

Helsinki bulletin



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A STEP CLOSER TO NATO

On June 13-15, 2011 Belgrade hosted the Strategic Military Partner Conference organized by NATO Allied Command Transformation. That was the biggest military conference at global level in 2011. In Serbia it reopened the debate on its relationship with North Atlantic Treaty Organization and, in a way, tested the public opinion for potential membership of NATO.

Serbia officially calls itself a neutral country according to a parliamentary resolution of 2007 (dealing with Kosovo). Though membership of NATO allegedly is not on the agenda, Serbia's dynamic relations with the Alliances, including this conference, indicate that an internal agreement /on membership/ has been reached. Unavoidably, the membership of Partnership for Peace will be followed by an application for NATO membership – in foreseeable future.

However, Russia's overt opposition hampers the application for NATO membership. For Russia's ambitions and its opposition to NATO's eastward enlargement Serbia is the only stronghold in the region.

Despite strong anti-NATO emotions ever since the 1999 intervention – the emotions fueled by the conservative war lobby, "Serb hatred for NATO"¹ was not demonstrated in some worrisome form during the conference. Only two protests one insipid march against NATO were staged on the occasion. "Protests and dissatisfaction melted away soon," commented Gen. Aleksandar Dimitrijevic, retired intelligence bigwig.²

The great majority of citizens interpreted the presence of NATO high officials as clear sign that the country was heading towards the Alliance.

STRATEGIC CONFERENCE

The regime visibly tried to "separate" the Belgrade summit conference titled "Strategic Military Conference of NATO and Partnership for Peace" (including the main topic on its agenda – transformation of NATO) from the Alliance

1 Politika, June 18, 2011.

2 Danas, June 18-19, 2011.

itself.³ Under the pressure from the conservative bloc and Russia, Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac, State Secretary of the Ministry of Defense Tanja Miscevic and Chief of Staff Gen. Milivoje Milovanovic argued that was not a NATO conference and that no one, “not even NATO member-states” were questioning Serbia’s neutrality.⁴

Tanja Miscevic claimed that NATO planned not (on that occasion) to invite Serbia to join it, that Serbia would not ask for membership and that no strategic document contrary to Serbia’s neutrality would be signed.⁵

Admiral Gian-Paolo di Paolo, chairman of NATO Military Committee, confirmed all that in public. He told the press after the conference that NATO fully respected Serbia’s decision to be a neutral country and that the Alliance was satisfied with new developments in mutual relationship. Serbia is not perceived as an “enclave” surrounded by NATO member-states, he said, adding that the entire region is perceived as a part of the Euro-Atlantic family of nations, in which each country freely chooses the role to play.⁶

Defending themselves from allegations about letting NATO in through the back door, Serbia’s officials accentuated military, political and diplomatic prestige earned by the very fact that the conference had been convened in Belgrade.

3 The conference assembled chiefs of staff and high officers of member-states of NATO, Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue, Instambul Initiative and European Union.

4 Interview with Gen. Manojlo Milovanovic, Politika, June 13, 2011.

5 Interview with Tanja Miscevic, Blic, June 12, 2011.

6 Danas, June 16, 2011.

INSIPID PROTESTS STRONGLY BACKED BY RUSSIA

The protest “against NATO conference in Belgrade” by Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ was organized at “a modest stage” and “in a chamber atmosphere.”⁷ The party leader, Vojislav Kostunica, and the announced speaker, academician Matija Beckovic, did not show up for the occasion. Journalist Zeljko Cvijanovic, rock musician Bora Djordjevic, poet Dobrica Eric and ex-football player Milutin Soskic were the ones to address protesters, mostly party members and activists of extreme rightist organizations “Obraz” and “1389.”

The “performance” staged by Serb Radical Party was also lame despite the fact that it was organized in front of the Serbian Presidency and marked by skirmish with the police.

Both rallies were actually in the service of the election campaign that has already begun unofficially. Therefore, protesters’ “instructed” anger targeted President Boris Tadic. Scenarios of these protests, including the insults thrown at the President of the Republic by football fans (of the Red Star club mostly) associated the event at the Red Star stadium on the occasion of Premier Putin’s visit in March 2011.

