

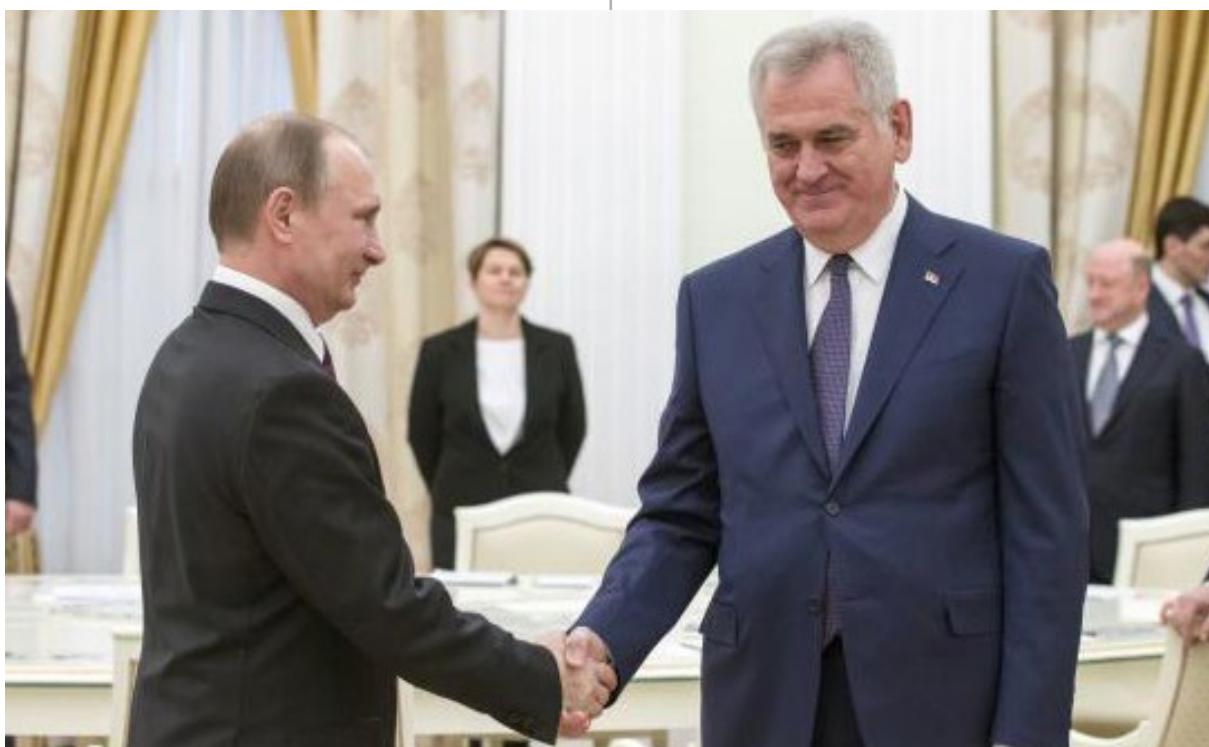
Helsinki bulletin



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

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SERBIA BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS



FONET/AP

T. Nikolić sa V. Putinom u Moskvi, mart 2016.

Serbia's elites turned out to be incompetent for adjusting its potential to modern times and changed international circumstances. Frustration with the defeats suffered in the 1990s wars and with the failed transition paved the way to "Russification of the Serbian identity," as some analysts noted.¹ Unwillingness for facing up the consequences of Milošević's policy prevented the emergence of a clear-cut political scene and political options for Serbia's future. Hence,

we witness a posthumous glorification Slobodan Milošević turning him into yet another "tragic character in the national mythology."² All this indicates a modest liberal-democratic tradition of Serbia's state and society. Intellectual confusion over value standards prevented a consensus on the country's political-historical objectives and the goals of public policies.

1 Zoran Panović, editor-in-chief of the Danas daily.

2 Politika, March 6, 2016.

It was only logical, therefore, that all this played into the hands of the conservative bloc – from parties (Democratic Party of Serbia, Dveri, Serbian People's Party, etc.) through academic circles to Serbian Orthodox Church, University, tycoons and the media – that looks up to Russia and opposes reforms. Consequently, Serbia's foreign policy is something like "sitting on two chairs." But sitting on two chairs turns out to be more and more uncomfortable considering the present-day Balkans where interests of several actors – Russia, EU, US and Turkey as of recently – are clashing.³ The alleged neutrality Belgrade has been invoking has boiled down to self-indulgent "balancing" between the two sides – the balancing making both of them suspicious and, therefore, more apt to pressurize Serbia.

