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INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS COME FACE TO FACE IN THE BALKANS

The process of building European architecture began in the Balkans after 2000 when avenues to Europe were opened to the region. Dynamics of that process depended on specific criteria and standards implying gradual transformation and transition of Balkan countries and societies. However, disturbed relations at the international arena considerably changed the situation: bipolar world emerged once again, wars broke out in the Middle East, Turkey faced a crisis

and the Eastern question was reopened, and the entire continent shook with the migrant crisis. Once again the Balkans came into the focus of big powers and brought them face to face. Eager to establish itself again as a big power Russia saw the Balkans as the means for saber-rattling with EU, US and NATO.

The crisis in Europe, especially after Brexit, revealed the Union's weaknesses, while the change

at Serbia's political scene in 2012 opened the door to Russia for easy manipulation with elites in Serbia and notably in Republika Srpska. Serbia's incumbent political elite with Premier Aleksandar Vučić has reached the point when it has to prove the veracity of its European orientation if it wants the Western community to go on supporting it as it had over the past couple of years. But Moscow – the loyalties of the biggest part of the Serbian regime already lying with it – also wants a bigger show of loyalty. The question is – is Premier Vučić under the pressure from Serbia's pro-Russian bloc and his power to lead Serbia toward EU hence limited? Or, is all this about a well-organized and shrewd strategy?

Serbia's constant wavering between Moscow, Brussels and Washington, and excuses of neutrality – on the top of disturbed regional relations, blockade of the Brussels Agreement and Serbia's "neutral" position vis-à-vis the referendum in Republika Srpska – sharpened its relations with the Western community. Analyst Boško Jakšić says that the present crisis of Serbia-West relationship is the gravest since Vučić came to power, and that things only became worse after his return from Moscow.¹ During that visit Putin said he hoped to see in a new Serbian cabinet more "dignified" persons concerned with development of bilateral relations.²

Early elections in Serbia last spring ensured parliamentary seats to representatives of the conservative-nationalistic right that now plays the role of the regime's "official" critic. Their criticism of social effects of Vučić's policy rests on a highly improbable combination of family business and Russian capital. Orthodoxy of the petty bourgeoisie is not only an unrealistic alternative

1 http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2016&mm=06&dd=14&nav_category=11&nav_id=1143482

2 <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:607136-Putinova-poruka-Vucicu-Dajte-mesto-u-Vladi-prijateljima-Rusije>

but its politics intensively undermine articulation of a realistic one.³

The balance of power in the parliament actually keeps "the four pillars of foreign policy" (Russia, China, EU and US) fixed and makes the wavering possible. At the same time, the right's "monopoly" on the criticism of NATO, imperialism and Euro-Atlantic integrations – along with the legitimacy it has once back in the parliament – are always welcome excuses to the Premier for being inconsistent.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Ever since 2000 when at EU's insistence regional cooperation became a top priority for all the countries, regional relations have never been at such a low level. The Berlin Initiative (along with its follow-ups in Vienna and Paris meetings) has not contributed in any major way to the dynamics of regional cooperation regardless of all summit meetings convened to have it spurred. What mostly caused this stagnation were Russia's activities aimed at curbing the Western Balkans' integration into Europe.

Tensions in the triangle Croatia-Bosnia-Serbia have seriously grown over past months. This may easily have to do with Montenegro's movement towards NATO. Gojko Raičević, the president of Montenegrin Union for Neutrality and editor of the web portal IN4S, says stopping Montenegro from becoming a NATO member-state would help to safeguard the autonomy of Republika Srpska and to never have Serbia's membership of the Alliance on the agenda.⁴

Relations between Serbia and Croatia – with their turbulent past from the beginning till the end of Yugoslavia – are the most complex of all. Mutual tensions in the past months have had the

3 <http://www.bilten.org/?p=14717>

4 Geopolitika, August-September, 2016.

same common denominators like in the years before (anniversaries of operations Storm and Flash, the Stepinac case, Croatia's obstruction to opening of negotiating chapters 23 and 24, and marking of the anniversary of Serbs' rebellion in the town of Serb), but now the rhetoric used was much stronger and reminded of war propaganda in the 1990s. Domestic problems plaguing individual countries and their politicians' inability to adequately answer the bigger and bigger social and economic challenges are also major aspects of today's relationship in the region. Hence, foreign policies have been placed in the service of domestic needs and, as Split reporter Boris Dežulović puts it, "used without any sense of responsibility to the region we share and cannot – not any of us – escape from it."⁵

Serbia-Croatia relations, however, need to be considered in a larger, European context especially since Croatia is in the membership of both EU and NATO – the very fact that has considerably changed the character of regional relations. Serbia that started the war on Croatia in 1991 with propaganda picturing it as exclusively Ustashi and fascist creation has hardly changed this pattern till this very day.

