

Helsinki *bulletin*



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SERBIA-ALBANIA RELATIONS: ONCE AGAIN ON TRIAL



FOTO: FONET

The 2016 European championship qualifier between Albania-Serbia football teams had to be abandoned after a riot broke out involving players of both teams and Serbian fans. It was triggered by a drone flying the flag of the "Greater Albania."

What remains an open question is who profited from the incident or who had been rubbing hands in Serbia or beyond it. Besides, the incident itself can be hardly taken out of the context of the visit by Russian President Vladimir

Putin and the military parade staged in his honor.

Albanian Premier Edi Rama's visit to Serbia postponed on the account of a strong wave of hostilities is a concession to Serbia's conservative and radical groupings defying the Brussels Agreement and Belgrade-Tirana normalization. It also seems to be a challenge to Premier Aleksandar Vučić and the course to the EU he had proclaimed.

The Albanian Premier's visit had been prepared practically throughout 2014, while the actual date rescheduled several times (now set for November 10). The first visit of an Albanian Premier after 70 years would have a regional impact corresponding to the EU's strategy for the Balkans. Moreover, unimpeded regional cooperation is one of key preconditions for the Western Balkans speedier movement towards the EU.

Commenting on the incident of the Partisan Stadium Belgrade's media, especially the *Pecat* magazine, claim that the USA and the EU lobbied with Serb authorities to "let in a group of / Albanian/ officials with KLA symbols" (although Albanian football fans had been banned from the Belgrade match a group of officials was at the stadium VIP seats). The *Pecat* magazine thunders against Serbian authorities for insisting on Edi Rama's visit despite of everything.

Professor Milan Pošanski says, "Tirana has been and still figures as a political transmission of certain circles in the West, especially in the context of the US war on terrorism...The official Tirana seems to have gained a propaganda-political point on the drone scandal for the time being. However, all this will produce a boomerang effect in the long run, revealing that the action itself was the one by a loser."¹ Serbia's security services did not pass the test, he says, and insists that all such services should be placed under the same umbrella – "a merge of intelligence and counter-intelligence services in a national security agency."²

The media argued that Olsi Rama, the brother of Premier Edi Rama, masterminded the incident from his VIP seat. They stressed out the fact that he had an American passport. The media also claimed that he had been arrested

and investigated by the police, which he denied once back in Tirana.

The stadium audience was whistling while the orchestra played the Albanian anthem, throwing all sorts of object on the terrain, and chanting "Kill the Albanians! Kill the Albanians, the brothers of the Croats!" shortly before the match was abandoned.

No doubt that the incident disclosed the true nature of the relationship between the two countries. Despite a certain level of Belgrade-Tirana communication, bilateral relations are still marked by distrust and tension. Serbia's perception of Albanians as an inferior nation runs deep. Kosovo has been the biggest stumbling bloc in the past two decades. For long has Belgrade tried to win over Tirana's partnership for Kosovo's partition – and failed. As for Albania, its transition has been a hard one, while its elite have been after integration into EU and NATO. The international community – the US as the most influential among the Albanians in the first place – did not allow the scenario.

Once it signed the Brussels Agreement and thus opted for EU integration, Serbia's relations with Albania were up on the international agenda. It was only thanks to the EU's insistence on bilateral cooperation as crucial for the region that the stadium scandal did not turn into another devastating Balkan trend.

The Belgrade incident, however, not only further radicalized a part of Serbia's political arena but also – as it turned out – was planned to raise tensions in Macedonia, Kosovo North and Montenegro.

Scores of incidents followed in its footsteps, including smashed and scorched shops of ethnic Albanians in Vojvodina in the first place. The police identified and arrested some of perpetrators

1 Ibid.

2 Ibid.

(totaling 11 persons).³ The Ministry of the Interior released those were all individual hooligans. Considering the unimpeded actions by extremist groupings throughout the province, a more plausible conclusion is that the assaults at ethnic Albanians were orchestrated to discredit the Provincial Government at the same time.

