

# Helsinki *bulletin*



HELSINKI COMMITTEE  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA  
address: Rige od Fere 20,  
Belgrade, Serbia  
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;  
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs  
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

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## TURKEY: A FACTOR OF REGIONAL STABILITY

Over the past year Turkey has emerged as a major factor in the Balkans. Turkish diplomacy mediated not only between some countries – between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first place – but also in sensitive, internal disputes. Serbia has been in the focus of Turkey's activities as a potential generator of regional instability. This primarily refers to Serbia's attitude towards Republika Srpska, but also towards Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole, and its bad relations with neighboring countries. Serbia has been obstructing the process of Kosovo's international recognition, while the international community has been constantly concerned with its political and religious tensions in its Sandzak region.

Turkey's regional activity is focused on Belgrade in the first place. Hence, intensive mutual communication at high and highest levels. Serbian President Boris Tadic said the relations between the two countries "have never been better before." Turkey's mediation contributed to fresh advances in Serbia's relations with Bosnia. Not long ago, Belgrade approved the newly appointed ambassador of Bosnia-Herzegovina after three years of obstructing the appointment. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet

Davutoglu made two political leaders of Sandzak, Rasim Ljajic and Sulejman Ugljanin, shake hands at long last. Together with their Spanish counterparts, Turkish diplomats are trying to secure representation of all countries in the region at the upcoming EU meeting in Sarajevo, Prime Minister Erdogan's cabinet announces attractive investments in the region, etc.

No doubt that major international factors – US in the first place – back Turkey's "diplomatic offensive" in the Balkans. Turkey itself has been aspiring to EU membership for decades but all EU member-states do not support its course. However, with its economic and political power and influence, Turkey gradually emerges as a warrant of stability in the Balkans the hallmark of which is still "an instable peace." Ivan Vejvoda, executive director of the Balkan Trust for Democracy, says, "Turkey belongs to the region historically and geographically. Its ongoing activities are along the lines of the policy of Prime Minister Redjep Tajip and Foreign Minister Davutoglu, labeled 'zero problem in the region and neighborhood.'<sup>1</sup>

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NIN, April 29, 2010.

However, Turkey's activity in the region and Belgrade's readiness to partake in it constructively face strong resistance in Serbia and in Republika Srpska. This resistance was more than evident after the trilateral summit meeting in Istanbul on April 24, 2010. Serbia's and Turkey's presidents, Boris Tadic and Abdullah Gul, and the president of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haris Silajdzic, adopted a declaration whereby they expressed their readiness to work towards "peace, prosperity and stability in the Balkans."

Serbian elite's deep-rooted prejudice about Turkey is mirrored in the general public as well. Such attitude has been cherished by the same elite that in late 20<sup>th</sup> century practically realized the "traditional hostility deriving from the 500-year of slavery under Turks." At that time, this elite was mostly propagating the thesis about the threat of "Islamic fundamentalism" along the "Green Transversal" connecting Bosnia-Herzegovina with Turkey through Sandzak. The same thesis was used to "justify" the war against Bosnia-Herzegovina and the terror against Bosniaks in Sandzak.

In the present-day context, the "danger" of Turkey's diplomatic engagement is identified with weakening of the position of the Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina on the one hand, and assistance to Prishtina in the promotion of Kosovo's independence on the other. Turkey came second in recognizing Kosovo in February 2008. According to the Serb elite, this recognition was "to the detriment of Serb national interests." Tomislav Nikolic, leader of Serb Progressive Party /SNS/, says, "I cannot understand the President of Serbia getting so close to Turkey in the attempt to settle the problem of Bosnia-Herzegovina...I am afraid that such decisions would turn the developments in Bosnia-Herzegovina to the detriment of Serb people and Republika Srpska. Hence, I am troubled

with the President's behavior and the meetings he attends in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey."<sup>2</sup>