Sociologist Slobodan Vuković speaks of three reasons why the Balkans has become a powder keg once again: "Croats and Bosniaks are not acting on their own but with a helping hand from foreign powers, especially from US and Great Britain, eager to undermine Republika Srpska and, consequently, Serbia. Big powers want to punish Serbia for not imposing sanctions on Russia and to push it towards NATO. The third reason is the elections campaign in Croatia when nationalism thrives as usual."⁶

5 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/srpsko-hrvatski-odnosi-su-trajno-poremeceni/r3n235y>

6 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/balkan-opet-bure-baruta-odnosi-srbije-hrvatske->

The loudest anti-Croat propagandists are Ministers Ivica Dačić and Aleksandar Vulin, newspapers such as Večernje Novosti, Politika and Pečat, and all tabloids (Informer, Kurir, Srpski Telegraf and the like). The main message officials have been putting across is that Croatia is a fascist state and that EU ignores this fact. In a letter of EU officials Premier Vučić said he was concerned about regional developments and the open anti-Serbian policy, Croatia's most of all.⁷ He added that there were many proofs of the way in which this policy has been pursued, and mostly in Croatia. He stressed that Serbia has never provoked anyone or taken a wrong step except for sending diplomatic notes to protest against these policies.⁸

In the same tone Minister Dačić kept saying that Croatia should put an end to its propaganda and actions resembling those in the 1940s. "Rehabilitation of Stepinac, Ustashis unleashed in Serb and throughout Croatia, naming streets after Mile Budak, Ustashi minister and the mastermind of the plan for the slaughter of one-third of Serbian population, expulsion of another third and conversion of one-third to Catholicism, and even after April 10 the day of NDH, the fascist Ustashi salute 'For home ready' cried at stadiums and concerts, swastikas seen at football grounds, monuments to Ustashi terrorist Miro Barišić who gunned down Yugoslav Ambassador – what is all that if not rehabilitation of the fascist Ustashi NDH?"⁹

He also said, "Croats can be fascists, Ustashi, Nazis or whatever they want to be but Serbia

i-bih-odavno-nisu-bili-ovako-napeti/zk4j20

7 <http://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-o-dogadajima-u-hrvatskoj-obavestio-sam-zvanicnike-eu-o-antisrpskoj-politici-clanak-2378709>

8 *ibid.*

9 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/balkan-opet-bure-baruta-odnosi-srbije-hrvatske-i-bih-odavno-nisu-bili-ovako-napeti/zk4j20>

would not allow them to deny or justify the crimes against Serbs, Serbia would not allow such humiliation. It is my duty to fight against such revisionism as those who forget crimes and history are condemned to relive them.”¹⁰ In saying this, he seems to neglect that the official Serbia has been revising its past for decades, and glorifying fascists such as Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović, Milan Nedić and Draža Mihailović. Some of these have been listed among 100 most important Serbians in history. The 30th anniversary of the SANU Memorandum and public debates on it testified that instead of making a clear break with expansionism, extremely nationalistic media and SANU’s elite decided to have it rehabilitated and thus set the stage for another conflict in the Balkans.

Animosity for Bosnia-Herzegovina grew by the same principle; it reached its peak when Premier Vučić was called unwelcome to Srebrenica, Naser Orić, the commander of Bosnian troops, given the freedom of movement and Bakir Izetbegović said in Novi Pazar that Sandžak was the same as RS. Minister Dačić responded strongly to this statement claiming that Bosniak officials from Bosnia-Herzegovina were after destabilizing the region and going on war with Serbia and the Serbian people.¹¹

Serbian People’s Party led by Nenad Popović (in charge of relations with Russia) released, “Followers of NDH ideology and Alija Izetbegović’s jihad and green transversal have obviously become creators of Croatia’s and Bosnia’s official policies.”¹²

