

# Helsinki *bulletin*



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NO.115 // MAY 2015

## MACEDONIA: IN A RIFT BETWEEN EAST AND WEST



FONET/AP

Macedonia police raid on Kumanovo's „Wild Outskirts” (April 9–10, 2015) killing 22 persons, including eight policemen, and devastating the entire section of the town, dramatically signaled instability of Macedonia – a delicate geostrategic point – and of the entire region as well.

Though in a way a culmination of months-long crisis shaking Macedonia's political arena, the shooting in Kumanovo cannot be perceived out of the regional context. Macedonia is just a part of a complex area of clashing ambitions and aspirations of many players. Aside from neighboring countries – Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Kosovo – not only major European

countries and the US but also Russia<sup>1</sup> and Turkey in past couple of years, all of them after strategic interests of their own, have been trying to position themselves.

EU orientation – the region's historical chance to place itself under a single /EU/ umbrella for the first time in modern history – was undermined by Balkan states' fragility. Unfortunately, countries at EU periphery proved to be tempted all the time, mostly for economic reasons, to turn to outside players – and often pay dear for it. Almost all the countries in the region have been opting for neutrality – this time or another – as it made it possible for them to make deals with various parties as was the case of the energy agreement with Russia.

A fragile state – which Macedonia with its complex sociopolitical structure and corrupted administration certainly is – proved to be a most welcome arena for overt manifestations of all sorts of ambitions. A front page headline carried by the Politika daily – „A Minute of Silence for Macedonia” – suggests expectations that a South Balkan state may not „survive” its present circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Several schools of thought about the background of Macedonia's latest crisis found their way in Macedonian and international media: from theses that the armed groups in Kumanovo acted in collusion with the regime, that the ruling elites were incapable of managing the complex, multiethnic state, that the crisis was incited and managed by Western secret services by the „Maidan recipe,” through the one that President Ivanov and Premier Gruev had turned to Moscow instead of Brussels, to

<sup>1</sup> In 2013 Russia proclaimed South Eastern Europe a sphere of its strategic interests and in 2014 defined three regions in Europe – EU, Russia and Turkey, reminded Johanna Daimler, German expert in the Balkans, at a conference on May 13, 2015 in Belgrade.

<sup>2</sup> Politika, May 12, 2015.

the claim that this was all about the West's „response” to the planned pipeline „Turkish Stream.”

## SERBIA SIDES WITH MACEDONIAN PREMIER

Playing on the Macedonian crisis Serbia revived the thesis about the Greater Albania a part of its elite is most interested in. The thesis was meant to legitimize (though no one openly said that) Serbia's longstanding territorial aspirations, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Republika Srpska) and Kosovo (four Serb municipalities in Kosovo North).

Practically all the media in Serbia argued that with the Kumanovo shooting „the Albanian dream” – a pan-Albanian state – was beginning to come true.

On April 10 – while Macedonian police was still fighting in Kumanovo – Belgrade papers run dramatic headlines such as „The Greater Albania at the Doorstep” (Blic), „The War for the Greater Albania Begins” (Alo), „Kumanovo Assaulted from Kosovo” (Vecernje Novosti), „Macedonia in Chaos” (Kurir), etc.

Interestingly, some sections of President Nikolić's platform for resolution of the Kosovo issues „leaked” into the media. The President had announced the platform back in December 2014 but kept postponing its submission to the government and publication. However, on May 12 the Politika daily published the exclusive that „the President will suggest to the Premier to keep on treating Kosovo North in accordance with the Constitution, and refer to the territory beyond the community of Serb municipalities as the 'the area Albanians used to live in at the times of the SFRY.'”

Nikolić's platform reopens the idea about Kosovo's partition Serbia's mainstream elites have never given up. Some international observers such as, say, Professor Stephen Mayer from Washington, are used to promote the idea implying an agreement on territorial exchange between Serbs and Albanians – meaning giving up three municipalities with Albanian majority to Kosovo, while integrating four Serb-populated municipalities in Kosovo North into Serbia.

