

Helsinki bulletin



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SERBIA AND BREXIT



FONET/AP

Serbia's elite's reactions to the growingly complex global situation, especially in Europe, boil down to gloating; every new crisis is being used as an argument against EU's sustainability, and for weakening of the US power and, naturally, for Russia's bigger and bigger role and its international comeback. This is the context in which many in Serbia are interpreting the country's geostrategic position, the place that is "not in the West."

Many domestic commentators and analysts have compared Brexit with Yugoslavia's disintegration half a century ago. Brexit and SFRY collapse associated one feature: the selfish, xenophobic nationalism that has taken Britain out of Europe 25 years after it had brutally and criminally wiped out a country in the Balkans.¹

1 „...What exactly makes the logic of „Britain to British“ any different from that of „Serbia to Serbs“ which led to ethnic cleansing, snipers and mine throwers against Sarajevo, uricide of Vukovar and genocide

However, while everyone sees Brexit as a tectonic earthquake with unforeseen consequences on the continent and its future, Yugoslavia's collapse – and especially the Serbian nationalism that fueled it – had never been understood as a precursor of a dangerous trend of disintegration of much larger proportions.

The bigger part of Serbia's public openly greeted Brits' decision to turn their back on Europe after 40 years. This part is not explicitly Euro-skeptical but believes in the official story about Yugoslavia's disintegration: the culprit is the international community that is now with Brexit shaking EU "paying up."

Conservative politicians and intellectuals taking that now, with Britain's departure from Europe, their Russian "dreams" were coming true cheered at the decision Britain, "the cradle of European democracy," had made. To them, Brexit is only the beginning of EU's end that will make Serbia take another (Eastern) course.²

As for the official Serbia, it was putting across controversial messages to Brussels. Some media close to Vučić were taking the stand different from the Premier's official stance that regardless of Brexit Serbia remains dedicated to the membership of EU.

in Srebrenica?" Aleksej Kišjuhas in his column titled „Little Britain“, *Danas*, July 2-3. jul 2016.

2 „What a lovely summer morning, what a wonderful piece of news for Serbs all over! The English drove a stake through the heart of the vampire of EU," said Vojislav Šešelj, the leader of Serbian Radical Party and advocate for political and economic alliance with Russia, the day later; *Express*, July 1, 2016.

OFFICIAL REACTIONS

Serbia's administration reacted to Brexit with reserve. Though they must have been aware that presently growing crisis within EU would surely slow down Serbia's accession, the "troika" of Belgrade officials (President Tomislav Nikolić, Premier Aleksandar Vučić and Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić) publicly pledged their support to Serbia's course to Europe.³

However, some different signals were being sent at the same time. While Europe was still shaking with "Brexit fever" Belgrade was denied opening of negotiating chapters 23 and 24 (that were opened to Montenegro and Turkey at the time). And this was what once again fueled anti-European rhetoric to such proportions that for umpteenth time questioned the present regime's commitment to EU membership.⁴

The West's suspicions about Serbia are not groundless; and for two reasons for least. First, Belgrade's has been flirting with Moscow (and with Beijing as of lately) not only as its national protector when it comes to Kosovo and Republika Srpska but also as an allegedly major economic partner. In the name of "traditional friendship and closeness" Serbia has not joined EU's economic sanctions against Russia. Second, Russia's policy for the Balkans is growingly aggressive as she tries to prevent NATO enlargement – at this wing of Europe at least. Apart from Serbia and Republika Srpska as major supporters of its mission, Moscow also

3 „EU is the center of the world no longer, but there is no better place for us than in it," said Vučić; „The enlargement crisis is obvious but Serbia would not change its policy for integration into EU," said President Nikolić; „The course to Europe is not the only course for Serbia but is the best," said Minister Dačić.

4 Reacting to the news about postponement of two negotiating chapters Ivica Dačić called for urgent consultation on „further foreign policy moves."

counts on Macedonia. Brexit was practically a gift from the gods to its deterrent campaign (against NATO but EU as well) that is presently mostly of media-propaganda character but occasionally uses “n tougher” methods: to it, Brexit signaled that EU was deeply shaken and, therefore, had to postpone admission of new members in the long run.