Serbia's foreign policy ambivalence is now glaringly mirrored at the domestic scene. At the time the opening of first negotiating chapters with EU has become official (as of December 2015) citizens have not been less enthusiastic about Europe since the ouster of the Milošević regime. Russia's "soft power" bombardment of Serbia's cultural, scholarly, and, in particular, media scene generated pro-Russian feelings among almost all the strata.

The media – especially those with rightist editorial policies such as *Vecernje Novosti*, *Pecat*, Russian portals and even the pro-governmental *Politika* – have been systematically undermining the government's orientation towards EU – although in words only – reviving negative stereotypes about neighbors, and distancing Serbia from NATO and US (by reminding their audiences of NATO intervention); in parallel, they have been advocating alliance with

3 This is evident, among other things, in Russia's reaction to the adoption of a law on diplomatic immunity for NATO staff in Serbia and its pressure for the same status for Russians working for the Nis Humanitarian Center.

Russia based on anti-capitalism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

No Euro-skeptic or pro-Russian parties have been represented in the parliament formed in 2014 (and dismissed this February). However, judging by the findings of latest public opinion polls, several pro-Russian parties will win parliamentary seats in the elections of April 24 – Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/, Dveri and, most probably, Šešelj's Serbian Radical Party /SRS/. Moreover, parties led by self-proclaimed Russophiles – such as Nenad Popović's Serbian People's Party – and individuals like military commentator Miroslav Lazanski participate in the election campaign in coalition with the ruling SNS.

And then one should also be mindful of the influence of many Russian commentators who have been fueling people's delusion about Serbia's significance for the Balkans and some future unification of Serbs and other Eastern Orthodox peoples. So, Alexander Dugin, Putin's ideologist, stresses that all Serbs are after such unification, most of all those in Republika Srpska, which takes the "central place in the strategic architecture of the Balkans." "After so many defeats, dramas, losses and damages, this will signal a new dawn. The patriotic, anti-Western wing of the Serbian society will grow stronger all of a sudden. In tandem with Serbs, Russia will be able of creating a pool of Eastern Orthodox countries of Europe, to be joined, under certain circumstances, by Romanians, Bulgarians, Macedonians and Greeks."⁴

4 <http://www.balkanspress.com/index.php/komentar/misljenje/6498-aleksandar-dugin-republika-srpska-ce-se-pripojiti-srbiji#>.

NIKOLIĆ: A MESSENGER IN MOSCOW

Since his election in 2012 Tomislav Nikolić has met with Vladimir Putin ten times. Intensive communication between the two testifies of Kremlin's interest in the Balkan geostrategic region. It is common knowledge that Putin chooses the partners he can rely on. As it seems, President Nikolić is "the number one choice" for the Russian President.⁵ Lately in Moscow, he was pledging loyalty to President Putin and pledging Serbia's neutrality: "Serbia will never cross the line by joining NATO."

In early March 2016 Nikolić travelled to Moscow to receive a prestigious award of the Russian Orthodox Church for the year 2015 – the award of the International Fund for the Unity of Eastern Orthodox Nations bestowed for "merits in building ties between Eastern Orthodox nations, contribution to the safeguard of Eastern Orthodoxy or to politics, international relations, arts and culture."

According to observers, Putin did not receive him as cordially as it had been expected.⁶ For his part, Nikolić spared no effort in servility and complimenting his host. "You can't even imagine how much is Serbia grateful to you for taking two actions important to its future and the future of RS as well," said Nikolić, explaining he meant Russia's veto in UNSC on the resolution on Srebrenica (in July 2015) and its vote against Kosovo's membership of UNESCO. And then, speaking of Russia's engagement in

Syria, he said he was grateful for the courage of Russian troops, adding, "Unfortunately, this is not the year 1999. If it were there wouldn't have been bombardment of Serbia."⁷

The talks between the two presidents focused on the issue most important to Russia – Serbia's relationship with NATO and status of the Russian staff in the Nis Humanitarian Center. Namely, on the eve of Nikolić's visit to Moscow the Serbian National Assembly verified the agreement with NATO providing diplomatic status to the Alliance's employees in the territory of Serbia; Russia's request for same status for its humanitarians has been on the waiting list for more than a year.