To all appearances Serbia's security services and high-ranking politicians had been informed about Macedonia police action plan. The fact that Serbia's security services reacted promptly, actually simultaneously with Macedonia police action testifies to this: along the border with Macedonia, in the so-called security zone, Serbia deployed its gendarmerie and anti-terrorists squads.

## „FEAR” OF THE GREATER ALBANIA

Uncritically accepting breaking news stories from Kumanovo, mostly based on Macedonian official releases, Serbia's media piled them up with their own commentaries and „analyses.”<sup>3</sup> Recalling „secession of Kosovo and Metohija,” the drone at the Belgrade football match, the New Year decoration of the Albanian governmental building in Tirana and statements given by Premier Edi Rama, they interpreted the Kumanovo conflict as a dress rehearsal of Macedonia's „federalization” to end up in West Macedonia's integration into Albania. The me-

3 „During the crisis in Macedonia Radio-Television of Serbia – duty-bound most of all to respect and protect the rights of Albanians and Macedonians, our countrymen and neighbors – was guesting psychologically overexcited commentators and retarded analysts interpreting the Kumanovo incident with the terms such as 'Shiptar terrorists' and 'the Greater Albania,' and forecasting the spread of the conflict,” wrote historian Nikola Samardžić, *Danas*, May 15, 2015.

dia implied the same scenario for Montenegro and Greece.<sup>4</sup>

Most of these commentaries emphasized that the West – US in the first place – sided with Albanians, actually that Americans were using Albanians to attain their strategic goals in the Balkans, while Albanians were using Americans for the accomplishment of their loftiest goal – creation of the Greater Albania. So the *Nase Novine* daily argued that „the war in Macedonia meant a direct assault on Russia and Vladimir Putin.”<sup>5</sup>

Somewhat reserved about a variety of theories about the Macedonian crisis circulating in the region, the pro-governmental *Politika* daily says that for the time being Serbia and Republika Srpska favor the thesis about „almost the first step towards the Greater Albania” has been made in Macedonia. Its front page banner „Kumanovo: a step towards the Greater Albania?” suggests the reasoning of the paper's editors.<sup>6</sup>

Popular is also the thesis that the West wants to prevent close cooperation between Balkan nations, especially Eastern Orthodox ones, and in the name of „the new world order” impose NATO, EU and Washington on Macedonia's foreign policy as its crucial partners. Accordingly, these strategic partners must be „outside” the Eastern Orthodox „civilization” so as to be able to separate Macedonia from Serb influence.<sup>7</sup> Over the past years, argue advocates for this thesis, Skopje has been approaching Belgrade, and at the same time, silently and persistently, strengthening its ties with Moscow; the latter gained momentum when the construction

4 Blic, May 10, 2015.

5 *Naše novine*, May 11, 2015.

6 *Politika* May 12, 2015.

7 *Pečat* No. 369, May 15, 2015.

of the South Stream II pipeline was on the agenda.<sup>8</sup>

Serbia's high officials were more reserved about the background of the incident in the neighboring Macedonia. They also claimed resolutely that a same scenario was out of question in Serbia considering the mobilization of security forces.<sup>9</sup>

However, some experts disagreed with them on the issue. Professor Zoran Dragišić said that terrorist attacks were not to be ruled out in Serbia. „The Greater Albania idea is in the biggest background of everything. I am not an optimist, and I believe that the conflict can easily spill over into our territory, sooner or later, depending only on terrorists' short-term goals,“ he explained.<sup>10</sup>

Citing American intelligences sources, the Informer daily forecasts unification of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Macedonia into an „Eastern Orthodox alliance.“ Besides, claims the paper, CIA takes that „US and EU further support to extremists will drive Eastern Orthodox nations into Russian's embrace.“<sup>11</sup>

Well-known international strategist Dominique Moisi, recently in visit to Belgrade, takes that Serbs' fear of the „Greater Albania“ is exaggerated. Asked by reporters whether in the case of Kumanovo we witness creation of a pan-Albanian state, he replied, „Maybe, but I doubt it. You, in Serbia, exaggerate a fear of 'the Greater Albania.“<sup>12</sup>

