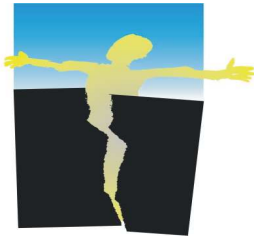


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Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Rige od Fere str. #20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia
tel./fax +381 11 30 32 408; e-mail office@helsinki.org.rs ;
www.helsinki.org.rs

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MEDVEDEV IN BELGRADE



Belgrade hasn't had much opportunity to host notable heads of state over the past two decades. Ex-Yugoslavia's disintegration and Serbia's role in the process – as constants at the international agenda – have only logically brought to Belgrade high officials of many countries, organization and institutions, but high-level visits were truly rare events. No doubt that the visit by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev is significant in this context. This is testified by the interest of media people in the Serb-Russian summit: some 600 reporters covered the meeting between Tadic and Medvedev. This was the first Serb-Russian summit meeting since Serbia's independence in 2007. As for President Medvedev, this was the first time he was given a chance to address a parliament of another country in his capacity as the head of the Russian Federation.

The visit itself was more important for the messages Medvedev passed to the public worldwide than that of Serbia. The first, a rather harsh one, targeted former “brotherly countries” in Eastern Europe and

their historical revisionism¹, while the other a larger Euro-Atlantic community, formulating a geostrategic doctrine – an idea about a new agreement on collective security.²

Medvedev paid a visit to Belgrade at the point when the Balkans was once again in the focus of the international community. Serbia was used as a “backyard” wherefrom Russia sent messages about its international aspirations. US' and EU's decisions to go after consolidation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and deploy EULEX in the entire territory of Kosovo are meant to consolidate the whole of Western Balkans and definitely place it under the umbrella of NATO and EU.

Having failed to prevent NATO enlargement in the Balkans, Russia backed Serbia in its ambivalence vis-à-vis the Alliance. This is also the angle from which one needs to perceive Medvedev's visit. And as such, it will probably give rise to major debates both within NATO and Serbia's political circles.

¹ East European countries managed to push a resolution equalizing nazism and communism through the SE Parliamentary Assembly. Besides, over EU debate on a common narrative of the past they raised the question of interpretation of May 9 as the victory day against fascism – the date that, for them, marks USSR occupation of Eastern Europe. This placed Russia in the situation of having to struggle for its interpretation of WWII and its causes and consequences.

² Russia has been promoting the doctrine ever since the Warsaw Pact fell apart. According to it, NATO became meaningless after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The whole idea actually counteracts NATO enlargement strategy, which is still the biggest obstacle in relations between US and Russia.



The visit by the highest Russian official (who visited Belgrade in early 2008 in his then capacity as the deputy prime minister and chairman of Gasprom Management Board) testified clearly of Serbia's non-existent long-term strategy for international and domestic policies alike. As such, it, in a way, makes Serbia come into the open.

International context of the visit

Serbia made an explicit turn towards Russia at the time of Vojislav Kostunica's premiership (2004-2008) and because of the Kosovo status in the first place. The turn itself coincided with Russia's international comeback announced in President Vladimir Putin's address to the Munich OSCE Meeting in early 2006. Russia's veto on Security Council resolution on Kosovo's independence was the first manifestation of its toughened position. Counting on Russia's support, Serbia placed Kosovo at the top of its foreign policy agenda and opted for the strategy for slowing down its international recognition. By initiating proceedings on the legality of Kosovo's independence before the International Court of Justice, Serbia tries to press for another round of status negotiations with an eye on Kosovo's partition.



Vladimir Putin i Dmitry Medvedev

However, the global financial-economic crisis laid bare Serbia's collapsed economy and made it expand the front of its diplomatic action. Sobered up by budgetary crisis, Serbia had to rearrange its foreign-policy priorities. European course was again high on its list and with it the debate on membership of EU and NATO. Namely, over the past nine years major investment funds and general financial support have been coming from the European Union, totaling 2.7 billion Euros.