On the other hand, anti-NATO bloc, though not visibly present in the streets, managed to exert pressure on Patriarch Irinej who used to support to Euro-Atlantic integrations. He called the choice of Belgrade as a host for the strategic conference “unacceptable.” Insolently, he accused NATO of “deep wounds” inflicted on Serb people and economy, adding, “It that can be medically treated and healed, that’s good. Though, this medicine might well be toxic for our wounds.”⁸

7 Politika, June 13, 2011.

8 Politika, June 15, 2011.

At the last Synod of the Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/ Patriarch Irinej was voted down in several cases: he did not manage to have ex-Bishop of Raska Prizren Artemije excommunicated and to have Pope Benedict XVI invited to Serbia. Russia's support to the most conservative part of SPC rather intensified the power of its influence.

The *Pecat* weekly (financed by Gasprom) outstood in the anti-NATO media campaign. Other broadcast and print media mostly impartial when covering the events, including the conference and protests. Editor-in-chief of New Serb Political Thought /Nova Srpska Politicka Misao/ Djordje Vukadinovic, known not only by his over animosity for NATO but also as a vociferous Eurosceptic, this time for a change grudging DSS leader, Vojislav Kostunica. He wrote him off as a politician for not being able to organize massive anti-NATO protests. "Definitely, he no longer stands for a political power and an alternative," wrote Vukadinovic.⁹

RUSSIA'S HUMILIATION OF SERBIA

Unlike the insipid and unconvincing reactions by domestic opposition parties and right-wing organizations, Moscow expressed its dissatisfaction with the military conference in Belgrade in a coarse and humiliating manner.

Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Konuzin and his colleague, the Brussels-seated ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, are the only two Russian officials who directly and overtly oppose Serbia's movement towards NATO and EU.

According to Rogozin, Russia consequently opposes NATO enlargement and takes that the process spread far beyond a reasonable limit

⁹ Politika, June 21, 2011.



long ago. Ever since the dissolution of Warsaw Pact Russia has been trying to deny NATO. In this context, it came up with a new concept of security within CSCE (later OSCE) and in 1992 initiated a military-political alliance with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Should Serbia be interested to join in, the organization would welcome it, says Rogozin, but Belgrade should be the one to initiate the membership.¹⁰

Rogozin uses Kosovo as a trump card in his argumentation against Serbia's membership of NATO. Serbia cannot join NATO unless it recognizes Kosovo, he says, because NATO would not have in its membership the countries involved in territorial disputes. Should Belgrade recognize Kosovo for the sake of NATO or EU membership, Russia would have no more reason for not recognizing Kosovo itself, he explains. Actually, Moscow has been reiterating Belgrade's stand without overstepping it in any way. This is what Foreign Minister Lavrov had in mind when saying, "Russians cannot be bigger Serbs than Serbs themselves."¹¹

Russian presence in North Kosovo can be ascribed to its strategy of holding Serbia hostage to its own interests – keeping it away from NATO. No wonder that not long ago President Medvedev bestowed the prestigious Pushkin

¹⁰ <http://www.akter.co.rs/politikaprint/3492-vojna-neutralnost-je-pametan-izbor.html>.

¹¹ <http://www.akter.co.rs/politikaprint/3492-vojna-neutralnost-je-pametan-izbor.html>.



Award on reporter Igor Gojkovic, correspondent for the Voice of Russia, the station listened to in Kosovska Mitrovica.¹²

Accepting the award reporter Gojkovic said, "Thank you, Russia. This recognition does not belong to me only but to all Serbs, particularly those in Kosovska Mitrovica, listening the station as of recently." Living in hostile environment, Kosovo Serbs nourish tender feelings for Russia and, therefore, care a lot for the programs aired by the Voice of Russia, he added.¹³

Attendance of a high-ranking delegation of Russia's General Staff was announced on the eve of the conference, given that Russia itself is in the membership of Partnership for Peace. However, the composition of the delegation was downscaled at the eleventh hour.