8 Ibid.

9 Politika May 12, 2015.

10 Beta News Agency, May 10, 2015.

11 Informer, May 15, 2015.

12 Politika, May 14, 2015.

## TOMISLAV NIKOLIĆ'S NEW PLATFORM

In the week when the armed conflict in Macedonia made breaking news in the media and dominated the public scene, Politika, the most influential daily, published that had information about the contents of President Nikolić's „new“ platform for Kosovo. Though announced back in December 2014 publication of the platform has been postponed several times.<sup>13</sup>

According to Politika, Nikolić acts „by the Constitution but has in mind, nevertheless, a lasting agreement with Albanians.“<sup>14</sup> In other words, Kosovo North would be treated as it is in Serbia's Constitution (as a province in its preamble), while the territory beyond the community of Serb municipalities as the one „Albanians used to inhabit at the times of the SFRY.“<sup>15</sup>

Indicatively, the information about the President's platform leaked soon after in his interview with the Wall Street Journal (on the eve of his visit to the States) Premier Vučić touched on the possibility of a constitutional amendment.

Tomislav Nikolić also penned the platform for Kosovo in 2012. However, the parliament voted it down along with its phrase „nothing shall be agreed on until agreed on.“ The said platform just temporarily block the Belgrade-Prishtina negotiations several months later raised at the highest political level to result in the Brussels Agreement of April 2013. The question is, as Politika also puts it, how long will „the

13 „I would say the resolution of the status for Kosovo and Metohija will be sped up as of now. Serbia must be prepared for it, especially its negotiators in Brussels. How prepared? Well, the parliament must adopt a new set of measures, and I myself would only be glad to develop their draft,“ he said. NIN, May 14, 2015.

14 Politika, May 12, 2015.

15 Ibid.

latest platform last in parallel with the Brussels Agreement”<sup>16</sup> and like its predecessor be the reason for yet another misunderstanding with the government. A commentary by Vice-premier Zorana Mihajlović indicates that the latter may be the case. „It would have been only logical for the President to first reach an agreement with the Premier and only then have the platform publicized, “she said.<sup>17</sup>

Nikolić’s latest platform actually implies Kosovo’s partition – if not straight away then in some time in the future. Stephen Meyer proposed about the same plan in late April, though in a form of a „barter” – South Serbia in exchange for Kosovo North.<sup>18</sup> What probably motivated Meyer, perceived over here as someone wishing well to Serbia, was Albanian Premier Rama’s statement that Albania and Kosovo would be forced to unite unless Kosovo was given a green light to EU integration. Mayer suggests that Serbia should seize even that hypothetical opportunity to open negotiations on territorial exchange with Prishtina and Tirana.<sup>19</sup>

In an interview with the „Sputnik” web portal analyst Dušan Janjić said that judging by newspaper stories the President had just innovated his platform of 2012 and that the government had accepted only its basic ideas but not concrete measures. Actually all this was about the President’s attempt to take control over the government, concludes Janjić, adding that the President himself is aware that the platform hardly stands a chance in the parliament. On the other hand seriously challenges the government and Vučić. As it seems, says Janjić, the President decided to use Kosovo to tell Vučić

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16 Ibid.

17 Danas, May 14, 2015.

18 Politika, April 23, 2015.

19 Ibid.

that he trusts him no more and waits his turn to take over Serbia.<sup>20</sup>

## RUSSIA PLAYS ON A VACUUM

Western Balkans’ failed transition resulted in stagnation – even regression – of almost all the countries in the region. Prospects for the membership of EU lost their potential for motivation so the countries in the region began turning toward other options. Russia’s changed foreign policy (2007), the influence of Eastern Orthodox churches and Eastern Orthodoxy in general, and especially the Balkans’ dependence on energy supplies opened the floodgates to Russia’s new geo-strategic opportunities.