The incidents in Vojvodina are closely connected with the grudge a part of the right-wing, conservative bloc – inclining towards the Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ – bears against Premier Vučić's "Western" policy.

"SERBIA'S NIGHTMARE"

The abandoned football match was politically misused to accuse Tirana of trying to realize the "Greater Albania" project. Some historians were interviewed to provide "scholarly" argumentation to the campaign. "This process /Greater Albania/ has been on for long, that's nothing new. Most importantly, it is being supported by big powers. Today the US and some European and Muslim countries side with the Albanians. Serbia's position is a difficult one, while Macedonia is the most vulnerable of all," said academician Dragoljub Živojinović.⁴

Edi Rama wrote on Twitter, "Serbia will become a normal state only once the Real Serbia realized that the Greater Albania was its nightmare rather than our project."⁵ Aleksandar Vučić responded, "People saying that the Greater Albania is our nightmare must be right. But this is not only about our nightmare, this is a nightmare of the entire Europe and mankind, and we shall do everything in our power to prevent

it /from becoming a reality/. We hope normal Albanians would understand this message."⁶

The Belgrade-seated media seized the opportunity of to "alert" all neighboring countries to "Albanian expansion in the Balkans" and widen the front line against "the Albanian offensive." They especially focused on Macedonia. "Almost the entire Western Macedonia, including Skopje, has been incorporated into the Greater Albania map," quoted a story run by the *Blic* daily.

On the other hand, some Macedonian historians argue that Macedonia's Albanians (except for zealots to be found everywhere) are not hostages to the 19th century and like other Balkan nations want to be a part of the EU. Belgrade's provocation is just a manipulation, they take. "The Greater Albania idea and 'scarring' people with it has always been pulled out of the hat by anyone after some political goals. Some circles want to disturb citizens and so use the Greater Albania idea as a threat," says Katerina Todoroska of the Skopje Institute of National History, adding that even big powers had been doing the same throughout the history.⁷

Not even Montenegro was spared. Vaselj Siništaj, the president of the Civic Initiative and former MP, warned that someone has been trying to transport the tension of the Belgrade football match to Montenegro.⁸ Montenegrin MP Dritan Abazović listed the causes of similar incidents in Montenegro: poor potential of domestic civil society, underdeveloped governance that considerably relies on demagoguery, and bad economic situation. Incidents as such are a giant back step for the Balkans' European prospects, he said.⁹

³ Blic, October 22, 2014.

⁴ "Blic, October 19, 2014.

⁵ <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/503497/Rama-Srbija-ce-bit-normalna-drzava-kada-shvati-da-je-Velika-Albanija-samo-njena-nocna-mora>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Isto.

⁸ <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/69035/u-tuzima-i-ulcinju-slavili-remi.html>.

⁹ <http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/politika/69382/abazovic-evropski-put-ne-trpi-nove-sukobe.html>.

“The Belgrade incident is a tragic reminder of the painful past. It shows that the Balkan region has not at peace and that the worst of all ‘greater state’ projects is still alive in the Balkans,” said Montenegrin historian Đorđe Borozan.¹⁰ That project, he reminds, counts on a part of Montenegro with a considerable Albanian population; no wonder, therefore, that after the provocation in Belgrade incidents broke out in Montenegro as well. “Symptomatically, the Albanians are pointing out that their country is in only one in the world surrounded by its own nation – the Albanians,” adds Borozan.¹¹

A most interesting “coincidence” was that the *Russian Night Wolves* – close to President Putin, their honorary member – specifically came to the region for the ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of Belgrade’s liberation from Nazis.¹² Some of them toured Montenegro as well. According to their leader Aleksandar Hirurg, the *Wolves* are promoting the unity of Eastern Orthodox nations, “the unity of Russia and the brotherhood of our artificially separated peoples.”¹³ Over the past two decades they have established 34 branches in Russia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and Latvia.

