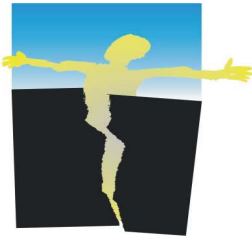


# HELSINKI Bulletin



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*Nº 35 • July 2009*

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## THE PRESSURE OF STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding the persistent anti-NATO propaganda Serbia's membership of NATO has become the most important geostrategic agenda that is being daily discussed notably by the so-called expert circles. Several crucial domestic and international factors have contributed to such intensified discussion. At home, the global economic and financial crisis pressurizes the incumbent government to rationally decide the country's geostrategic orientation. Such rational decision would simultaneously open Serbia the avenues of EU assistance in overcoming economic and social problems. Internationally, the most important of all is the new US administration's intensified engagement in the region, which was verified by Vice-President Joseph Biden's visit last May. At the same time, these developments overlap with EU's growingly manifest endeavor to open up European prospects for Western Balkan countries by "netting" them more tightly. Last but not least, the decision on applying for NATO membership the leadership of Bosnia-Herzegovina (including Republika Srpska) made in early June is a challenge for Serbia: in near future, it could easily become an isolated -- allegedly military neutral -- island surrounded from all sides by member-states of the most powerful military-political alliance in the world.

Though real campaigning for Serbia's membership of NATO has not

begun yet, the conservative bloc worriedly follows the debate on the issue and calls it an aggressive pro-NATO campaign (Djordje Vukadinovic). Over the past several years the NATO option had been marginalized since Vojislav Kostunica's cabinet had managed to push the Declaration on Military Neutrality (2007) through the republican parliament.



### Pro-NATO Argumentation

Except for the Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ advocating, ever since its establishment, Serbia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration as an inseparable course, the Serbian Renewal Movement /SPO/ has been most outspoken in favor of Serbia's membership of NATO so far. Though no longer politically strong as it used to be, Vuk Draskovic's party is a member of the ruling coalition, whereas Vuk Draskovic himself speaks from the position of an

ex-Foreign Minister. According to him, “in three years only Serbia has changed its strategy aiming at Euro-Atlantic integration into European integrations and anti-Atlantic integrations.”<sup>1</sup> “That’s impossible and impermissible kebabs a la Serb,” says Draskovic.<sup>2</sup> “The policy of anti-Atlantic integrations is a policy of rehabilitation of Slobodan Milosevic’s regime and its anti-Europeanism. This policy has made an impermissible concession to anti-European forces in Serbia,” he underlines.<sup>3</sup>



As for other parliamentary parties, G17 Plus is on the same side as SPO. Its leader, Mladjan Dinkic, has most openly of all criticized the energy agreement with Russia. For merely pragmatic reasons the party would not more openly advocate Serbia’s joining the North Atlantic Alliance. The issue is still not “on the agenda” the more so since “no one has invited us to join /NATO/,” they say.<sup>4</sup>

Serb nationalistic-conservative circles received a most embarrassing message from Republika Srpska. Its Premier Milorad Dodik said Serbia’s attitude towards NATO was a matter of “internal affairs” and could not jeopardize Republika Srpska’s option for Euro-Atlantic integrations – and, moreover, despite the fact that the Alliance had “dropped depleted uranium bombs on Serb towns in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”<sup>5</sup>

The advantages of membership of the most powerful international

<sup>1</sup> RTV B-92, July 14, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Pravda*, July 2, 2009. It is indicative that Vuk Draskovic gave a lengthy interview to the daily known as unofficial mouthpiece of Tomislav Nikolic’s Serb Progressive Party.

<sup>4</sup> *Politika*, June 17, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Borba*, July 15, 2009.

military alliance -- for both Serbia and its army -- are more and more discussed among expert analysts. Some participants in the round table organized by SPO and the International Institute for Security in June 2009 highlighted that Serbia’s alleged neutrality was nothing but a fraud – because, from the legal viewpoint, a country’s neutrality is not secured through parliamentary declarations but through international covenants.

Expert circles also warn that “neutrality” implies the end to arms trade. In this context, Zoran Dragisic, military-political analyst and professor at the Faculty of Security, reminds that arms production is Serbia’s major business branch and that arms are exported to the Third World countries. In 2008 Serb company SDPR exported arms worth 400 million US dollars.<sup>6</sup>



The country’s orientation towards NATO is unviable unless supported by the Democratic Party /DS/. However, Serbian President Boris Tadic -- whose space for maneuver is restricted by his loyalty to nationalistic-conservative circles -- carefully picks his words whenever referring to this delicate topic. In a recent interview with Radio Free Europe he reminded of the parliamentary declaration “within which we proclaimed Serbia’s neutrality vis-à-vis NATO and other military alliances.” Indicatively, however, he said in the same interview, “What will happen in next five or ten years depends on Serb people.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Information Zoran Dragisic presented to the round table.

<sup>7</sup> *Borba*, June 24, 2009.

