

Helsinki *bulletin*



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SERBIA AT A SEESAW



A. Vučić with Deputy Secretary of State A. Blinken

Ukrainian, Greek and especially Macedonian crises provided a crucial insight into the situation of the Balkans. What motivated the West's return to the Balkans were the region's fragile stability, uncertainty and danger of its further deterioration. Besides, Serbia's neutrality in the present international constellation proved unsustainable. And its chairmanship of OSCE clearly indicated its inability for keeping balance between big powers now plainly struggling for their interest spheres.

The Balkans may get stabilized and prosper only under a single umbrella – that of EU and NATO. NATO ensures a security frame for post-conflict countries emerging from Yugoslavia. Accession to EU calls for legislations and value system that guarantee the rule of law, stable institutions, market economy, social plurality and human rights.

The Ukrainian crisis and Moscow's doubled efforts to spread its influence in the Balkans,

„woke up“ EU and US. Against the backdrop of ongoing geo-strategic competition between Russia and the West, EU's and US's stronger involvement in this region also restored the hopes for European prospects.

Serbia's indecision about its place in the sun hampered its recovery, also considerable undermined by Serb elites' inability for taking the stock of the 1990s wars, acknowledge defeat and recognize regional realities. Maintained delusion about a recomposed Balkans practically „hijacked“ its political energy for thorough reforms and transition.

So far Premier Vučić has made a fresh advance by signing the Brussels Agreement. He is now expected to make further steps toward stabilization of the Balkans, primarily by distancing Serbia from Republika Srpska /RS/ and Milorad Dodik.

VUČIĆ IN US

The Premier's visit to US (June 2–4) is his most important international tour in 2014. A series of meetings with high-ranking officials of the US administration and representatives of several major American companies buffered the fact that he had not met with US Vice-president Joseph Biden. By the way, at the security conference in Munich Biden himself invited Vučić to visit Washington.

It is important to note that Vučić was the first premier of Serbia to pay a visit to the US capital since 2007 (Vojislav Koštunica, the then premier, and Boris Tadić, the president at the time, were in visit in 2007). The visit itself testifies that US still expects the Premier to work for regional stability above all. Vučić was complimented for normalization of relations with Prishtina and implementation of the Brussels Agreement. A platform for Kosovo President

Nikolić had been announcing for long, no doubt stands for a warning that things may easily take a different turn.

The visit to Washington was the occasion for reminding the Premier of the problems in Serbia-US relations that have not been solved for years. Among them is the murder of American citizens of Albanian origin, the Bitichi brothers, in the summer of 1999; and, torching of the US Embassy in 2008 when some other diplomatic missions of Western countries also went up in flames. Completion of legal proceedings against perpetrators is of vital importance to Serbia-US relationship.

On the eve of his visit Premier Vučić announced that he would raise the issue of major geo-economic significance to Serbia: its search for additional sources of gas supply. Serbia almost entirely relies of gas imports from Russia. Hence, many observers and analysts labeled his very mention of looking for natural gas supplies other than those from Russia – of “the pipeline US supports”¹ – “a U-turn in Serbia's policy.”

Some take that Vučić's visit to Washington (third in a row) since the Serb Progressive Party came to power in 2012 testifies of his definite option for the West. “Serbia formally set sail to Europe long ago, but all the time they were too many signals that raised doubts about it. So Potomac could be Vučić's Rubicon,” wrote Mijat Lakićević, the deputy editor of the New Magazine.²

1 Danas, May 30–31, 2015.

2 Novi Magazin, June 4, 2015.

SUPPORT TO THE AMERICAN PIPELINE

During his two – day visit to Tirana this May (27–28) told the Associated Press – and surprised many – that Serbia would accept US's suggestion to reduce its dependence on Russian gas by joining in the pipeline project US supported.³ More precisely, that Serbia would join the Trans-Anatolian pipeline planned to supply Europe with Azerbaijan gas. In the matter of energy security, he added, Serbia is ready to be supplied with gas from different sources, which is “most important to our American friends.”⁴

AP published his statement as breaking news – a signal of “a political U-turn Serbia, Russia's traditional ally, is making.”⁵ According to some media, US officials are leading the “offensive of deterring” Balkan states from joining a new Russian project – the Turkish Stream connecting Russia and Turkey with Europe via Greece.⁶

Trying to soften his statement, Vučić explained that diversification of the sources of energy supply was not “a U-turn to America” but a wish to ensure Serbia's energy safety and efficiency.⁷ Domestic analysts were divided into two schools of thought. Some argued that this was a “fresh advance to the West” and distancing the country from Russia, while the others claimed that diversification of the sources of energy supply did not necessarily imply a political U-turn.