Following his meeting with Putin, Nikolić told the press that they had agreed that "Serbia should maintain its military neutrality" through "balancing and making agreements with both military alliances."⁸ As for Putin, he was more reserved. He just said that the "relations between the two countries are being successfully developed" and expressed his readiness to "provide support anytime."⁹

According to some domestic analysts, Nikolić did not manage to convince Putin in the continuity of the policy of balancing, including the so-called equal military cooperation with Russia and NATO. Their observations were based on Russian media's reports on the visit, including the stories published in the liberal Komesarant.

5 While the media in the West see Premier Vučić as a leader favoring EU over Russia, the media in Russia are mostly hostile to him.

6 While shaking hands with him Putin kept Nikolić at distance. Two years ago, when Putin was in visit to Belgrade the Serbian President managed to kiss him nine times.

7 Večernje novosti, March 11, 2016. Upon his return from Moscow, Nikolić said that Russia „prevented the establishment of the Islamic state in the same way it had been done in Kosovo.“ Politika, March 14, 2015. .

8 Večernje novosti, March 11, 2016.

9 Ibid.

MOSCOW WORRIES OVER NATO

According to the agreement between the Serbian government and NATO /NSPO/ on cooperation in logistics the parliament verified in mid-February, all the Alliance's staff is granted diplomatic immunity, freedom of movement and other privileges. They are exempt for paying taxes and dues and liable only to paying their bills and customs. Besides, the NSPO staff and their vehicles can freely travel all over the territory of Serbia; their access to closed security zones depends on the agreement they make with domestic authorities.

Much hue and cry was raised about the law on the agreement; loudest of all were pro-Russian parties, groups and individuals. President of DSS Sanda Rašković had appealed to the President not to put his signature under it because – as she argued in her open letter – this legislation “brings NATO to Serbia without Serbia's formal joining it.”¹⁰ President of SRS Vojislav Šešelj also called upon the President to deny signing the law, arguing it would have been “a biggest concession to NATO than the one Hitler required from Yugoslavia in 1941.”¹¹

The latest agreement with the North-Atlantic Alliance is the fourth in a row since Serbia has joined the PFP (at the time of Koštunica's premiership). However, it was the SNS-SPS government that signed the most important three, including SOFA applicable to NATO member-states only. Editor of the New Serbian Political Thought magazine Đorđe Vukadinović argues that Serbia needs not join NATO at all given that it has already “subjugated its sovereignty to NATO standards and NATO command.”¹²

10 Participants in the protests and other public manifestations staged in Belgrade were stressing that was all about “Serbia joining NATO through the back door” and “NATO getting into Serbia through the front door.”

11 Politika, February 19, 2016.

12 Politika, February 23, 2016.

At first Moscow reacted with reserve – and warning between the lines. Maria Zaharova, the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, said, “Russia has noticed that Serbia has been developing relations with NATO but counts on its sticking to the policy of military neutrality.”¹³ Only two days later she reacted more nervously; commenting on the killing of two employees of the Serbian Embassy in Libya in a TV talk show, she accused the West “of trying to pull Serbia into NATO step by step.” “That's humiliating to the Serbian people. They are imposing the Stockholm syndrome on them, they are making their victims – and Serbs were victims of the aggression – love them and admit openly they would join them. That's a special kind of perversity.”¹⁴

Nikolić explained that the latest agreement would provide NATO expertise and funds for destruction of a large quantity of inadequately stored ammunition in Kragujevac. “We have neither knowledge nor resources for it, and this will be done for us solely at our request.”¹⁵ In an article he penned for the Blic daily, Nikolić argued that Serbia was staunch in its neutrality. “Not a single motion of the government or a single regulation passed since 2012 has questioned this position. The cooperation in the domain of security, defense and struggle against terrorism involves a number of international and regional organizations and initiatives.” He reminded of Russia's “higher level” cooperation with NATO – presently suspended on the account of the Ukrainian crisis.¹⁶

Anja Filimova, the editor of the “Strategic Culture Fund” website, strongly criticized Serbia's incumbent leadership. In her view, the present leadership of Serbia – which is anyway in NATO's “zone of influence” – does nothing to oppose it and,

13 Danas, February 17, 2016.

14 Vreme, February 25, 2015.

15 Ibid.

16 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nikolic-zasto-sam-potpisao-zakon-o-nato/8vnp975>.