10 <http://webtribune.rs/daciceva-samarcina-hrvatskoj-ako-je-uslov-da-budemo-kao-hrvati-necemo-u-eu/#>

11 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/balkan-opet-bure-baruta-odnosi-srbije-hrvatske-i-bih-odavno-nisu-bili-ovako-napeti/zk4j20>

12 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/balkan-opet-bure-baruta-odnosi-srbije-hrvatske-i-bih-odavno-nisu-bili-ovako-napeti/zk4j20>

SERBIA: REACTIONS TO THE REFERENDUM IN RS

Despite all the warnings Milorad Dodik kept his promise and called the referendum on national holiday – the Day of Republika Srpska. Bosnia is not only weak and dysfunctional but a referendum in it directly undermines the Dayton Accords and legitimacy of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The West’s expectations from Vučić to prevent the referendum in RS were unrealistic without putting him under strong pressure including sanctions. Bosnia is the only legacy – or to put it precisely, a booty – of the 1990s wars that Serbia would give up only if it really had to. All long as Russia stands behind Serbia’s project, the latter (as all its governments have) will be faking its attitude towards Bosnia by saying it backs up “everything the three constitutive peoples agree on” and supports the Dayton Accords unconditionally. Ever since signing the Accords Serbia has been working planningly on building fundamental ties with RS, while relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina in words only. After twenty-one years such situation has become normal; hence, Bosnia can be reconstructed only with large-scale assistance from US and EU, which implies recovery of Bosnia’s economy.

Dodik’s visit to Moscow only two days before the day of the referendum testified that Russia strongly supports this motion. The media, however, speculated that Putin told Dodik to “put on the brake.” Dodik denied this.¹³ Medvedev’s announced visit to Belgrade was postponed; Russian Ambassador Alexander Chepurin explained that the date of the visit had not been set and that a visit as such had to be thoroughly prepared.¹⁴

13 <http://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/region/dodik-putin-mi-nije-rekao-da-podignem-rucnu-2016-09-26o>

14 <http://rs.n1info.com/a196505/Vesti/Vesti/Cepurin-Nije-jos-odredjen-datum-posete-Medvedeva-Srbiji.html>

According to journalist Željko Cijanović, Russia is now a tougher player in the Balkans which is, among other things, evident in its strong support to the referendum in RS. “However, it is our duty to defend our territories and our people rather than look up to Putin to defend them instead of us. Even if he would like to, by a most radical scenario, he cannot be a bigger Serb than Serbs themselves. Russia’s support is not to be questioned – and that’s quite enough.”¹⁵

Russia’s “Komesarant” daily takes that holding a referendum in RS threatens with fueling the confrontation between the international community and RS President Dodik; and that Serbia and Russia on whose support Dodik counts on could be involved too. Dodik just added to that anxiety by calling RS a state following on the referendum and by not excluding the possibility of calling another one on independence, adds the paper. Accordingly, the most opportune scenario would be to isolate Dodik and back up his less radical opponents in RS. Further on, the paper claims that Moscow avoids assisting Dodik at all costs, since after his meeting with Putin Kremlin issued just a brief press release saying nothing about the referendum or support. This could mean that, like Belgrade, Moscow decided not to enter any confrontation over the RS referendum and its consequences. After all, says the paper, Moscow’s support to Dodik would not only cause more quarrel with the West but also mean that Moscow is “more pro-Serbian” than Serbia, Russia’s main partner in the Balkan, is.¹⁶

Serbia and RS have been intensively coordinating their policies over the past months – almost on daily basis. Dodik was in Belgrade on every major occasion. No wonder, therefore, that

15 <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/politika/91224/STOGO-POV-Detalji-izvestaja-americkih-obavestajaca-CIA-upozorava-PUTIN-RATOVAO-SRBIIJU>

16 <http://www.avaz.ba/clanak/256214/ruski-mediji-dodik-u-sukobu-sa-svijetom-uvlaci-i-srbiju-i-rusiju-nema-bezuvjetnu-podrsku-moskve>

Brussels and Berlin expected Vučić to use his influence on Dodik (as he did when it was about a referendum on judiciary) so that the latter gives up the idea about it. However, nothing happened this time; Premier Vučić and President Nikolić just said they did not support the referendum in RS but wished in no way to influence political stands of legitimately elected politicians in RS.¹⁷