Officials of the ruling party, including Vice-Premier and Minister of Energetics Zorana Mihajlović, claim that “in energy supplies

Serbia should lean on the West and Russia alike.” The Minister also said that the construction of the Niš-Dimitrovgrad pipeline was a good project, adding, “it was a big mistake we haven't launched it earlier.”⁸ Quoting its sources, *Naše Novine* daily wrote that prior to revealing his plans in Tirana Vučić had informed Russian President Putin about everything. In doing it, claims the paper, Vučić assured Russian officials that his plans would in no way affect Russia-Serbia relations.⁹ So the daily interprets his statement in Tirana as “a strong signal to Americans that Serbia is not a Russian protectorate.”¹⁰

No official reactions came from Moscow. The *Politika* daily argues that “In Moscow's eyes there is a new dimension to Belgrade-Washington relationship,” as testified also by Moscow's *Komercant* paper.¹¹ The latter suggests that Premier Vučić's visit to US “could be a turning point in Belgrade's foreign policy.” Serbia is more and more turning toward the West although still insisting on neutrality and good relations with Russia, it adds.¹²

All these speculations are also fueled by the fact that in mid-April Russian Premier Dmitry Medvedev had invited Premier Vučić to visit Moscow but had not received any confirmation yet. To reporters' inquiry about this invitation people from the Office of the Premier answered that the Premier “has not planned that visit so far.”¹³

Vučić also discussed with his American hosts potential pipelines for alternative supplies – such as a trans-ocean gas transport of American gas from oil shales. However, no details

3 *Politika*, May 29, 2015.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *NIN*, May 21, 2015.

7 *Politika*, May 29, 2015.

8 *Danas*, May 30–31, 2015.

9 *Naše Novine*, May 30–31, 2015.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Politika*, June 2, 2015.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Danas*, May 5, 2015.

about these talks and possible offers have been released.

It's obvious, however, that natural gas supplies will be among key challenges to Serbia in the foreseeable future. Serbia is supplied with Russian gas coming to end consumers through Ukraine. Russia claims – what many doubt – that it will put an end to this route by the end of 2019 at the latest. As for gas supplies from Azerbaijan, Dušan Bajatović, the director of "Serbia Gas" company and the SPS official close to Russians, says that gas reserves of the Shah Denis field cannot answer Europe's demands.¹⁴ For their part, Azerbaijan producers claim the contrary, adding they would be selling their gas "at commercial basis."

EMBARRASSING TOPICS

On the eve of the Premier's visit to US the media have speculated about embarrassing questions he would be asked. This primarily referred to Kosovo and the platform drawn by President Nikolić,¹⁵ Bosnia-Herzegovina, torching of the American Embassy and even to the trial of businessman Miroslav Mišković. But most embarrassing of all, speculated the media, would be the unsolved murder of three Bitichi brothers, American citizens killed in Serbia's police base in Petrovo Selo in the summer of 1999. Vučić was the minister of information at the time.

Just before his visit Vučić announced to form a commission to interrogate the murder. He said Veran Matić would chair the commission.¹⁶

¹⁴ Politika, May 29, 2015.

¹⁵ President Tomislav Nikolić submitted his platform to the Premier before his visit to US. However, Vučić avoided commenting on it in public. All he said was that the document was „a serious paper.“

¹⁶ Journalist Veran Matić has already chaired one of „Vučić's commissions“ – the commission to investigate

Commenting on this initiative, Fatos Bitichi, a survived brother of the three, said, "My family would not accept it, as this is all about buying time and staging a show for Washington. Only the War Crimes Prosecution and the court are authorized to deal with the case, as they have all that is needed to unearth the truth."¹⁷ Vučić knows who is responsible for the crime as I have given him personally all the evidence, he added.¹⁸

Lawyer of the Bitichi family was also dissatisfied at the news about the commission calling it "a diversion." "The Premier cannot bypass his key and active role in preventing a credible investigation into the brothers Bitichi case," he said.¹⁹

Police General Goran /Guri/Radosavljević was being mentioned in this context. In 1999 he commanded the special police unit and the training center in Petrovo Selo where the Bitichi brothers were shot. Now retired Goran Radosavljević is in the membership of Vučić's Serb Progressive Party. Fatos Bitichi claims that back in 2013 Ivica Dačić told him that "Guri is Vučić's man, so we need to press Vučić."²⁰

While Vučić was in visit to Washington Police Minister Nebojša Stefanović said that the investigation into the murder of the Bitichi brothers has made "a significant progress," including "new evidence."²¹ Obrad Kesić, the representative of Republika Srpska in Washington, said, "The Premier of Serbia guaranteed that the

into the murder of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija in 1999. The commission did its task – the trial of the accused is on.

