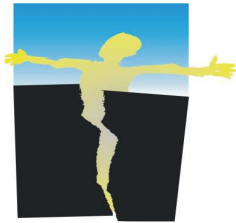


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Montenegro: Regime in Podgorica Constantly Criminalized

Relations between Serbia and Montenegro aggravated after Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo (October 2008) to which Belgrade responded by expelling the Montenegrin Ambassador. When Podgorica and Prishtina established diplomatic relations (November 2009) Belgrade withdrew its ambassador to Montenegro. Montenegrin President Filip Vujanovic paid an official Belgrade to Serbia in May 2009, but the visit itself did not contribute to full normalization of bilateral relations. Besides, Montenegro definitely opted for Euro-Atlantic integrations and applied for EU candidacy, NATO endorsed a plan of action for Montenegro's membership (December 2009) and, most importantly, the Montenegrin parliament already adopted a declaration condemning the Srebrenica genocide.

Serbia still aspires to play an arbiter in some exclusively internal affairs of its neighbor. Such tendency is notably mirrored in Belgrade's "concern" for Serbs in Montenegro and their status. Actually, it tries to "order" a kind of status local Serbs

should be accorded. With an approach as such, Serbia overtly supports the pro-Serb opposition in Montenegro, which has been playing on the thesis about allegedly jeopardized Serb people, Serbhood and Serb language.



Filip Vujanovic

For its part, Serbia constantly plays on the story about Montenegrin Premier Milo Djukanovic's alleged involvement in cigarette trafficking and "the criminogenic nature" of the incumbent regime in Podgorica. This was particularly evident after Montenegrin parliamentary elections in March 2009, when the ruling coalition won an absolute majority of vote. To justify the last in the series of its electoral defeats, Montenegrin opposition claims they were rigged,



FOND ZA OTVORENO DRUŠTVO

whereas electoral campaigns ensuring Djukanovic victory are funded through criminal activities. According to the pro-Serb opposition, the outcome of the independence referendum in 2006 was due to the hookup between the regime and organized crime. Such and similar claims and assaults at the ruling coalition, notably at Djukanovic, find a strong echo in Serbian media.



Milo Djukanovic

The Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/ recognizes neither the Montenegrin state nor the Montenegrin nation. SPC would neither recognize the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which attracts more and more believers and adherents. SPC openly interferes into political processes in Montenegro despite Montenegro's constitutional, secular character. Pro-Serb parties in Montenegro have not only been created by SPC but also, like many other organizations, operate under its influence. So, an Assembly of Serbs in Montenegro has been established in the Moraca monastery. Main promoter of SPC activities in Montenegro is Metropolitan Amfilohije Radovic.

The newly elected SPC patriarch, Irinej, did not miss the opportunity to underline that Montenegrins and Serbs were the same people. "Separation of Serbia and Montenegro is senseless and irrational, given that we are the same people with same roots,"¹ he said and called the Montenegrin church "a

mock community unfortunately supported by the state."²

The media in Serbia are constantly campaigning against Montenegrin tourism: they play on the thesis about high prices, bad conditions and primitive service. Their list of the reasons why one should not vacation at Montenegrin coast goes as far as including Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo independence. The year 2008, as the year of Montenegro's high tourism, will be remembered by "high expectations falling short," they gloated.

Serbia's diplomatic claims

Serbia strongly responded to Montenegro's decision to establish diplomatic relations with Prishtina once it recognized the new state. It promptly messaged the Montenegrin government that opening of a Montenegrin embassy in Prishtina further aggravated bilateral relations. Zoran Lutovac, Serbia's ambassador to Montenegro, demanded postponement of diplomatic relations with Kosovo until the ruling of the International Court of Justice.

Serbia requested to open three consulates in Montenegro – in Herceg Novi, Niksic and Bar. Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic explained that Serbia was duty-bound to protect its nationals in Montenegro. The Montenegrin government turned down the request as excessive – Montenegro is a country too small to host three consulates, one is quite enough, said the government. Then Belgrade warned Podgorica to think twice before sending an ambassador to Serbia, coming from the political structure that had won the March parliamentary elections. Premier Milo Djukanovic responded by saying that was "a continued tendency to govern Montenegro outside Montenegro." When the Montenegrin government

¹ Kurir, January 27, 2010.

² Blic, January 27, 2010.

appointed Igor Jovic ambassador to Serbia, the Serbian media begun running the stories about him being suspected for cigarette, booze and food smuggling in his capacity as Montenegrin ambassador to Ethiopia. The Blic daily run a story headlined "Podgorica Sends a Smuggler for Ambassador to Serbia."³

Serbia seizes every opportunity to belittle Montenegro's independence. So, without any official announcement and arrangements, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic went to Bijelo Polje to attend a ceremony marking St. Sava Day. "Throughout history, Serbia and Montenegro were walking side by side and never quarreled...Togetherness between peoples of Serbia and Montenegro – togetherness in religion, customs and spiritual heritage – is indestructible," said Jeremic addressing the audience.⁴



Vuk Jeremic

Serbs in Montenegro

The pro-Serb opposition claims special rights for the Serbs in Montenegro. However, it is divided over the issue. A smaller portion of that opposition, actually the Serb Radical Party, advocates a national minority status for Serbs. With Belgrade's support, the rest – the

biggest portion – would not proceed with such demand. On several occasions, Serbian President Boris Tadic emphasized that Serbs could not be a national minority in Montenegro. At the summit conference of South East European states in Cetinje, he said, "Serb roots in Montenegro are deep and that's a scholarly fact...Therefore, we cannot accept that Serbs in Montenegro are treated as a national minority."⁵ It was neither acceptable to him, he said, that the Serb language and culture in Montenegro are in the minority. "Montenegrins in Serbia are autochthonous people, the same as Serbs in Montenegro," said President Tadic, adding, "Nobody has the right to question Montenegrin identity in Serbia, the same as no one could possibly question Serbian identity in Montenegro." He messaged that Serbia's policy was not hegemonic, but Belgrade was only duty-bound to safeguard Serbian cultural heritage in all the countries in the region.⁶

