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Serbia Trapped In A Vicious Circle: From Republika Srpska To Kosovo

Serbia's behavior – notably at international level – is dictated by its proclaimed strategic goals and priorities summed up in the slogan “Both Kosovo and EU.” These are mutually opposed goals and contrary to the criteria and preconditions for EU membership.

Controversial behavior at both domestic and international scenes stems from inner tensions and the pressure from the actors who actually determine Serbia's strategic goals. On the one hand, “realpolitik” (necessitated by the country's almost catastrophic economic situation in the first place) calls for rationalization of these goals along European course. On the other hand, the once “warring lobby” (patriotic bloc) insists on the attainment of warring goals by legal and diplomatic means. After the fall of Milosevic's regime this bloc was reinforced with intellectual “followers” of the nationalistic-conservative option.

Application for EU candidacy (in late 2009) implies acknowledgment of the new realities

in the region, i.e. recognition of all the states emerging from ex-Yugoslavia. Intent to “close down the Balkan question” as soon as possible, international factors such as US and EU keep reminding of this fact and of Serbia's obligations. A closed Balkan question opens up the avenues to EU for all newly emerged states, including Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, within their present borders.



Boris Tadic: application for EU candidacy

Trapped in a vicious circles of its own, official Belgrade acts inconsequently and confusingly. As it tries to reconcile incompatibilities, its actions oscillate between “Europe” and “patriotism.” On the one hand, the government and President Boris

Tadic are under the pressure from international community, under the pressure from economic reality at home and under the pressure from their own promises to the citizens who voted for the European option in 2008. On the other hand, the conservative bloc insists that “there is an alternative to EU.”

Conservative bloc, lead by Vojislav Kostunica and Tomislav Nikolic, is strong. It is also backed by mighty informal centers of power and individuals advocating the attainment of national goals at all costs, even at the cost of refraining from EU. A part of the Democratic Party itself is also close to this bloc and its actions generate inter-party tensions. Former head of ex-Premier Kostunica’s office, Aleksandar Nikitovic, says the incumbent government’s policy – “EU has no alternative” – “is entirely without any political wisdom and elementary statesmanship vision.”¹



Vojislav Kostunica

This circle strongly criticizes any fresh advance towards acceptance of European values. It argues that such advances are at the detriment “of the state and the nation.” Editor-in-chief of *New Serb Political Thought* /*Nova srpska politicka misao*/ magazine Djordje Vukadinovic, who also belongs to this circle, calls President Boris Tadic’s avoidance of the regional summit at Brdo by Kranj, Slovenia, “a small diplomatic triumph.” Along the same lines is the statement by Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic. Should Serbia be forced to choose between Europe and Kosovo, it would opt for Kosovo, said Jeremic.

¹ *Danas*, March 17, 2010.

According to him, adoption of the parliamentary Resolution on Srebrenica was a mistake. “The moment something clever is done and a right move taken, three wrong moves are taken to make them senseless and everything starts from the beginning or becomes even worse than it was,” says Jeremic.²

Trapped as it is, the official Belgrade wavers between concessions (in Kosovo) and oscillating over Bosnia. Financial difficulties and the economic stalemate impose adoption of realistic goals. Serbia’s potential for blackmail is smaller and smaller: neighboring countries and the international community have understood its strategy at long last. Insistence on the goals advocated by the conservative bloc reflects the spirit of provincialism and misunderstanding of the new context of international relations.

“Step-by-step” strategy for North Kosovo

The international strategy for Kosovo is effective regardless of everything. Though slowly and with inadequate efficiency, international actors are “conquering” North Kosovo. Their objective is to have Northern Mitrovica and another three municipalities gradually integrated into Kosovo governance. The plan is not formally backed by the European Union but surely has its silent support. Opening of “EU House” in Northern Mitrovica (March 25, 2010) testified to this.

EU has developed a strategy for North Kosovo and will be indirectly assisting the implementation of the strategy by the International Civilian Office /ICO/ and the Kosovo government.

² *Politika*, March 30, 2010.



Prishtina-based *Koha Ditore* daily writes that the “step-by-step” approach aims for three major moves forward: visible and functional presence of EULEX north of the Ibar River, opening of a EU house dominated by Serbs and visibility for the EC projects for betterment of people’s everyday life.³

EU envoy to the North Kosovo and head of European House, Michael Giffoni, says that all the 27 EU member-states have provided him their support in his capacity as mediator for Kosovo’s north. “My role is very clear. My task is to promote the values cherished by the European Union, and these values concern all people – in the North and in the entire Kosovo alike – and to initiate settlement of the problems dealing with the quality of people’s life in a pragmatic manner,” he said.⁴ Mr. Giffoni also underlines that opening of the EU House in Northern Mitrovica creates preconditions for “EU’s credibility and implementation of the projects dealing with improvement of living conditions for local population.”⁵

Such course of events in the field counteracts the official Belgrade’s strategy for partition of Kosovo. Belgrade has planned to “peg” Northern Kosovo to Serbia through parallel institutions it had installed there solely for this purpose.

Nervous tension grows

Tensions in Belgrade grew when the International Court of Justice /ICJ/ unofficially released that its advisory opinion on the legality of Kosovo’s independence would be available only by the end of the year (and not before November 2010) rather than in the

³ *Koha Ditore*, March 24, 2010.

⁴ Blic, March 22, 2010.

⁵ Ibid.



first half of 2010 as it expected. That was a piece of bad news for Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic because, as he put it, an early advisory opinion suited Serbia. “We feel confident about our legal argumentation. The more time passes from today and the moment of decision, the more opportunities for pressurizing the court,” he said.⁶

Be it as it may, Serbia will not be in the position to use (the hoped for) advisory opinion of ICJ for initiating a debate on Kosovo at the forthcoming session of the UN General Assembly (this September) and possibly induce another UN resolution calling for renewed status negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina. The strategy itself is based on the plan for Kosovo’s partition.