SCRAP WITH BRUSSELS

The media close to Vučić, notably the Informer, accused the US and EU – actually their diplomatic missions to Serbia – of supporting and financing mass protests in Belgrade: numbers of citizens protesting against the megalomaniac project “Belgrade Waterfront.” What triggered off citizens’ growing dissatisfaction (under the slogan “Drown not Belgrade”) was illegal demolition, in pitch of night, of a number of downtown facilities (to clear the terrain for the disputable project).

As it seems, media allegations against US Ambassador Scott and Head of EU Delegation Davignon were sparked by the two officials’ call to Vučić to deny political protection to those who ordered the “phantom” demolition and those who ordered the police not to intervene.

It was actually Vučić’s sudden and unexplained cancellation of the already scheduled visit to Brussels and US (at the promotional flight of “Air Serbia” to New York) that first signaled a serious misunderstanding with international representatives in Belgrade.

Belgrade responded strongly to postponed accession negotiations, putting across improper verbal messages to Brussels officials saying that Serbia would not tolerate such “humiliation” and “insults.” The Foreign Minister even announced a possible reconsideration of Belgrade’s international orientation.

The Informer tabloid simultaneously ran a story about Russia’s preparations for military and economic assistance to Serbia. It quoted a diplomatic source saying that NATO’s final objective was “to install a pro-Western, obedient regime in Belgrade that would break all the ties with Russia.” Therefore, claims the paper, Putin ordered development of a plan for urgent assistance to Serbia, saying allegedly that Moscow’s seriousness was being tested in the case of Serbia and that Russia was actually defending itself in Serbia.⁵

A strong reaction as such – abandoned discreetly later on – indicates “inner controversy” and ambivalence of the regime, torn between two incompatible geostrategic options. Such position the regime has opted for itself will obviously turn less and less comfortable and sustainable. Like many others, this is what leader of the Dveri movement Boško Obradović claims, messaging Vučić, “Make your choice – either EU or Russia.”

SUPPORT TO BREXIT

As most in Serbia, not long ago cheered Scotland’s referendum independence from the Great Britain, so now they greeted the British decision to leave European Union. They mostly came from conservative intellectual circles, Euroskeptical parties and rightist movements and groups.

Generally, the public opinion in Serbia also changed in the last year and a half: only some 50% of citizens are now in favor of the country’s

membership of EU and, according to the Ipsos Strategic Marketing poll conducted in May

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<http://www.informer.rs/vesti/svet/74971/PUTINOVO-DRAMATICNO-UPOZORENJE-NATO-sprema-Srbiji>

2016, 40% would vote against Serbia's joining the major European association.⁶

In a public opinion poll following upon the British pivotal decision, the Factor Plus Agency asked citizens, "Whether or not Serbia should pursue its integration into EU after Brexit?" About 50% of interviewees replied "no:" some said EU had no future (23%) and others because the membership of EU was uncertain; 45% of interviewees said it should follow the course, whereas 5% was uncertain.⁷

It is only logical then that developments encouraged the advocates against EU (and for turning to Russia instead). Đorđe Vukadinović of the New Serbian Political Thought (and MP as of recently) says he is convinced that "we are surely wrong to pursue our 'European course despite more and more evidence about this course leading only to nowhere."⁸

Leader of Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ Sandra Rašković Ivić says she fully understands and supports British Euroskeptics, and calls "Serbia's membership of EU" – a fairy tale.⁹ Europe doesn't want Serbia in its yard but just fools around with it, she claims. Many Euroskeptics share this view. So, Slobodan Samardžić, the president of the State-Building Movement, argues that it has never occurred to EU to take in new members. This is why, he explains, Serbia should start developing a more realistic policy for Brussels.¹⁰

The Informer tabloid and its editor-in-chief Dragan Vučićević – the latter the most fervent supporter of the Premier – cheers Brexit with a euphoric banner – "Long Live Brexit!