Dmitry Medvedev

Domestic controversies

The atmosphere surrounding the visit – from its announcement to realization – was marked by uncritical euphoria³ with accompanying mythology of “eternal and never-ending Serb-Russian friendship” on the one hand, and rational caution on the other. And yet, Russia's announced financial assistance was taken with a grain of salt. For instance, referring to the claim about one-billion-dollar loan the Russian President would bring with him, *Kurir* ran a front-page banner “A Billion, Oh Boy!” and a story headlined “Monies Coming in.”⁴ For its part, *Press* criticized the overblown servility for some Russian demands such as renaming of streets or construction of Luke Oil gas station in the midst of one of Belgrade

³A „Thank you“ /Spasiba/ petition for Medvedev has been signed in the downtown Belgrade, in Knez Mihailo Street, for ten years before the visit; a political party named „My Russia“ was formed in Sabac with a view to advocate unification with Russia, „an Eastern Orthodox mother and cradle,“ two manifestations were organized under the slogan „Thank You, Russia,“ a monument to Pushkin – a donation of the Russian Writers' Association - was erected in one of Belgrade's downtown parks; the Monument to Liberators of Belgrade was retouched.

⁴ *Kurir*, October 6, 2009.

parks. “The visit must not be a test of our insanity, the same as it must not provide the setting for some insatiable Russians,” concludes the daily.⁵

Adding bizarre touches on this ambivalence, some were exhilarated by the fact that in couple of days only an orchestra of one hundred trumpeters teamed up to play 27 melodies – from domestic “Kalashnikov” to Russian “Kalinka” - whereas the others calculated the costs of the concert for which Serbia’s taxpayers allegedly paid at least 130,000 Euros.⁶



Boris Tadic i Dmitry Medvedev

Preparations for the visit revealed different perceptions of the visit’s significance. Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic’s attempt to exclude ministers of the interior and defense – Ivica Dacic and Dragan Sutanovac – from the organizational committee for the visit brought about a conflict within the government.⁷ Eventually, representatives of both ministries were included in the committee. The fact that neither Vojislav Kostunica nor Tomislav Nikolic made a part of the official delegation – despite their overtly pro-Russian stances – was most indicative. President Medvedev blatantly ignored Milorad Dodik during the ceremony in the “Sava” Center.

Who liberated Belgrade after all?

The biggest domestic controversy has connotation in ideology too. Russian President Medvedev deliberately set the date for his visit to Serbia at October 20, the day marking Belgrade’s liberation from Nazi occupation. For

⁵ *Press*, October 14, 2009.

⁶ *Blic*, October 18, 2009.

⁷ *Blic*, October 2, 2009.

the sake of anti-communism Serbia has annulled its anti-fascist past, including October 20 that has not been marked for years.

On the eve of the visit Russian Ambassador in Belgrade Alexander Konuzin seized every opportunity (interviews, authorial texts, various manifestations, etc.) to underline Russia’s role in the liberation of Belgrade. He didn’t even refrain from presenting some controversial historical assessments and unsuitable demands. In his authorial text for the *Danas* daily, Konuzin writes under the headline “Liberation Came from the East,” “From a tortured, fascism-thorn Russia an avalanche of Red Army troops resolutely rushed to the West to finish with the wounded enemy.”⁸ Konuzin, known for his “imperial arrogance,”⁹ kept pointing out that citizens of Serbia “welcomed their liberators with joy and exaltation”¹⁰ but totally marginalized or ignored the role of partisans. He also demanded that some downtown streets in Belgrade, renamed in the meantime, should be again named after Russian marshals and generals (Biryzov, Tolbukhin, and Zdanov).



Alexander Konuzin

Such interpretation that neglects the role of the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia in the WWII (Ambassador Konuzin euphemistically refers to as a struggle by “Yugoslav peoples”) is a direct outcome of the historical revisionism that has been on in Serbia for years. While wiping out the victorious partisan movement led by communists, Serbia wiped out anti-fascism as well and its

⁸ *Danas*, September 28, 2009.

⁹ *Vreme*, July 2, 2009.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*.

contribution to the triumph of anti-Hitler coalition in the WWII. The said revisionism is probably best illustrated by the “search for” the grave of the collaborative Tchetnik commander Draza Mihailovic. Not long ago, Dragisa Cvetkovic, Yugoslav prime minister in 1991 and signatory of the Triple Entente with Hitler, was rehabilitated by the Nis District Court.