Just a couple of days after the conference the news came to Belgrade that the Russian Foreign Ministry (back on June 4) classified Serbia as "a high-risk country" or the "country of complex social-political situation." Given that such countries are marked by "explosive sociopolitical situations deriving from inefficient central governments, underdeveloped economies, dependence on energy supplies, low standards of living and high rates of crime," Russian diplomats serving in them will have

12 <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/06/21/52189982.html>.

13 Ibid.

their paychecks increased by 20 percent. So it happened that Serbia joined the club with Georgia, Aphasia¹⁴, Guatemala, Israel, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan and Chad.

The guest list for the reception to mark the Russia Day on June 12 in Belgrade-seated Embassy included people such as Svetlana Ceca Raznatovic, widow of Zeljko Raznatovic Arkan¹⁵ and "Tchetnik duke" Sinisa Vucinic¹⁶. Serbia's President Boris Tadic also attended the reception. By making such unusual and compromising guest list the Embassy wanted to demonstrate who "the boss" was. It put across the same message on the occasion of Premier Putin's brief visit to Belgrade: Putin watched a football match at the Red Star stadium where he got a standing ovation from the masses throwing insults at President Tadic at the same time (in absentia).

Ambassador Konuzin was also notably arrogant and undiplomatic at the time of Russia's takeover of Serbian Oil Industry /NIS/. Namely, it was during his mandate that NIS was sold to Russian Gasprom Co. at low price and under arrangements unfavorable to Serbia. As of

14 Abhazija became independent after Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008 and only Moscow has recognized it so far.

15 Tried and convicted for malversation.

16 A close associate of Mira Markovic, also tried and convicted.

recently Gazprom sponsors the Red Star club, while its director general, Kyril Kravchenko tops the list of most influential foreigners for the year 2010 that is traditionally publicized by the Blic daily.

Ambassador Konuzin often refers to Russian “historical interests” in the Balkans inhabited by “Slav peoples.” Russia is interested in using the territory for, say, construction of the South Stream pipeline, he says, adding that Serbia is Russia’s closest partner and ally among Balkan countries. He misses no opportunity to reiterate Putin’s message to Serbia: Russia will make no bones about NATO enlargement, which threatens its security. Small NATO member-states are never asked to have their say but only to follow the decisions made by others,

he emphasizes. “A possible decision on a rocket shield system in Serbia would be a threat to Russia’s security and force Russia to take steps against such military threat. Those steps would not be directed against Serbia but against rockets.”¹⁷

Ambassador Konuzin explicitly opposes Serbia’s membership of NATO. At the time the issue was publicly debated on the occasion of Premier Putin’s visit to Serbia (March 2011) and probably discussed at the summit meeting, Konuzin said, “Serbia has the right to join any organization. We shall respect your decision, counting on Belgrade’s respect for our view that membership of NATO poses a threat to Russia’s security.”¹⁸

¹⁷ http://www.ambasadarusije.rs/pr/11_026.php

¹⁸ Vreme, June 16, 2011.

SUMMARY

Preventing Serbia from joining NATO is a priority of its policy for Serbia, actually a part of its strategy for NATO. In this context, Russia is also the main reason why Serbia settles not the Kosovo question in a manner that would speed up its accession to EU. Russia is in the background of Serbia’s denial to recognize regional realities.

Russia’s presence in Serbia derives from most unfavorable arrangements made in the Milosevic era and subsequently confirmed during Vojislav Kostunica’s premiership. His cabinet is directly responsible for the NIS related arrangement which only intensifies Serbia’s subservient position vis-à-vis Russia.

On the other hand, Russia tries hard to improve its relations with NATO and EU, and profit from them inasmuch as possible. These are the facts the media should use as crucial arguments for the country’s membership of NATO.

In other words, the media should – like Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ does – use well-argued information indicative of manner in which Russia instrumentalizes Serbia when it comes to the latter’s relationship with NATO. It is in Serbia’s best interest to develop relations with Russia to mutual benefit and on equal footing. But it is also in Serbia’s strategic interest to join other countries in the region under the common security umbrella. This is the more so important when one bears in mind the heavy legacy of the 1990s wars. Only membership of EU and NATO can lead towards normalization of relations in the region.