In this context, critical remarks about Serbia’s attitude towards Kosovo such as “it knows what it wants not but doesn’t know what it wants” are already circulating. So, for instance, *Politika* daily runs in its regular column, “What Serbia could possibly give up? The territory with majority Albanian population that has been denying, de jure and de facto, the state of Serbia for two decades? And if it gives it up, what it wants in return? What are Serbia’s minimal claims? Ahtisaari’s negotiations are over long ago and citizens have the right to know what it is Serbia would never accept...And finally: has Serbia a card up its sleeve? Does it plan to demand the same rights for Republika Srpska the Albanian Kosovo has been granted by most EU member-states?”⁷

Dodik’s assignment

Serbia’s attitude towards Republika Srpska is the “key” to understanding its 150-year-long territorial aspirations in Bosnia. The wars of 1990s have to be considered from that angle in the first place. For Serbia’s elite the Dayton Peace

⁶ *Politika*, March 29, 2010.

⁷ *Politika*, March 26, 2010.

Accords (1995) equaled the attainment of that goal under the then international circumstance. For fifteen years now, Serbia has been doing all in its power to prevent constitution of a functional Bosnian state – and has been successful. This is why the thesis that Bosnia cannot sustain within its present borders is being kept alive.

Fully aware of that, key international factors agreed on the necessity for revision of the Dayton Constitution to strengthen cohesion of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In order to question the sustainability of the Bosnian state, Republika Srpska and its leader, Milorad Dodik, have been skillfully hampering all efforts and initiatives in that direction. Milorad Dodik is the one who takes all the actions that incite tensions in Bosnia-Herzegovina (threats with a referendum on independence, denial of Sarajevo as a capital of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina, mock defense of the Dayton Accords, etc.).



Milorad Dodik

The Premier of Republika Srpska has extended his initiativeness to Kosovo as well. Not long ago, he appealed to Serbs and Albanians to make “a historical agreement” that would put an end to their territorial disputes. “Partition of Kosovo is the only sustainable solution that could be acceptable to both Serbs and Albanians,” he said.⁸ Albanians can hardly govern North Kosovo, he argues and suggests, “North Kosovo should be offered in return for a lasting piece and border demarcation

with Serbia.” Serbia, too, he adds, “must not allow to be blocked for yet another 50 years for the sake of Kosovo.”⁹

In the case of Kosovo the implications of the “territories for peace” plan are far-reaching, as they presuppose recomposition of other borders in the Balkans. Serb nationalists would gladly see Albania as a partner in initiating another round of border corrections. Formerly, Belgrade was counting on Tirana and taking its pulse about partition of Kosovo. But that much hoped for partnership has never come true.

Dodik used Kosovo to make another offer for Bosnia. He came public with the option of “peaceful separation.” Should other parties and international actors insist on the amendment of the Dayton Accords and Constitution, “all other possibilities would be open and legitimate,” he argues. In the event of a debate on rearrangement of Bosnia-Herzegovina, he says, “a peaceful separation becomes a valid option because Republika Srpska also has the right to decide on the status.”¹⁰

Torment of Belgrade

Constantly supervised and pressurized by the international community Belgrade must be constructive vis-à-vis Bosnia-Herzegovina. Therefore, for the time being it restrains from reacting at Dodik’s statements. In addition, the government is faced with really serious economic problems mirrored in a sudden resignation of the Central Bank governor Jelasic, frictions at the economic forum at Mt. Kopaonik and the spiraling down living standards.

Serbia’s official policy for Bosnia-Herzegovina is formulated by the stand about “supporting any solution the three constitutive peoples agree on.” However, “Dodik’s

⁸ Danas, March 15, 2010.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kurir, March 27, 2010.

options” are in play in the conservative bloc, formal and informal. The recent “scholarly” meeting (Belgrade, late March) marking the 15th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords (convened eight months before the proper date) called for “restoration of Dayton original principles.” Participants in the meeting were the well-known promoters of the Serb national program – from Dobrica Cosic, Svetozar Stojanovic and Ljiljana Smajlovic to Djordje Vukadinovic, Slobodan Antonic and the others.

The meeting’s keynote speaker, Milorad Dodik, put across a clear message saying, “The Dayton Agreement is a document for Bosnia-Herzegovina’s political history and political future...Should a debate on a new constitution and rearrangement of Bosnia-Herzegovina take place, the only viable concept would be, in my view, a peaceful separation and peaceful coexistence of two entities.”¹¹



Dobrica Cosic

The international community needs to strengthen its role in the Balkans so as to truly contribute to the region’s stability. In this sense, the year 2009 marked a breakthrough in the entire region, including Serbia. But Belgrade’s aspirations enliven whenever the international community pays less attention to its doings.

Regional reconciliation excludes any country’s leadership in the Balkans. Serbia’s leadership – Belgrade is always claiming – is just another form for its regional aspirations.

Economic difficulties impose a new economic policy. However, so far nothing indicates that the Serbian government or any other political actors are ready for such a change. The situation, therefore, might get even worse. Under such circumstances, Serbia may easily shift its focus on neighbors and radicalize relations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

For all those reasons, Bosnia-Herzegovina’s and Montenegro’s membership of NATO needs to be sped up. Membership of NATO puts an end to border issues. Economic policies adjusted to local capacities, notably in agriculture, would invigorate the region.



¹¹ Danas, March 27-28, 2010.