It seems that the Russian “pressure” has sobered up some political circles in Serbia in the context of historical facts dealing with liberation of Belgrade and a part of Serbia. Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac said the role of the People’s Liberation Army should be always taken into account and that “Russians have not liberated Belgrade on their own.”¹¹ Neither did city authorities show much understanding for the demands coming from the Russian Embassy. Mayor Dragan Djilas promised they would be given thought in the process of naming the city’s new settlements.¹² Dissatisfied with such response, Ambassador Konuzin cynically named a corridor in his embassy after General Zdanov.¹³



Memorial Cemetery of Liberators of Belgrade

Political level of relations

The most important segment of Tadic-Medvedev meeting was a one-hour tête-à-tête. Apart from a crucial economic arrangement, most probably their private conversation was about the newly established “strategic partnership” of unequal partners. Details of the tête-à-tête remained undisclosed and thus prone to speculation and guesses.

According to *Blic*, Tadic responded to the initiative for a new

¹¹ *Blic*, October 2, 2009.

¹² *Blic*, September 25, 2009.

¹³ Interview with *TV B92*, October 19, 2009.

concept of collecting security by saying he was “ready to discuss the idea, though a motion as such has to be approved by all.”¹⁴

In a larger context, having Serbia as its practically only geostrategic pillar in South East Europe is most important for Russia. No doubt that President Medvedev’s visit was meant to politically and economically (through credit dependence on Moscow) strengthen such position. On the eve of his arrival, Vuk Jeremic said, “All West Balkan countries face prospects of EU membership, but only one among them, Serbia, has Russia for its strategic partner.”¹⁵

On the eve of his visit, President Medvedev said the two countries were “connected by similar goals and common, pragmatic interests.”¹⁶ He particularly focused the economic area, announcing “a detailed study of the plans for large, joint projects.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, a member of the delegation, said the visit would “mark a new era in Serb-Russian relations that have turned into long-term, strategic partnership.” Once they meet in Belgrade, the two presidents will be able to “confirm tangible results of cooperation and decide new roads /of cooperation/,” he added.¹⁷

Reactions to the visit

The visit testified that Kremlin’s foreign policy rests on pragmatism and self-perception of a big power, and that Russia “has not politically withdrawn from Europe.”¹⁸ In this context, analysts agree that Moscow is not bothered with Serbia’s movement towards the European Union and its possible membership of it. Namely, Russia itself tries to develop good bilateral relations with EU member-states and thus secure partners, which will be protecting its interests in Europe (such as, say, Germany).

The foreign-policy doctrine Russia has been developing ever since the second term of Vladimir Putin’s presidency made the most significant message Med-

¹⁴ *Blic*, October 21, 2009.

¹⁵ *Danas*, October 20, 2009.

¹⁶ *Vecernje Novosti*, October 19, 2009.

¹⁷ *Danas*, October 19, 2009.

¹⁸ Dimitrij Trenjin, direktor Karnegijeve fondacije za mir u Moskvi, izjava za *BBC*, 20. oktobat 2009.

vedev passed worldwide. After Russia's invasion against Georgia (2008) and recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the doctrine was formulated as Russia's "privileged interests" in other countries with which it is "traditionally connected by friendly, cordial, historical and special relationship."¹⁹

Intervention against Georgia and recognition of the two secessionist Caucasian republics places Russia's position into quite a different context vis-à-vis Kosovo. Despite the fact that Medvedev stressed that "no one should claim the Kosovo issue solved without Serbia's final say" some reports from Moscow assert "Russia's deflated interest in Kosovo" and express doubts about "Moscow's new, independent initiatives in this regard."²⁰



The fact that it was Belgrade Medvedev has opted for to revive the Russian idea about collective security to be crowned by "a new agreement" meant to replace OSCE is indicative in itself. Medvedev sees Europe's security architecture of today as obsolete and inefficient and, as he put it, "equally inefficient in the Balkans and in Caucasus." It needs to be replaced, therefore, by a new one that would encompass the entire Euro-Atlantic space. In brief, such an agreement – a legal frame for major tenets of collective security – would stand for "a new level

¹⁹ Annual report by the Helsinki Committee for the year 2009 „Human Rights, Democracy and – Violence.“

²⁰ *Danas*, October 19, 2009.

in decision-making and defense from common threats."²¹

The media, too, paid most attention to this part of his speech. Medvedev's statement places Serbia in a delicate position as it indirectly raises the question of its overall strategic orientation. If Serbia follows its European course resolutely and moves towards EU membership, it's only logical that it also follows EU's foreign policy. So, what happens to Serbia's readiness to make concessions to Russia about NATO membership?

