

HELSINKI Bulletin



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NATO – YES OR NO? (2)



Early April discreet raising of the issue of the military-security position of Serbia (after Croatia and Albania became full members of NATO),¹ seems to have triggered off a major alarm among the influential members of the conservative block. Urging of few politicians, analysts and commentators that Serbia should re-assess all aspects and angles of its controversial military neutrality (Declaration of Serb Parliament adopted in December 2007 during the tenure of Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunice) from the standpoint of regional milieu and its own European future, was interpreted as the start of the campaign for Serbia's accession to NATO.² And the motive for the backlash against that unproven initiative, was the announced participation of the two Serb officers in the NATO-manouevres in Georgia, in May-June period.

¹ www.helsinki.org.rs

² Miroslav Lazanski, «Discreet Charm of Photography», *Politika*, 20 April 2009.

«Defense» of Russia

Decision about that engagement was taken by the Serb government within the framework of *Partnership for Peace* in December 2008. Then the proposal of Individual Program of partnership between Serbia and *Partnership for Peace* for 2009 and 2010, envisaging also deployment of the officers in Georgia, was adopted.³ However in mid-April in Belgrade have arrived the Moscow news that Russia was energetically opposing NATO manouevres in the Caucasian region. Russian President Medvedev then stated that such a conduct did not contribute to the renewal of cooperation between the alliance and Moscow.⁴ Dimitri Rogozin, permanent representative of Russia with NATO, then stated: «... From the standpoint of Russia, from the standpoint of Georgia, and from the standpoint of a large part of the

³ *Danas*, 22 April 2009.

⁴ *Politika*, 22. April 2009.

world, such kind of a military game must be considered as the one of an openly provocative character.» He went on to note that the August 2008 war in South Ossetia was preceded by military drills of the North Atlantic Alliance.⁵



Response of Moscow caused quite a stir in Belgrade. Thus Milorad Vučelić, in an editorial of his weekly *Pečat*, wrote: »Who gave a mandate to the Serb power-mongers to make a bid for Serbia's NATO membership...and thus violate their own constitution, history of the Serb people and Resolution on the military neutrality of the Serb Parliament. No-one in Serbia is entitled to send soldiers and officers to take part in NATO campaigns anywhere, and notably campaigns against Russia. That weekly dedicated to the supposed deployment of the two officers the whole issue, under a dramatic headline «Serbia in the Eastern Front.»⁶ According to Vučelić, that act of co-operation within the framework of Partnership for Peace is a shame, humiliation and national and state treason: «While moving along 'the European road' Serbia through NATO reaches the Eastern front... Everybody in Serbia can see that the incumbent authorities are doing their utmost to facilitate Serbia's entry into NATO, in a stealthy, creeping way, against the will of the Serb people... By acting so the incumbent regime in

⁵Idem.

⁶*Pečat*, 24 April 2009.

Serbia has branded with a dirty NATO seal the face of the Serb people.»⁷

Author Bosko Obradovic, Secretary of the Management Board of the *Serb Assembly Dveri* stated that «on the symbolical and real plane Serbia's entry into NATO shall adversely affect relations with Russia.» He then went on to assert that the existence of political parties with a hostile attitude towards Russia was not comprehensible: «Are these domestic forces part of a broader strategic process of enclosing and suppressing Russia? The foregoing shall surely affect us. Have we assessed the price of this easy joining the Euro-Atlantic wave...we can drown in it, especially since we had in advance renounced the possibility of looking for salvation on the other coast.» Obradovic openly opposes Serbia's membership of the EU on the following ground:» How shall we be able to maintain special relations with Russia, when we shall have to take part in every manifestation of joint policy of the EU.»⁸

President of Democratic Party of Serbia, former Prime Minister, Vojislav Koštunica, after a joint meeting with President of the Serb Democratic Party from Republika Srpska, Mladen Bosić, sharply condemned announcement that Serbia would take part in NATO manouvres in Georgia: «Serb officers have never in the country's history taken part in conflicts in the East or went near the Russian borders.»⁹

«Defense of Russia» public mood which was intentionally created nearly silenced proponents and advocates of different viewpoints. The spin off of that media campaign was a host of public opinion polls and surveys, dominated by demands that the government of Serbia change its decision and renounce deployment of the two officers in the Caucasian

⁷ Idem

⁸ Idem

⁹ *Danas*, 22 April 2009.

region. Thus daily *Danas*,¹⁰ ran the following statement of a researcher of the Centre for Civilian-Military Relations, Djordje Popović: «Since the strategic goal of Serbia is preservation of Kosovo and Metohija within the framework of Serbia and in view of the fact that in that effort Serbia relies heavily on the support of Russia, I don't know how good would it be for us to take part in those manouvres, which are tantamount to direct confrontation with Russia.» President of the Atlantic Alliance of Serbia, Vladan Živulović stated that «Serbia's participation in NATO manouvres was not realistic.»