6 Danas, June 27, 2016; the agency also concludes that Brexit suits anti-European mood in Serbia.

7 Politika, July 1, 2016.

8 Politika, June 28, 2016.

9 Danas, June 23, 2016.

10 Kurir, June 25, 2016.

Davenport, Get out of Serbia!"¹¹ Findings of street interviews with "ordinary people" published in some papers are also most telling. For instance, the Kurir tabloid "finds out" after interviewing nine people with different "profiles" that eight of them supports the British decision, while only one person takes it was wrong.

With good reason or not, great many media in Serbia ascribes the biggest merit for Brexit to Russian President Putin, arguing that the outcome of the referendum was "Russia's big triumph." Anyway, the compliments for Putin that have already become traditional in most media are now being additionally fueled.

Regardless of the Premier's statements including the latest about not calling a referendum on the membership of EU, the biggest state-run newspapers (Politika and Večernje Novosti) and especially the privately owned that support him unconditionally (such as Informer, Srpski Telegraf and Pečat) have been propagating anti-European (and anti-American) policy.

This is a dangerous controversy, says editor of the NIN weekly Nikola Tomić. "It poisons the society and weakens its – often fully justified – already dispirited Euro-enthusiasm. Vučić playing a good, pro-European policeman, and his media the bad, pro-Russian and pro-Putin one – is a naïve game but the most risky one for the Serbian society."¹²

WHAT IT IS THAT MOSCOW WANTS

The West's suspicions about Moscow's influence on Belgrade's policy have grown over the past couple of months. The first warning signal was Premier Vučić's unexpected, "private" visit to Moscow in May. After his meeting with President Putin – quite untypical in diplomatic

11 Informer, June 29, 2016.

12 NIN, July 7, 2016.

practice – Kremlin’s website published that the Russian President said he expected to see “people committed to the development of our bilateral relations in appropriate positions” in Serbia’s government to be formed.¹³

Sergei Zeleznik, high official in Putin’s party, warned against the so-called colored revolution and Ukrainian scenario threatening Serbia. “People in Serbia, in the countries emerging from Yugoslavia and in Ukraine are well aware who incites protests and how, and how tragic the consequences of such protest could be. It is perfectly clear that protests in Belgrade, the same as those in Banjaluka and Macedonia have undisputable characteristics of the way the Western powers are destabilizing the Balkans” he said.¹⁴ Lower-ranking officers followed in his steps.

Reacting to Serbian media stories about foreign diplomats’ (primarily American) “participation” in Belgrade protests, Maria Zaharova, the growingly influential spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry, said, “Blatant meddling into other states’ domestic affairs has obviously turned into routine behavior in the Balkans.”¹⁵

Ever since the Ukrainian crisis broke out disturbing seriously its relations with the West, and it consequently included the Balkans in its geostrategic priorities Russia has been trying, more and more aggressively, to waver, slow down or completely bloc the countries on their way to European or Euro-Atlantic integration. In its “determent campaign” it has been using the thesis the argument that the governments of candidate countries were working against their citizens’ will or not paying any attention

to citizens’ wish for turning to the East, rather than the West.¹⁶

At the same time Moscow has been trying to impose on Serbia a referendum on membership of EU and NATO in 2017 when presidential elections will be held. According to the Blic daily, the said referendum has been on the agenda of all Russian-Serbian talks, whereas “Vladimir Putin’s emissaries were doing their best to make it the topic number one through pro-Russian parties in Serbia.”¹⁷

And so, more and more frequently a referendum on EU – and not only on NATO – is being argued for at the domestic scene. It has been advocated by the parties and movements opposing the policy “there is no alternative to EU” and which now are now represented in the parliament.¹⁸

Representatives of Serbia’s four parties – the ruling SNS, its coalition partner Serbian People’s Party, DSS and Dveri – attended the congress of Russia’s ruling party in June 2016. At the margins of the congress representatives from Serbia, as well as those from Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Bulgaria, put their signatures under the Declaration on the Establishment of a Military Neutral

13 Danas, May 27, 2016.

14 Informer, July 1, 2016.

15 Danas, July 8, 2016.

16 Boško Jakšić in a series of articles, “Russian Drang Nach Western, Politika, July 1-3, 2016

17 Blic, June 29, 2016; the paper claims that Deputy President of Duma Sergei Zeleznik used every opportunity to tell the representatives from Serbia, „Russia will be supporting you as long as you insist on a referendum on EU and NATO.“ .