moreover, “the public is not willing to oppose the ruling elite.” The elite, she continues, “stages brutal propaganda campaigns that impair the national consciousness, undermine the spiritual core of the people and facilitate their colonization and subsequent destruction...”¹⁷

In an interview with the Politika daily, Russian Ambassador Alexander Chepurin said, “Russia opposes NATO enlargement, including its enlargement towards the Southeast Europe,” stressing that any enlargement was aimed against Russia. “Serbia’s membership of NATO would not contribute to its security but the other way round...Pulling Serbia towards NATO is humiliating to Serbs.”¹⁸ The Ambassador did not miss the opportunity to remind that Russia was a warrant of Serbia’s territorial integrity /Kosovo/ and that the two countries had similar stands about Bosnia-Herzegovina and RS (supporting the Dayton Accords and secession of RS).¹⁹ This is exactly why Serbia’s elite favors Russia – because it keeps up its delusion about unification.

Aleksandar Mitić of the Center for Strategic Alternatives sees Serbia-NATO agreement as violation of Serbia’s neutrality – as it “swings the pendulum towards cooperation with NATO favoring it over other actors at the international scene, Russia above all.” Though the law does not formalize the membership of NATO, he adds, Serbia may join it behind citizens’ backs.²⁰

NO “BALANCE” AFTER ALL

Sided by Serbia’s pro-Russian bloc, the Russian side intensified the pressure on Serbia’s authorities demanding diplomatic status for its countrymen working for the Humanitarian Center

17 Danas, March 1, 2016.

18 Politika, March 20, 2016.

19 Ibid.

20 <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/553022/RUSIJA-Ni-korak-dalje-u-NATO>

in Nis. Leader of Serbian People’s Party Nenad Popović was among those calling for reciprocity – “cooperation with Russia to be raised at the same level as with NATO.” (His party has one parliamentary seat and is the only one voting the agreement down.) Military analyst Miroslav Lazanski – on the ruling party’s list for the upcoming elections - shares his view. “If we are balancing successfully and if we are truly neutral, we must provide the same immunity and status to those Russians.”²¹

It seemed that the government would succumb to the public pressure to provide the status to the Nis staff equal to that of their “colleagues from the West,” the more so considering Nikolić’s upcoming visit to Moscow at the time and the announced visit by Russian Premier Medvedev to Serbia. But the government did not yield. While in visit to Moscow, Nikolić formally apologized (to Russians) saying that signing of that “fully agreed on agreement” had been postponed on the account of early parliamentary elections called in Serbia.

The agreement – on the waiting list for three years now – has thus been delegated to a new cabinet. Observers expected it to be signed during Putin’s visit in October 2014. However, Putin left empty-handed as the signing was postponed. A month later German magazine “Spiegel” run a story claiming that Chancellor Angela Merkel had appealed with the Serbian Premier against its signing because of Berlin’s concern over Russian expansion in the Balkans and the Nis Center’s potential turning into a headquarters of Russian espionage.²²

According to the Pecat magazine, Brussels has warned Belgrade recently that the agreement with Russians would contradict SAA.²³ “If anyone exerts pressure on Serbia, that would be NATO and the

21 Politika, February 20, 2016.

22 Ibid.

23 Pečat, February 26, 2016.

West rather than Russia that is pretty on the defensive now,” says analyst Branimir Anđelković.²⁴

THE PUBLIC IN SERBIA “TURNS” TOWARDS RUSSIA

Paradoxically, as Serbia moves formally closer and closer to EU, the general public is less and less enthusiastic about it. Findings of the latest public opinion polls show that less than 50 percent of citizens support Serbia membership of EU. At the same time, sympathies for Russia are on the upward curve – for both its foreign and domestic policy. “Russia has become a factor of influence, stronger than ever before,” comments euphorically the *Pečat* magazine.²⁵

This turn in Serbia’s public opinion – guided by the mainstream media and tabloids – has been notable ever since Russia’s intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. The military intervention in Syria strengthened the trend, only logically. Political parties and organizations advocating closeness with Moscow now have more space to maneuver in thanks to benevolent media.

President Putin has been most popular in Serbia for years, the same as the Russian “model” of politics. Indicatively, they are most popular among younger generations.