According to Professor of the Security Faculty, Dr. Milan Mijalkovski, Serbia should not take part in the international manouvres in Georgia for it would be tantamount «to putting a finger in Russia's eye».¹¹

However, in his extensive interview to daily *Borba*, Djordje Popovic from the Centre from Civilian-Military Relations, espoused a totally different view point from the one who had floated, several days earlier in an interview to daily *Danas*. After expressing his opinion that a final decision on the aforementioned participation should be taken by the government in Serbia, after taking into consideration dissatisfaction of Russia, he shed light on the other aspect of that, essentially «benign» decision: «This is a good drill for our army, since after so many years of absence from the international security scene, this would be a good opportunity for our officers to familiarize with new technological standards and be in company of 1,300 soldiers from the countries, members of NATO».¹²

And finally the government of Serbia on its 30 April 2009 decided not to take part in the NATO manouvres in Georgia. It is

noteworthy that the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Aleksandar Konuzin, had been informed of the nature of the said decision several days ahead of its adoption, while the NATO officials were informed of the government's decision only after the pertinent session. Subsequently the Serb Foreign Secretary Vuk Jeremic made a public statement: «We decided not to take part in something assessed as a security threat to Russia.»¹³

Thus the NATO manouvres in Georgia began on the 6th of May without representatives of the Serb army. The Serb Defense Secretary Dragan Šutanovac then stated the following: «We think that the Army of Serbia would not draw sufficient benefits from participating in such a drill. Decision on participation of officers was taken in early 2008, that is before the war in Georgia. Ministry of Defense and the Serb Army did not have a foreknowledge of that drill.»¹⁴

Alleged disagreement between Šutanovac and Jeremic

Despite a host of pertinent, official statements, it still remains unclear who was behind the initiative that the two officers of the Serb Army be sent to Georgia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Defense. But regardless of the foregoing one gets the impression that the said debate brought to the fore simmering animosities and misunderstandings within the largest member of the ruling coalition, Democratic Party, that is an alleged rift between the Defense Secretary, Dragan Šutanovac and Head of Diplomacy, Vuk Jeremić, or between the «cabinet» and «party» of President of the Republic, Boris Tadić.

Before the news about the aforementioned disagreement was leaked, demands for replacement of

¹⁰ *Danas*, 10 April 2009.

¹¹ *Borba*, 28 April 2009.

¹² *Borba*, 12 April 2009.

¹³ According to *Standard*, 1 May 2009.

¹⁴ *Borba*, 7 May 2009.

Defense Secretary, Dragan Šutanovac, were made public. Thus in the aforementioned issue of weekly *Pečat*, Aleksandar Vulin, President of the Socialists' Movement pathetically stated the following: «Dragan Šutanovac must be dismissed, and his policy too. It seems he cannot forgive Russia the fact that it has not bombarded us, seized part of our territory, and strengthened every terrorists and enemy of Serbia. In order to convince Russia, our last great ally, that our Defense Minister is not speaking on behalf of Serbia, Defense Minister must resign.»¹⁵ In the same issue of *Pecat*, a demand for replacement of Šutanovac, considered an advocate of Serbia's accession to the Euro-Atlantic integrations, was also made by the *Srpski sabor Dveri*.



But it turned out that the very Minister Šutanovac in his letter to Prime Minister Cvetković, stated that «the Serb Defense Ministry thinks that Serbia should not take part in the drill in Georgia, because of the foreign policy situation in the region of Caucasus» and asked Prime Minister Cvetković to «propose to the Foreign Ministry to alter its decision on participation of members of the Serb Army in the NATO manouvres in Georgia.»¹⁶ However, as *Standard* has learnt, the Foreign Affairs Ministry was perplexed by that letter, for the same demand had been already made to Prime Minister Cvetkovic.

¹⁵ *Pečat*, 24 April 2009.

¹⁶ *Standard*, 1 May 2009.

According to the same quotation, the Serb Foreign Affairs Ministry at the same time informed the Defense Ministry of its proposal not to deploy any officers in Georgia.¹⁷ If there was any misunderstanding, it was hushed up by the official explanation given by the state secretary in the Defense Ministry, Dušan Spasojević, that «such a misunderstanding was due to a bureaucratic mistake.»¹⁸



As regards the above story, which in all likelihood shall have its sequel, it is noteworthy that *Politika's* commentator Miroslav Lazanski, one of the most persistent detractors of the Defense Secretary, Dragan Šutanovic-criticized even from having too often his photos taken with NATO officials and officers, and never with the Russian officers-this time around sided with the Serb Defense Ministry. Lazanski thus noted that it was not fair only to criticize the Defense Ministry, for «it was not the Serb Army only, but rather the whole state of Serbia which had acceded the program *Partnership for Peace*.» Lazanski added: «Added to an unpleasant, overall impression and unnecessary explanations, it turned out that some Foreign Ministry officials are gloating over any mistake made by their counter-parts in the Defence Ministry. Or perhaps poor