Besides, Russia realized how significant „soft power” of its foreign policy could be in the countries historically close to it. Having launched theses about „superiority of the Eastern Orthodox civilization” Russia endeared itself to fragile and frustrated countries such as those in the Balkans. Serb elites, especially the Serb Orthodox Church, are traditionally oriented toward Russia. In 1990s they banked on Russia’s support which they never got as Russia had to cope with problems of its own. With Vladimir Putin in power, Russia’s support to Serbia’s cause /Kosovo/ postponed resolution of the territorial issue in the Balkans. Moscow interprets the Macedonian crisis by blaming the West like in the case of Ukraine.

Aware that the Western Balkans aspires to Euro-Atlantic integration, Moscow wants to slow down or block such trend in Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia and Montenegro, making no secret of it. It even feels good when it manages to complicate the process in these countries. All in all, Russia has been undermining the processes

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20 <http://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/20150519/2017383.html#ixzz3amgCzjlo>.

of Euro-integration in the Balkans, fragile as it is and thus prone to its influence.

Russia's intelligence services are more and more present in the region. Russia has moved a part of its military-intelligence service to Serbia, including the Center for Management of Crisis Situations in Nis. It has been asking diplomatic status for its employees posted in the town. So far Serbia has been resisting such demands.

Russia is probably most interested in Montenegro because of the Adriatic Sea. It has been asking for access to Montenegrin ports – Podgorica has been denying it. Actually Russia has been demanding the same since the times of the SFRY. In its propaganda activities in Montenegro Russia undermines Premier Đukanović for having „crossed out the 300-year-long history of Russia-Montenegrin relations” among other things. Counting on Montenegrins' soft feelings for it, pro-Russian players claim, „No matter how much Montenegrin authorities want Euro-Atlantic integration, this is not what the majority of population would agree with. As it has to offer some justification /to its citizens/ the government speaks of Moscow's infamous 'invisible hand.' Such accusations reflect the spirit of Brussels' policy. However, these accusations cannot solve the country's actual problem; on the contrary, they will only raise the tension.”<sup>21</sup>

For Kremlin the Macedonian crisis is yet another in a row of „orange revolutions.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that the West was punishing Skopje for its cooperation with Moscow. „The fact the Skopje denied to impose sanctions on Russia and Macedonia's support to the project 'Turkish Stream' many in Brussels and over the ocean oppose made

<sup>21</sup> Geopolitika, No. 86, May 2015.

the setting for developments in Macedonia,” he told a press conference in Belgrade.<sup>22</sup>

There were attempts to organize something similar to Ukrainian and Yemeni scenarios by playing on the threat of „the Albanian factor,” he also stressed out. „Many years ago there were serious contradictions to be followed by signing the Ohrid Agreement /2001/. And they are now suggesting some further federalization of Macedonia and even the country's partition whereby a part of it would go to Albania and a part to Bulgaria.”<sup>23</sup>

Bulgarian Foreign Minister Daniela Mitov called Lavrov's statements irresponsible and unacceptable, emphasizing that Bulgaria had strongly supported Macedonia's independence and even guaranteed its territorial integrity.<sup>24</sup>

Russian commentator Dmitry Babich compares Macedonian scenario with Ukrainian and says that Lavrov is worried with good reason. Washington has taken upon itself to decide the timing and type of political harvest in the Balkans, in Ukraine or in Caucasus, he says. Although this germinates civil wars (with Ukraine as the latest example) the harvest goes on as no one over the ocean is accountable for these „temporary difficulties,” concludes Babich.<sup>25</sup>

Andrei Kelin, Russian representative to the OSCE in Vienna, announced a number of initiatives for overcoming the Macedonian crisis. Regardless of the government-opposition dialogue the resolution to the crisis is still not in

<sup>22</sup> [http://ruskarec.ru/opinion/2015/05/19/zapad\\_nastavlja\\_turneju\\_po\\_balkanu\\_40007.html](http://ruskarec.ru/opinion/2015/05/19/zapad_nastavlja_turneju_po_balkanu_40007.html).