Some domestic commentators also perceive Serbia's attitude towards NATO as crucial. They pose questions such as "Do Russians really make threats /to us/ or is all this nothing but a screen for concessions to populism and nationalism at home?"²²

Economic relations

The Russian President's economic package is still rather vague. Major details about the Russian one-billion-dollar loan to Serbia were not disclosed during Medvedev's visit, despite all the expectations. At the joint press conference, President Tadic said, "The Russian President and government positively responded to our request for credit support."²³ According to unofficial sources, Serbia will be granted a 200-million-dollar loan for its budget, whereas the rest of 800 million will be invested in energy supply and traffic infrastructures.

Several bilateral agreements the details of which will be considered in the months to come were signed. Apart from establishment of a joint enterprise (Srbija-gas and Gas-promnjet), the two sides signed a protocol on another joint enterprise for construction of the South Stream Pipeline. Russians will have the majority of 51 percent of shares in both enterprises.

According to President Medvedev, the Russian-Serb "energy" arrangement includes modernization of Serbia's Oil Industry /NIS/ with a view of turning the company into a regional leader in the domain of energy supply. Given that

²¹ President Medvedev's address to the Serbian Parliament, broadcast live by RTS, October 20, 2009.

²² Bosko Jaksic, "A Question or Two for Medvedev," *Politika*, October 18, 2009.

²³ *RTS*, October 20, 2009.

Serbia, the region and a considerable number of European countries are dependent on Russia's energy, such deals are significant for energy security. However, economic analysts warn that business credits will probably be conditioned by engagement of Russian contractors so that a rather big portion of the funds will "go back" to Russia.



Economic relations between Serbia and Russia have not been that important for either of the two countries so far. Russia has ranked as the 19th country on the list of investors in Serbia and there has been a huge imbalance in the barter economy. That is logical to a certain extent since Serbia imports gas and oil from Russia. With its modest supply, Serbia cannot be a major player at Russia's huge market.

Judging by the data of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, the scope of bilateral trade has been rather reduced by the economic crisis. In the first eight months of 2009, Russian export to Serbia exceeded 1.1 billion US dollars, whereas Serbia's export to Russia was just above 160 million. When compared with 2008 – when Serbian-Russian trade was over 4 billion dollars (and also rather imbalanced for Serbia) – the reduction has been drastic.

The least transparent agreement signed on the occasion deals with construction of "an emergency center" in Nis. Namely, the public has learned nothing so far about the details of the arrangement.

Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Serbia needs to be perceived in a larger international context, notably that of resettlement of Russian-American relations. Medvedev himself referred to "the need for harmonization of relations with the US." In addition, contacts between Moscow and Washington have been intensified.

Regardless of all the promises made about economic assistance, the visit showed that Serbia's so-called neutrality was unsustainable. It becomes more and more obvious that Serbia has to take a clear-cut geostrategic course in the search of optimal solutions to its national and state interests.

Expectations of a part of Serbia's elite that Russian support would considerably influence the status of Kosovo are unrealistic – and primarily because of Russia's new international positioning and its policy for Georgia. Russia, therefore, cannot play any major role in Serbia's domestic policies except for further development of bilateral economic relations.

Despite media spinning of the visit's importance for Serbia, the summit meeting seems not to be welcomed in unison by public in Serbia. Awareness about Serbia's place in Europe and the need for clear definition of such a course gradually but certainly raises among citizens. The country's conservative-populist elites (Serbian Orthodox Church, Academy of Arts and Sciences, some army circles, in addition to Kostunica's and Nikolic's parties) incline towards Russia, but pragmatism of the pro-European elites is growingly convincing.