## ISTANBUL DECLARATION

The trilateral meeting in Istanbul this April can be seen as a logical follow-up of the intensive cooperation between Serbia and Turkey in the past year. That was the fifth high-level meeting in a row. Turkish President Abdullah Gul visited Belgrade in October 2009 and, in the meantime, the troika of foreign ministers of Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey met three times. According to some sources, foreign ministers Vuk Jeremic and Ahmet Davatoglu have met eleven times so far.<sup>3</sup>



The Istanbul summit was called "a fresh start" in the relations between three countries sharing the same objective – membership of EU. Apart from emphasizing the three countries' readiness to work towards peace and prosperity in the region, the joint declaration states that regional policy must be based on the safeguard of security, continued political dialogue and

2 Pečat, 30. April 2010.

3 NIN, April 30, 2010.

preservation of multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious characteristics. The summit also resulted in the agreement that all the three members of Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina (Silajdzic, Komsic and Radmanovic) should pay a visit to Belgrade in near future and that Turkey's Prime Minister Redjep Erdogan and Serbia's President Boris Tadic should go to Srebrenica for the ceremony marking the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. The President of Serbia also suggested Belgrade as a venue for the next summit meeting.

Addressing the press, Tadic emphasized that Serbia was committed to preservation of integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina and would take not a single step towards destabilization of the country or question its borders. "Serbia supports Bosnia-Herzegovina on its course towards EU and congratulates it on obtaining the Action Plan for NATO membership," said Tadic.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish President Abdullah Gul underlined that trilateral meetings and close and friendly relations between the three countries were of major significance for future, peace, prosperity and common EU-oriented vision of the Balkans. "Our cooperation and strategic partnership testify that Turks and Serbs have always wanted to be close friends, which is a breakthrough in the history of the Balkans," he said.<sup>5</sup>

Haris Silajdzic expressed his pleasure with Boris Tadic's statement that Serbia would never take a step against integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia-Herzegovina. "That brings hope and peace to our hearts," he said.<sup>6</sup>

## RESENTMENT IN REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

The Istanbul summit contributed to worsening of the relations between Belgrade and Banjaluka. Banjaluka bitterly criticized the trilateral meeting. Some called Belgrade's act "a stab in the back of Republika Srpska." Serb member of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Presidency, Nebojsa Radmanovic, was the loudest of all. He announced that Republika Srpska would oppose the Istanbul declaration, which, as he put it, did not contribute to the stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina. "Once it reaches the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, this illegally adopted document from Istanbul will be turned down," he said.<sup>7</sup> Namely, according to Radmanovic, by adopting the declaration Silajdzic violated the constitution, which places Bosnia-Herzegovina as a whole in "a difficult situation." Serb officials are also bothered with the fact that the declaration complimented the Peace Implementation Council /PIC/. "There is no unique assessment of the quality of PIC work in Bosnia-Herzegovina," he said.<sup>8</sup>

Like the Declaration on Srebrenica before it, the Istanbul Declaration raised the question of the relations between Serbia and Republika Srpska in Banjaluka. Vice-President of Serb Democratic Party Ognjen Tadic reminded that his party had duly called upon Belgrade and Banjaluka to "settle mutual misunderstandings." "That never took place as Sarajevo policy obviously came between," claims Tadic.<sup>9</sup>

Republika Srpska Premier Milorad Dodik – whose incendiary statements and threats in the past month contributed to destabilization of Bosnia-Herzegovina – was somewhat more reticent this time. And yet, he said that Haris Silajdzic had not been authorized to take unilateral

4 Politika, April 25, 2010.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Danas, April 28, 2010.

8 Ibid.

9 Politika, April 28, 2010.

steps in Istanbul – for, “it must be clear who’s the one to represent Bosnia-Herzegovina” when it comes to Serbia’s and Turkey’s attitude towards it. “We shall continue developing good relations with Serbia, but shall also continue clarifying our position and advocating Republika Srpska interests,” he said.<sup>10</sup>

Aleksandar Popov, director of the Center for Regionalism, says Belgrade has made a good and constructive U-turn in its regional policy. According to him, by putting his signature under the Istanbul declaration Boris Tadic “took upon himself to indirectly, if possible, pacify Dodik.”<sup>11</sup> Popov reminded that Belgrade has not reacted at Dodik’s statements that were contrary to the Dayton Accords.