Serbia’s intelligence community also put forth its explanation of the incident. Milan Pašanski, the president of the Research Forum against International Terrorism, argued that by flying the flag of the so-called Greater Albania over the Partisan stadium in Belgrade the Albanians had declared special war on Serbia and achieved their goal without any loss in human

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 During the military parade in Belgrade the Russian Wolves complimented RS President Dodik and RS Premier Željka Cvijanović for having preserved Republika Srpska and the unity of Eastern Orthodox nations, and contributed to the friendly relations with Russia. Kurir, October 16, 2014..

13 <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Drustvo/261438/Ruski-bajkeri-Nocni-vukovi-u-Budvi>.

lives – they had reaffirmed the political concept of the Greater Albania worldwide.¹⁴

“Their strategy of continued political pressure and inciting political tensions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, resulted in a most complex situation. Islamic fundamentalists’ constant endeavor to oust the Saudi Arabian regime spilled over to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and so was fundamentalism imported to the very heart of Europe,” explains Pašanski. He holds that the United States has hidden motives of its own: it “breeds” a while Al Qaeda in the Balkans to infect Muslim parts of Russia and China with fundamentalism, while keeping the borders of EU vulnerable and dependent on it. In this stratagem Albania has been given a major the role of a Balkan whistle-blower. This is why, he says, both EU and the West are so lenient to the Greater Albania policy.¹⁵

Albania, argues Pašanski, wants to incite riots in Serbia, jeopardize its security and internationalize the so-called Greater Albania project. It plans to achieve its goals in both “soft” and “tough” ways. The “soft” act of terrorism in the stadium was not meant to cause causalities but public disturbance and political reactions and changes. The assault took place at an international match and in the presence of Serbia’s head of state. Moreover, it also had the effect of “tough” terrorism as it promoted a militant concept of the so-called Greater Albania incorporating parts of Serbia and other Balkan states. Maximum publicity for political ideas and political propaganda all over the globe is the primary goal of terrorist strategies, says . The Albanians declared special war on Serbia, concludes Pašanski.¹⁶

14 Večernje Novosti, October 19, 2014.

15 Ibid.

16 Večernje Novosti, October 19, 2014.

CONCLUSION

The stadium incident, the military parade and the visit by Vladimir Putin testified that the situation in Serbia proper was most fragile, including the reshuffle at its right-wing theater (e.g. Sandra Rašković took over the leadership of DSS, and a new right-wing party emerges) and growing reliance on Russia. Russia is more and more present in Serbia: the thesis behind its presence is that Russia is an alternative to “the aggressive promotion of the so-called human rights.” Another thesis is also being emphasized: the one about Serbia at the crossroads of two civilizations – the Eastern Orthodox civilization and the post-Christianity West, while the former is “the alternative to the entire world.”

Recent developments stirred the embers of the dilemma about Serbia’s place. The right-wing actively advocates against European integration through the media. As the media have wholeheartedly endorsed this shift, Premier Vučić is practically left in the lurch. Whether he truly believed in the European course and, if so, to what extent he could pursue it considering all the obstructions, will be disclosed soon.

President Putin’s theses about revival of Nazism in the West, Baltic States and in Eastern Europe, and Russia saving Europe from its dictators are dangerous ones; the more so since neither Serbia nor Russia would admit their own trends of radicalization. Radical groupings such as the *Russian Night Wolves* are overtly supported by the Russian administration.

Sharpened relations with Albania on the eve of Premier Edi Rama’s visit further undermined the region’s fragile stability, and placed the “greater state” projects on the agenda once again. All this only adds fuel to the flames of instability in the countries with poor democratic tradition and elites coping hard with reforms.

The Western Balkans badly needs EU’s stronger and more comprehensive involvement – especially in the domain of economy since the acute economic crisis can easily further radicalize the region.