18 Replying to the question about Russian President Putin’s asking all the candidate countries to call a referendum on the membership of EU and NATO in an interview with German Bilt, Vučić said he knew nothing about Putin but knew about „some Serbian parties advocating this idea. „But my answer to them is clear: I am not interested in the number of people they would attract or the number of initiatives they launch.“ Blic, July 5, 2016.

Territory in the Balkans. Signatories of the Declaration emphasize the importance of the initiative launched by “a number of Balkan politicians with the aim of forming a territory of sovereign neutral countries that would encompass Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.”¹⁹

A NEW CABINET ON THE WAITING LIST

Though two months have passed since the parliamentary elections, Serbia is still without a cabinet. Many analysts and commentators ascribe this postponement to the pressure to which Vučić has been exposed from three sides – from Moscow, Washington and Brussels.

The interest in the composition of his cabinet that will indicate his orientation was there even before Brexit but after it it got a new dimension. Serbia’s former Ambassador to Germany Ivo Visković says, “EU will carefully analyze the composition of a new cabinet,” adding that it was most important that it included the people wholeheartedly supportive of European integration. “Vučić is aware that one-sided moves

such as turning to Russia...could return on the country’s head.”²⁰

Johanna Daimler, the German expert in the Balkans, says, “We can just speculate why it takes so long for the Serbian cabinet to be formed; however, I would say that Russia is playing on the obstacles in EU after Brexit to put more pressure on Serbia and interfere into its domestic affairs.”²¹

Quoting unidentified diplomatic sources, Belgrade media say that Serbian officials – if they really want EU to believe the membership of it is its strategic goal – should compose the government that reflects such aspirations. “Further flirting with Moscow is also unacceptable and Belgrade should follow EU’s foreign policy not only in the matter of sanctions against Russia but also when it comes to other countries.”²²

Another observer of the situation in the Balkans, Florian Biber, takes that Serbia should not “turn its back on Europe” as that would mean that opposes political and economic reforms, and denial of EU values. “Turning its back on Europe would make dictators in the East such as Erdogan and Putin happy but bring no good to Serbia,” he says.²³

19 Danas, June 29, 2016.

20 Danas, June 29, 2016.

21 Danas, July 7, 2016.

22 Danas, July 2-3, 2016.

23 Blic, July 10, 2016.

CONCLUSION

Brexit precludes serious changes within EU – the changes with possible far-reaching consequences on both member-states and candidates. The course EU will take is still uncertain. This is why all the trends should be seriously analyzed and citizens kept posted on all relevant developments.

“Cheering” reporting the outcome of Brexit is harmful to the understanding of European processes and citizens’ orientation. Turning citizens towards the East – mostly via media reporting – is the same as ignoring the advantages of the membership of EU for Serbia and the entire region.

The Serbian Premier should make his messages clear-cut. Putting across anti-European ones via the media he may seriously undermine the society’s involvement in accession negotiation. And by doing so he actually turns citizens, badly informed about what it is EU stands for, responsible for everything. Most media stories focus just on technical and commercial understanding of the European Commission saying nothing about the values it rests on.

Reports about Russia are heart-warming and never critical about the realities, especially its economic situation and absence of democratic institutes.

Serbia is in no position to sit on two chairs: this only undermines its credibility on both sides. At the same time such wavering wastes its time for social and institutional reforms. Serbia’s actually undecided position further isolates it from ongoing trends. It makes it give up by its own free will active participation in the processes that will decide Europe’s future, and give up the adequate place it should take in the family of European nations; and deprives it of participation in discussions and considerations of a new order.

What Serbian present regime is doing is quite the opposite: it uses every opportunity to justify its policy in the 1990s by placing them – this way or another – in the context of ongoing developments. This primarily implies justification of its warring policy for Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Serbia’s self-isolation from regional arena (despite EU’s endeavor to have regional cooperation intensified) further harms its European prospects.

For taking the country along a proper course the government should be creating the atmosphere that encourages public debates on all burning issues at home, in the region and the world. Only this would make it possible for citizens of Serbia to participate in ongoing European debates on equal footing; and only this would hinder the constantly growing authoritarianism.