## BELGRADE’S REACTIONS

In Belgrade, too, many strongly protested against Boris Tadic’s “radical turn” in the relations with neighboring countries. The nationalist, anti-European bloc expressed its doubts about the Serbian President’s reliance on Turkey in the process.

The Serbian parliament denied hospitality to Turkish President Abdullah Gul during his visit to Belgrade (October 2009) though the plan of visit included his address to parliamentarians. He never delivered his address since the opposition’s hue and cry over it might have resulted in incidental situations.

Denial of Turkey as a possible partner in stabilization of the region and its faster movement towards EU results from the conviction that all Ankara cares for is “protection” of Muslim population in Balkan states. Its support to constitutional reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina

and recognition of Kosovo’s independence are perceived from the same angle.

The *Pečat* weekly was (once again) the fieriest critic of Boris Tadic. According to the paper’s editor-in-chief, Milorad Vucelic, “Belgrade autocrats” no longer even mention Republika Srpska and “do all in their power to destroy it.” “The Istanbul Declaration clearly manifest how far we have gone in such policy...Only the resolve of Serb people on the other bank of the Drina River, the international law and Russians are defending Republika Srpska,” writes Vucelic.<sup>12</sup>

These circles interpret Turkey’s new dynamics in regional affairs as renewed ambitions of the once Ottoman Empire. MPs from Serb Radical Party cynically asked Bozidar Djelic, vice-premier for European integrations, from the parliamentary rostrum, “Where the government plans to take Serbia: to Europe or to the Ottoman Union?”<sup>13</sup>

The *Pečat* weekly calls this supposed future community Ottoman Commonwealth. Referring to Turkey’s protracted and uncertain admission to EU, *Pečat* claims that is no reason for Serbia to “tie its aspirations to Turkey’s problematic chances...let alone become hostage to some future rearrangement of the continent and establishment of third-rate Balkan and Central Asian integrations.”<sup>14</sup>

Vladislav Jovanovic, former foreign minister in FR of Yugoslavia, ascribes Turkey’s engagement in the Balkans and active cooperation with Belgrade regime to pressure from US. America wants Serbia’s support in “breaking Republika Srpska’s resistance,” says Jovanovic, adding, “The fact that Serbia, as a neutral country, supports integration of Bosnia-Herzegovina into

10 Ibid.

11 Isto.

12 Pečat, 30. april 2010.

13 TV B92, April 29, 2010.

14 Pečat, April 30, 2010.

NATO is politically sly.” “I understand that we cannot confront a superior trend but we need not embrace it and lend it a helping hand. This only harms our long-term interests – the safeguard of cultural, spiritual and national unity of Serb people in the entire territory of the Balkans,” says Jovanovic.<sup>15</sup>

By accepting Turkey for its key regional partner, Serbia has made a U-turn in its regional policy. Against the background of economic and financial crisis, as well as recession in almost all countries of the Balkans, regional cooperation needs to be continued, notably with Turkey, a country with huge political and economic potential.

Turkey’s role in stabilization of the Balkans is of major importance for rounding off the region’s security architecture. Its role in relaxation of the relations with Muslim population in

almost all Balkan countries – exposed to radical nationalisms for two past decades – is also most significant.

Serbia needs to place its attitude towards the Ottoman era into a realistic context and develop its relations with Islamic countries, including Turkey, on mutual understanding and common cultural heritage. The new dynamics in the relationship between Serbia and Turkey provides Serbia an opportunity to normalize its relations with Muslims/Bosniaks in Serbia proper and in the entire Balkans.

The media and educational institutions cherishing negative stereotypes about Turks and Muslims in general by tradition could greatly contribute towards achieving the above goal. The stereotypes in question are the same radical nationalism has been feeding on for hundreds of years and need to be decomposed.

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15 Politika, April 28, 2010.