appearing as a guest at the national broadcasting service, RTS, on December 1, 2015. But only a day before, the Premier was among those raising tensions: in one day only he met with President Nikolić twice and went to the Ministry of the Interior to take a polygraph test for some allegations against him – and both were in the context of the danger allegedly hanging in the wind.

to take revenge), Croats, Macedonians, Bulgarians and Hungarians. Nedeljnik, December 10, 2015.

⁹ TV Pink, November 22, 2015.

The actual plot was played in the triangle of three media outlets – two tabloids and the pro-governmental daily Politika. One of the two tabloids (Informer), unconditionally servile to the government and the Premier, accused the other (Kurir) of deceiving the public and racketeering domestic businessmen (precisely, one Miroslav Bogićević). Besides, owners of Kurir were arguing recently that having taken over the debts of the German WAC media corporation, they have “bought” the Politika WAC had withdrawn from several years ago, the daily partially in the governmental ownership now.¹⁰ Neither has this media tangle been untangled yet.

“Not a single report by BIA or the military intelligence indicated that a coup d’état was being planned in Serbia,” said President Nikolić afterwards (in an interview with the Politika daily). He explained that according to the analyses submitted to him “there was no danger of an overthrow” and he had no reason whatsoever to believe the stories one washes on TV or reads in papers.¹¹ Nevertheless, in the same interview he insinuated that intelligence services were operating independently and hence preselecting what was and what was not to be submitted (even to the head of the state).

The electoral assembly of the Serbian Progressive Party /SNS/ is scheduled for February 2016; the assembly is supposed to be in the service of the upcoming local, provincial and, possibly,

¹⁰ Under the newly adopted media legislation Politika, like other papers, had to be privatized by the end of October 2015; considered a „national institution” – and openly so by its present leadership - međuvremenu its privatization has been postponed by a special provision. Given the daily’s traditional closeness to every regime the Premier himself was against Kurir’s ownership of it.

¹¹ <http://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/345641/>
Nikolic-Zasto-nisam-verovao-u-pricu-o-drzavnom-udaru.

early parliamentary elections. As it seems, the decision about early parliamentary elections depends solely on the party leader. President Nikolić takes that he stands a better chance for reelection if parliamentary and presidential elections are held at the same time (regular presidential elections should be called in 2017) since he needs the support from Premier Vučić. Nevertheless, the question remains who will have a final say about the most suitable presidential candidate (Vučić, unreformed intelligence services or Russia). In other words, President Nikolić is not Russia’s one and only favorite.

Everything indicates that tensions - and possibly turbulence - are in store for the ruling party; the same refers to other centers of power, especially in the context of negotiations with EU. Nikolić argues that party membership will continue crossing swords over the Chapter 35 (normalization of relations with Kosovo). He appealed to the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences /SANU/ and the Serbian Orthodox Church /SPC/ to have their say about this chapter. According to the Danas daily, Russia supports openly the President’s anti-European stands and considers him a partner in the obstruction of Serbia’s integration into Europe. The paper quotes unnamed diplomatic sources saying that Nikolić goes public whenever “some major task in the process of EU integration is done and over” by “scorning and marginalizing its significance.”¹²

¹² http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/politika/rusija_koristi_nikolica_za_opstrukciju_eu_integracija_srbije_.56.html?news_id=313151#sthash.GNVDQGVV.dpuf

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Opening of negotiations with EU is strategically important as – at least in principle – channels Serbia towards Europe. This implies in no way that upcoming negotiations will proceed smoothly and free of stumbling blocks.

In fact, for Serbia there is no alternative to EU. Therefore, the government should explain to citizens what integration into EU is about so as to prevent or at least minimize manipulative stories about someone blackmailing Serbia, especially in the matter of Kosovo and its alleged neutrality.

The government should make the negotiations as transparent as possible, notably the negotiations on the issues that are most manipulated with.

The negotiations call for mobilization of the parts of the society that have been advocating EU integration for long – the civil society, professional associations, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, and some media outlets.

High schools and universities (especially the University of Belgrade) should mobilize young people for European option and thus at the same time contribute to curbing the brain drain. It is the lack of young and capable experts that will stand for the biggest minus of the upcoming negotiations.