Svetlana Logar of the IPSOS Strategic Marketing who conducted a public opinion poll among people 25 to 35 years of age not long ago, commented her findings saying that this target group, taken as a whole, would always prefer moving to Europe and US but would “move Russia into Serbia” speaking of its legislation and

political system.²⁶ So, for instance, 64 percent of interviewees support Russia’s foreign policy, 57 percent would vote for Russian military bases in the territory of Serbia, as many as 85 percent takes that alliance with Russia would increase the employment rate, while 62 percent holds that such alliance would contribute to the country’s stability and improve its international image.²⁷

As it seems, the outcome of early parliamentary elections on April 24 will verify this general mindset. According to some prognoses run in the media, the number of pro-Russian MPs in the parliament to be formed could exceed one hundred out of 250 parliamentary seats. By the same estimate, the list of pro-Russian MPs, apart from those coming from parties such as DSS, Dveri and Serbian Radical Party, would include about one-third of MPs on the SNS election list, those closer to President Nikolić than Premier Vučić.

VUČIĆ AND NATO

The Premier’s Euro-Atlantic orientation is often questioned, usually on the account of his ambivalent statements about Russia. The “Western” international community perceives him as a partner – mostly because it sees no else at Serbia’s political scene of today. Many commentators argue that the Western community is benevolent to Serbia because of the “Russian factor.” For instance, US senator John McCain has chosen the time of Nikolić’s visit to Moscow to commend once again “the strong leader” – Premier Vučić – for “resisting the pressure from Russia,” among other things.²⁸ The Premier said on the same occasion that anyone taking that Serbia could maintain its course towards Europe and

24 Politika, February 29, 2016.

25 Pečat, March 18, 2016. (In the same issue the magazine ran eight photos of Putin taken on different occasions and showing him in different poses)

26 Address at the conference “Serbia and Russia: Russian Influence on Serbia’s Stabilization, Democratization and Integration,” February 22, 2016.

27 Ibid.

28 Politika March 11, 2016.

prosper without US support was irresponsible and light-minded.²⁹

Commenting on the agreement with NATO, he said, “We need NATO as an ally protecting our people in Kosovo and Metohija.” Serbia needs to cooperate with NATO, and only those who would like to see the country back in the 17th century argue against it, he added. Addressing the press he presented the documents on cooperation with NATO signed by the DSS-DS coalition government – or more precisely, by Boris Tadić, the then President, and Koštunica, the Premier at the time.³⁰

Pro-Russian groupings such as “Pledgers” have been planning anti-NATO campaign. Following a protest in Belgrade on March 20, the

organization staged one in Valjevo assembling some 1,500 citizens. The local police, however, stopped the protesters from going on a march. Demonstrators were holding posters saying “Serbia is not a NATO colony,” Putin’s pictures, etc. Reporting on the demonstrations, the Russian portal Pravda.ru claimed that the only mass medium in Serbia doing the same was the portal called “Srbin.info” (a right-wing, anti-Western portal). “The freedom of expression is endangered...The once proud Serbia is now under the imperialistic boot,” says the Russian portal. No doubt that the government will keep actions by right-wing groups under control. For their part, Russian portals and media will be siding with them for sure, invoking the freedom of expression.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia’s presence in the Balkans is not patterned. On the one hand Russia has been testing EU and, on the other, demonstrating its ambition for the status of a big power with its sphere of “privileged interests.” In this sense, Serbia is an “easy prey” considering its ambivalent elites and public.

Serbia’s frustration with war defeats and failed transition is a dangerous potential for regressive trends and delusions about possible changes in the territory. This is what Russian commentators – with Kremlin in the background – have been insisting on.

The government and the Premier need to put across clear-cut messages, especially to the young. Inconsistent stands only further confuse the youth as they see no prospects for themselves in such muddles.

Serbia needs public debates on what it is a membership of EU implies and what the values EU rests on are.

In all this the media play a key role. Their hostile attitude towards reforms – and consequently towards EU – have shaped the public opinion to a large extent. Broadcast media, notable the public broadcasting services, could contribute greatly to change the general mindset.

The University should be encouraged to promote European values among students – not only through curricula but other activities as well.

Youth exchanges in the region – and in EU as well – need to be intensified. To this end, the Regional Office for the Cooperation of the Youth in the Western Balkans (the initiative of the Berlin process), seated in Tirana, should start functioning as soon as possible.

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30 <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/2008205-ekskluzivno-ovo-je-sporazum-koji-je-srbija-potpisala-sa-nato-foto>.