No one in Serbia was exactly worried over the absence of support to the referendum. Dr. Nenad Kecmanović explained Vučić’s stance as follows, “Had Vučić said no to Serbia’s restraint he would be called Euro-uncooperative. Had he advocated postponement of the referendum he would be seen as politically inconsequential since he had already supported the referendum on two occasions. He skipped over the trap by saying – without any further explanation – that Serbia was against the referendum but that the decision on it rested on Srpska and Serbia would respect whatever it decided. A compromise as such prevented a possible Belgrade-Banja Luka confrontation and encouraged RS in preparations for the referendum. This is why Dodik responded by saying – true, without further explanation and seemingly inappropriately – “Srpska is proud of Serbia.”¹⁸

However, many rightists accused Vučić of his stance on the referendum by saying he was “resolute to obey every order from Washington, but at the same time – being maniacal about his own grandeur and obsessive manipulation with public opinion – he has opted for the most scandalous and shameful solution: he involved himself in the conflict between RS and Bakir Izetbegović and eventually sided with Bakir Izetbegović.”¹⁹

17 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/>

[nikolic-i-vucic-nisu-podrzali-referendum-u-rs/tx0276](http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nikolic-i-vucic-nisu-podrzali-referendum-u-rs/tx0276)

18 <http://91.222.7.144/sudbina-dejtonske-bih-i-republika-srpska/referendum-i-prikljucenija.html?alphabet=l>

19 <http://91.222.7.144/sudbina-dejtonske-bih-i-repu->

All major centers of power in Serbia supported the referendum, the same as the majority of the right-wing opposition. On September 19 in Belgrade RS Office in Serbia and Moscow's Fund for Strategic Culture convened a conference under the title "Referendum in Republika Srpska: A Democratic Response to Undemocratic Methods." Prof. Nenad Kecmanović told the conference that the referendum had turned into a problem because Russians were interfering into the area "NATO, read Washington, already sees as its yard."²⁰

Addressing the conference Dževad Galijašević, expert in anti-terrorism, appealed to Serbia to support the referendum for it being a response to dictatorship (US) and the shameful position of three nations. Serbs are fighting for Croats' and Bosniaks' freedom and democracy too, and that is why their struggle should be supported, he stressed out.²¹

blika-srpska/vucic-brani-sarajevo-ili-noz-u-ledja-rs.html?alphabet=l#yvComment163696

20 Geopolitika, August-September 2016.

21 Ibid.

Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ appealed to the Premier to change his mind and give support to the referendum, given that "a support to citizens of RS means much more to our national and state interests than praises from ex-president of US Bill Clinton."²² Boško Obradović, MP and leader of Serbian Movement "Dveri," gave his support to the referendum and even suggested convening a joint session of the two parliaments so that the Assembly of Serbia could say yes to the decision on the referendum.²³

Patriarch Irinej of Serbian Orthodox Church said that RS was God's creation meant to "keep us safe and alive." Serbs in RS know best what it is they need, he added and appealed to them to make their own decision because that was "a democratic way." He also repeated that the Serbian people could survive only if united and in unison, stressing, "If need be, God forbid, we are ready to defend ourselves together."²⁴

22 http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2016&mm=09&dd=21&nav_id=1179196

23 Geopolitika, August-September 2016.

24 <http://rs.n1info.com/a192379/Svet/Region/Dodik-Referendum-o-Danu-Republike-Srpske-nije-secesija.html>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Serbia is a hostage to the “policy of neutrality” standing in the way of its progress towards European integrations. At the same time it manifests more and more frequently how much the deep-rooted nationalism – in its very nature and structure – prevents it from turning towards the future.

The RS referendum will seriously affect both RS and Serbia. Serbia’s stance on it actually testifies that it has not given up its aspirations in Bosnia and prioritizes these aspirations over membership of EU.

Russia’s support to separatism of Bosnian Serbs is a part of Putin’s strategy for sowing chaos in EU.

The international community is responsible for failing so far to react more strongly to all these threatening intentions and for taking part in systematic rehabilitation of people it has itself brought to justice.

The RS referendum totally crystallized Bosnia’s inoperativeness and fragility; it is the duty of international factors to create realistic preconditions to its recovery. The international community is to blame for allowing the collapse of Bosnian institutions that are crucial to the integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

EU needs to speed up integration of the Western Balkans so as to put an end to regressive trends that are, coupled with still unsolved refugee crisis, a security risk to Europe.