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.standartnews.com/english/read/russian\\_foreign\\_minister\\_lavrov\\_bulgaria\\_and\\_albania\\_want\\_to\\_divide\\_up\\_macedonia\\_among\\_themselves-8435.html](http://www.standartnews.com/english/read/russian_foreign_minister_lavrov_bulgaria_and_albania_want_to_divide_up_macedonia_among_themselves-8435.html)

<sup>24</sup> Politika, May 22, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

sight, he said, adding he dreaded that the crisis could culminate into a serious conflict.<sup>26</sup>

Russia is notably active in Serbia, as a central state, where it counts on the incumbent regime's sympathy and support. Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Chepurin reminded participants in the round table „New Security Challenges in Europe and Euro-Asia, and the Role of Serbia” (organized by „Slobodan Jovanović” fund in the parliament on April 8) of the Serbia-NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan suggesting that Serbia, considering

its neutrality, should have the same relationship with ODKB. „Russia attaches great importance to strengthening of relations between our armed forces...but Serbia had only two maneuvers with our armed forces and as many as twenty-two with NATO,” he said.<sup>27</sup> Asked how possibly Serbia could remain neutral when surrounded by NATO member-states, Igor Panarin, ODKB coordinator, replied, „When Crimea integrated into Russia Serbia turned to be closer to us. Russian Iskander missiles have a range of more than 2,000 kilometers and the route to Serbia is not that long,” he said.<sup>28</sup>

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26 <http://tass.ru/en/world/795861>.

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27 Geopolitika, No. 86, May 2015.

28 Ibid.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The tragic Kumanovo shooting only highlighted the complex and delicate situation in the Balkans where, as Montenegrin President Đukanović put it, all those believing that „the times of greater nation project are over for good are wrong.”<sup>1</sup>

Irresponsibility and immaturity of Balkan elites also open avenues to Russia and other players. Conspiracy theories are construed to divert the attention from these elite’s responsibly. Accordingly, both East and West are being blamed for all failures of each country.

Ever since the end of the ex-Yugoslav wars to which they actively contributed by even „dictating” peace-making accords (Dayton, Ohrid, Ground Safety Zone, etc.) key international players have failed to engage consistently in the establishment of a common political-economic and security frame for the Western Balkans providing each individual country enough room for economic and social progress of its own.

This primarily refers to the unkempt promise (Salonika Summit 2003) of European prospects for all countries in the region. Preoccupied with problems of its own and crises in other parts of the world, EU neglected the Balkans. Over the two past decades only Croatia was given a „ticket” to EU, while other countries remained at various – but marathon for sure – pre-accession stages. For instance, Macedonia obtained EU candidacy back in 2008 but not yet accession negotiations. In 2008 it was invited to join NATO but Greece blocked its progress in both cases.

Against the backdrop of international order – instable and occasionally chaotic while in search for a new paradigm – South East Europe and Balkans have turned over the past years into an arena of meddling and mutual competition of a variety of players – and not only Turkey and Russia.

On the other hand, unfinished and weak states of the region with their bad economic and social situations, and corrupted, visionless elites, are potential carriers of instability that may easily escalate to unforeseeable proportions.

According to some strategists, the „luggage” these countries are carrying makes them less and less attractive to EU, already fed up with the enlargement policy.<sup>2</sup> However, judging from experience being fed up with enlargement policy for the Balkans would be risky. For, as Dominique Moisi put it, „the policy of enlargement would be the European diplomacy’s best tool in the Balkans.”<sup>3</sup>

The Macedonian crisis demonstrated that the region is by far more unsafe than it used to be ten years ago. This is why the countries of the region should get stabilized through internal social dialogues. Balkan states are facing serious challenges that may take a dangerous turn. The Macedonian crisis is not a local but a regional problem and can only be solved as such. Membership of NATO is, therefore, more and more important as a guarantee of regional stabilization and to hinder major regional problems – democratic regression and economic stagnation.

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1 Politika, May 12, 2015; Commenting on developments in Macedonia Đukanović said, „Unfortunately, what remained in the post-Dayton period are dysfunctional Bosnia, Macedonia paralyzed on its course toward European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and the longstanding problem between Belgrade and Prishtina.”

2 Politika, May 14, 2015.

3 Ibid.