¹⁷ *Idem*

¹⁸ «Stanje nacije», *Televizija B92*, 30 April 2009.

communication between the two ministries is more frequent than the general public may deduce».¹⁹

Debate is (surprisingly) open

Over the past two months a public debate on NATO has gathered momentum in Serbia. It was jump-started with much bitterness during the marking of the 10th anniversary of NATO's Kosovo-related intervention, and then continued, with some markedly dissonant tones vis a vis the dominant anti-NATO mood, when Albania and Croatia became full members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In parallel were made public official disagreements over participation of the Serb officers in the military drill in Georgia. Anti-NATO mood is palpable in the public discourse. NATO is labelled as «a criminal organization.» Suspicions were also voiced that the incumbent authorities are covertly, «against the will of the Serb people» trying to make Serbia NATO's member. In one of the texts ran by the aforementioned issue of weekly *Pečat*, the following was alleged: «One fraction of the Serb government, spearheaded by the Defense Secretary Dragan Šutanovac, persistently strives to push our state into the NATO ...to that end he has reiterated that North Atlantic integrations are a guarantee of peace and stability in Serbia.»²⁰

Author Aleksandar Nikitović, in the same issue of that weekly, heated up the well-known thesis of «a special role of Western forces in creation of the incumbent authorities in Belgrade.» He then went on to assert the following: «Today their principal objective, after NATO aggression against Serbia and unilateral proclamation of Kosovo's independence, is to obtain agreement that what is left of Serbia

should become the NATO member... That is why foreigners and their partners in Serbia act covertly, but in sync, without disclosing that their goal is to such Serbia into the NATO ranks.»²¹

Most conspicuous, dissenting voice in that regard, was the one of former head of diplomacy, president of the Serb Renewal Movement, (one of the members of the ruling coalition, For European Serbia), Vuk Drašković. In his interview to the week-end issue of daily *Blic*, he made clear his standpoint on that issue: «If Serbia does not want to join NATO, then it cannot join the EU. If NATO is a 'criminal organization' with 'anti-Serb' goals, as it is frequently wirtten and said in Serbia, then we cannot take a 'neutral' stance on that enemy of ours. Then we must send war banners with Milosevic picture. If NATO is an enemy of Serbs, then the EU is also our enemy, for the vast majority of EU member-countries are also members of NATO.»²²

President of the Serb National Council from Kosovo, Rada Trajković, puts Serbia's drawing closer to NATO in the context of protection of Serbs in Kosovo. According to her «Serbia should ponder its entry into NATO, for that move could help us solve the issue of security of population in Kosovo. Serbia must work on the security relaxation of people, for NATO has a respectable military capacity which may assist in a showdown with extremists on both sides.»²³

Editor-in-chief of «Nedeljni Telegraf», Momčilo Djorgović, without declaring his opposition to or favouring of Serbia's NATO membership, underscored the necessity for a strategic pondering in Serbia in the context of far-reaching changes that have already happened in the Balkans. Nearly all neighbouring countries of Serbia are

²¹ Idem

²² *Blic*, 26 April 2009.

²³ *Borba*, 21 April 2009.

¹⁹ *Politika*, 25 April 2009.

²⁰ *Pečat*, 24 April 2009.

in that military-political alliance and that is an essentially new, not only a security fact: «In Serbia we don't seem to be enough aware of the key changes which have happened around us. If there are any responses, they are negative and demeaning with respect to the decision of Croatia and Albania to join NATO. Instead of feigning that nothing has happened, it would be better for us to fully grasp the meaning and far-reaching effects of those changes and understand them as a challenge to which we must immediately strategically respond, regardless of our decision as to which side we shall favour...It will be a great failure if we respond to new challenges by resorting to old policies and obsolete theories. It would be even worse if we block and destroy those political forces and options which open up possibilities for finding a new formula for Serbia.»²⁴

²⁴ *Nedeljni telegraf*, 15 April 2009.

By its eleventh-hour withdrawal from the envisaged participation in the military drill in Georgia, Serbia disappointed its partners in NATO. That conclusion may be drawn from the words of the US Ambassador in Belgrade, Cameron Munter, uttered in the program «Kažiprst» of Radio B 92: «We had hoped that Serbia would participate in NATO manouvres.»²⁵ He then went on to note that the the decision on non-participation in any case was a sovereign right of the Serb authorities.

Those authorities also have the responsibility to jump-start a serious and rational debate on the position of Serbia on all aspects of process of Euro-Atlantic integrations.

²⁵ «Kažiprst», *Radio B92*, 6 May 2009.