The leader of the parliamentary party – New Serb Democracy, Andrija Mandic, sided with Tadic. According to him, it was with the funds from the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists that the Serb Radical Party imposed the thesis about the status of a national minority for Serbs. His party supports the Serbian government's plan for the establishment of a regional assembly of diaspora and Serbs, which would be invested with authority in certain fields under a relevant law, he added.⁷

Miodrag Jaksic, state secretary of the Ministry for Diaspora, claimed, "Serbs in Montenegro do not enjoy even minimal constitutional rights in the domains of culture, information, education and religion." In response, the official Podgorica underlined that Montenegro was a civil state the constitution of which guarantees expression of all

³ Blic, September 4, 2009.

⁴ Vecernje Novosti, January 28, 2010.



⁵ Kurir, June 5, 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vecernje Novosti, June 1, 2009.

differences and that Belgrade's claims were ungrounded.⁸

The media in Serbia also constantly speculate the size of Serb population in Montenegro. According to the correspondent for the *Politika* daily, only 13,000 Serbs work for Montenegro's educational institutions: a negligible percentage of them is engaged in 21 kindergartens, 161 elementary schools and 49 secondary schools, whereas they keep low profile at the University to "avoid repressive actions."⁹

Montenegro's attitude towards Kosovo

Montenegro's decision to establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo angered Belgrade. Such an act, said Foreign Minister Jeremic, "undermines regional stability and hinders the establishment of the best possible relations among neighbors." "Podgorica's decision to establish diplomatic relations with the illegal, secessionist authorities in Prishtina cannot go unpunished," he threatened.¹⁰ In the attempt to soothe Jeremic's threatening statement, Dragoljub Micunovic, president of DS Political Council, said Serbia should not raise hell over diplomatic relations between Montenegro and Kosovo. However, he added, "We must make no bones about their motion. It's thoughtless and made while the process in The Hague is still on. It cannot be considered well-intentioned."¹¹

The Saric case

When two tons of cocaine were confiscated at yacht "Maui" sailing under British flag in Santiago Vasquez, Uruguay, the police

apprehended a Serb and his accountant, an Uruguayan, intent to load cocaine onto an ocean liner. While the investigation into the background and masterminds of this obviously well-organized mafia operation is still on, a media war against Montenegro is in full swing in Serbia. Darko Saric, the central figure of the case for the time being, is suspected of having laundered the cocaine money in Serbia mostly where he was buying real estate (in Vojvodina, in the first place), business premises, companies, hotels, lands, etc. The fact that not a single institution has suspected the source of these funds indicates that Saric must have had powerful mentors in Serbia, too.

"The Saric case" opened a new chapter in the struggle against organized crime in Serbia and in the region. Even President Tadic commented it by saying, "Today, Serbia is under the attack of organized crime, which cannot be identified as Serb only. There is no doubt that this criminal group was closely connected with same groups in South East Europe, as well as in the European Union and Latin America."¹²



However, Slobodan Homen, state secretary of the Ministry of Justice, said he doubted Montenegrin authorities' readiness to cooperate with Serbia in the investigation against Darko Saric's gang. "The very fact that Serbia's wishes were not met – i.e. that its request for postponed

⁸ Borba, August 19, 2009.

⁹ Politika, January 6-7, 2009.

¹⁰ Tanjug, January 16, 2010.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Vreme, February 25, 2010.

submission of evidence (against two suspects in the criminal enterprise) was turned down – make us suspicious,” said Homen.¹³ According to him, Saric’s gang has operated for ten-odd years, no one has ever said a word about it, its members had not been arrested in the Saber operation and the media have never run stories about it. As he put it, it is necessary to investigate into the extent of the gang’s undisputable connections within the Ministry of the Interior, politics, political parties and the media. “It is in criminals’ interest to finance opposition and the regime alike. By financing everyone you are protected. When this government was formed the chain must have broken at some point...One cannot claim that no one in this government was involved given that it is still on the investigation to ascertain that,” said Homen.¹⁴

Regional cooperation in the struggle against organized crime figures as one of EU preconditions for the region’s integration – and, as such, calls for coordinated actions. However, Serbia used the Saric case for further criminalization of Montenegro that is anyway discussed in the media on daily basis.



Slobodan Homen

By overtly promoting Nebojsa Medojevic, leader of the Movement for Changes, the Belgrade elite and the media actually work towards the attainment of his goal: ouster of Montenegrin Premier Milo Djukanovic. The publicity given to it in Serbia creates the impression that Djukanovic’s downfall is only a matter of time and that US sides with Medojevic. This leads to the conclusion that, for Belgrade, Djukanovic’s departure equals the end of Montenegro’s independence.

Serbia relinquishes its paternalistic attitude towards Montenegro slowly and painfully. Serbia still nourishes territorial aspirations towards Montenegro, notably in the context of access to Adriatic Sea (the plans for the purchase of the Bar Port). An attitude as such aims at slowing down Montenegro’s accession to EU and NATO.

Serbia needs to improve relations with Montenegro by respecting its specific national interests, the same as the fact that it is on Montenegro, as an independent state, to decide on these interests.

Distrust in Montenegrin authorities’ readiness and capacity to perform their duties, including the fight against organized crime, is systematically promoted.



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¹³ Tanjug, February 11, 2010.

¹⁴ Isto.