### Conservative Bloc Disturbed

The public discourse departing from the stereotypes about NATO as “a criminal organization that bombarded us” and “snatched our Kosovo” disturbed the nationalistic-conservative bloc. Vojislav Kostunica and his Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ are still politically the most exposed in this regard. Relying on the fact that citizens of Serbia are by far less enthusiastic about NATO membership than EU accession, DSS insists on calling a referendum on NATO as soon as possible. The party specifically highlighted this demand while making a coalition with Tomislav Nikolic’s Serb Progressive Party (SNS) that has recently won the majority vote in local elections in two Belgrade’s municipalities (Vozdovac and Zemun). As it seems, Kostunica has been insisting on the referendum because he believes that the incumbent regime “plans to haul Serbia into NATO through back doors and behind citizens’ back.” “For, the incumbent regime and NATO share the same goal – avoiding a referendum at all costs.”<sup>8</sup>



Vojislav Kostunica seizes every opportunity (including the issue of Vojvodina’s statute for instance) to emphasize the necessity for early elections and a simultaneous referendum on NATO membership.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Danas*, June 15, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> *Pecat*, June 2009.

He believes citizens would say “no” in the referendum. The *Pecat* weekly agitates for that the most. In his editorial headlined “NATO Grip” the paper’s editor-in-chief, Milorad Vucelic, writes, “Why is it that handfuls of people who are in power in Serbia and Republika Srpska, along with scores of non-governmental organizations in the region, wish to take for themselves all the merit, honor and respect for joining NATO? Why is it they would not share this merit with the people?...Why the Serb people should not be given the chance to express their feelings and celebrate? Why it is that only those in power are privileged to be pro-NATO? If they are so dedicated to their NATO-ism, why do they suspect Serbs would disgrace themselves?”<sup>10</sup>

Miroslav Lazanski, prominent military commentator in the media, explicitly opposes the debate “on the most important foreign policy topic since disintegration of ex-Yugoslavia” in small circles. He strongly criticizes politicians addressing “round tables and conferences that are either closed or open to the media” and advocates a wide public debate.<sup>11</sup>



Dordje Vukadinovic, editor-in-chief of the New Serb Political Thought magazine, extensively analyzes Serbia’s crucial strategic relations and pinpoints that all the cabinets since 2000 have been formed with the blessing and bigger or smaller assistance of Western actors. The present cabinet -- Vukadinovic calls the most “pro-West” of all -- has been formed just to remove Kostunica from power and, at the same time, prevent the Radicals from seizing it. “It turned out,

<sup>10</sup> *Pecat*, July 3, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> *Politika*, July 4, 2009.

however, that the third and most important objective, expected to be attained automatically once the first two are realized -- Russia's final expulsion from Serbia and the Balkans -- has been a total failure."<sup>12</sup>

As a relevant representative of the Serb conservative right, Vukadinovic speaks of "maintenance of a minimum of national interest and national self-respect" and advocates, in this context, "a third course" -- "correctness and genuine neutrality vis-à-vis America, because Russia would accept everything except for NATO."<sup>13</sup>

### Spinning Anti-Americanism

The anti-NATO sentiments the Serb political elite has been systematically spinning through the media are backed by considerable anti-American feelings. They have also been systematically construed for almost two decades -- and every stronger engagement in the region by American administrations has served as a new impetus. Though anti-American sentiments peaked in early 2008 in the aftermath of Kosovo's independence declaration (when the masses demolished the US Embassy in Belgrade), the latest "wave" was induced by "the Biden effect."

The grudge against US, which "crashed Serb national interests in the Balkans, while upholding those of Muslims, i.e. Bosniaks, Croats and Albanians" (Ljiljana Smajlovic)<sup>14</sup> was evident at the opening ceremony of University Olympic Games in Belgrade on July 1, 2009, when the masses booed the American students team.

Dragan Simic, director of the Center for American Studies in Serbia, said on the occasion that anti-American feelings have been considerably fueled by the media. "Some newspaper stories or TV features have been spoon-feeding a shallow anti-Americanism that is most hostile and most damaging to our relations."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Djordje Vukadinovic, *NIN*, July 16, 2009.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Nin*, July 9, 2009.

<sup>15</sup>*Politika*, July 13, 2009.

The intensified diplomatic activism among the Third World countries assembled in the Non-Aligned Movement -- helmed by the agile Foreign Minister, Vuk Jeremic -- banks on those countries' anti-Americanism. Many member-states of the Movement identify Serbia with anti-Americanism. Predrag Simic, Serbian ex-Ambassador to France, says, "The same as they used to perceive Milosevic's Serbia as a champion of anti-globalism, those countries see today's Serbia, to a certain extent, as one of the bastions of anti-Americanism."<sup>16</sup>

According to a recent public opinion polls conducted by Media Gallup, Pakistan and Serbia top the list of the countries cherishing anti-American feelings. The resistance to Atlantic integrations is to be considerably ascribed to the fact that citizens of Serbia generally identify NATO with America.

Apparently, some circles among Serbia's ruling political class are inclined to a geostrategic orientation that also formally takes the country towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. Because of strong opposition from the still influential nationalistic-conservative bloc, the rational debate on Serbia's real interests is "sidetracked" for the time being. Judging by positive reactions to such U-turn when compared with predominant stereotypes from the time of Kostunica's two cabinets by a part of public, significance of that debate should not be underestimated.

In addition, the interest for "a reset" of mutual relations is mutual because of the still unstable and potentially explosive situation in the region (South Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina). In this context, it is realistic to expect that Serbia will try to (even) institutionally strengthen its ties with NATO in the period to come. As announced by Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac, establishment of an office and appointment of Ambassador to NATO headquarters in Brussels will probably be the first steps in this direction.

<sup>16</sup>*Borba*, July 16, 2009.