¹⁷ Newsweek, Serbian edition, June 8, 2015.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Danas, June 2, 2015.

²⁰ Newsweek, June 8, 2015; tabloids close to the Premier used this statement to compromise Ivica Dačić claiming that „Dačić sold Vučić to Americans.“

²¹ Danas, June 2, 2015.

case would be thoroughly investigated, which was most welcome /by his hosts/.”²²

RUSSIA’S REACTIONS TO THE VISIT

Most media in Russia interpreted Vučić visit to US as America’s attempt to turn Serbia away from Russia and undermine its influence on the Balkans. Yevgeny Krutikov notes two diametrically opposite ideological trends in Serbia over the past fifteen years: one conditionally pro-European and the other conditionally pro-Russian. However, the situation is much more complex, he says. The pro-Russian trend is deep-rooted in people’s consciousness and occasionally erupts in massive manifestations of gratitude and love, while the pro-European one is always on the horizon, supported by Western media, embassies, NGOs, etc.; this trend is extremely active in propaganda and media spheres. The main conflict in Serbia’s domestic policy is actually a silent confrontation of two mentalities: one conventional, conservative and historical that associates the Serbian nation and culture with Russia, and the other allegedly pro-European that aggressively imposes itself on the society.²³

“During three days in US Vučić had many meeting but none at the level above the Deputy Secretary of State, White House advisers and senators. Obviously this could not have attracted any attention of the press and television in the United States,” writes commentator Constantine Kachalin.²⁴ He also stresses out that the visit was unproductive since it is hard to expect contracts worth millions and state-of-the-art technology. “All the Americans care for is that Vučić gives up the friendship with Moscow.”

22 Blic, June 7, 2015.

23 http://ruskarec.ru/politics/2015/05/31/vucic_i_turski_tok_antiruski_demars_ili_politicki_slalom_40361.html

24 <http://iarex.ru/articles/51817>

Russian media and some experts had already reacted strongly to the Serbian Premier’s words about reducing the country’s dependence on Russian gas. Alexsei Grivich, deputy director of the Fond for National Energy Security, says in an interview with Gazette Ru, “If Serbia continues playing into Europe’s hands, it may end up in dire straits.”²⁵ The main theses about Russia’s alleged pressure on the freedom-loving Serbia that has allegedly opted for the famous ‘European course’ makes no sense at all, he concludes, since as of lately Vučić and Nikolić have not been using economic arguments but speak as one about “European course” – and in absentia, since neither of the two dares to tell this to Putin’s face.”²⁶

EFFECTS OF THE VISIT

The main message Vučić brought home was that Serbia could count on America’s support for its “course to Europe.” Some analysts argue that US does not influence decisively Brussels’ decisions. Among them is Ilija Vujačić, Serbia’s former ambassador to US, who takes that expectations that US would “push on” Serbia’s European course derived from “a mistaken interpretation” of Brussels-Washington relationship. These are partner relations, he says, especially with individual EU member-states, which excludes any possibility for influencing this decision or that.²⁷ Dušan Reljić of German Institute for International Politics and Security in Brussels, shares his skepticism. He reminds of America’s strong support to Turkey’s EU accession endeavor over the past twenty years that has not exactly benefited Ankara.²⁸

25 http://ruskarec.ru/politics/2015/05/31/vucic_i_turski_tok_antiruski_demars_ili_politicki_slalom_40361.html

26 Ibid.

27 RTVB92, June 2, 2015.

28 Danas, June 2, 2015.

Washington commended Serbia on the level of security attained in bilateral and regional relations. Vučić guaranteed (probably at his hosts' request) to continue the Brussels process with more commitment and not to encourage Milorad Dodik's separatist ambitions in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

At this point US's priority (as well as EU's) is to curtail Russia's influence on the region. Russia has put to good use US's and EU's neglect of the Southeast Europe in the past couple of years to strengthen and spread its influence. Apart from Serbia, Greece, Hungary and Macedonia are now on Russia's list.

Russia's military presence in Ukraine renewed Euro-Atlantic interest in the Balkan region and the Southeast Europe. By denying to follow the EU common foreign policy and impose sanctions on Russia (no matter how irrelevant they might be), Serbia once again testified of its ambiguity about EU.

Serbia's neutrality is unsustainable in the long run. Stephen Mayer, former director of the CIA Balkans department, says that US would have exerted stronger pressure on major European countries – Germany in particular – (for Serbia's speedier accession) "had Serbia imposed sanctions on Russia."²⁹ This is what German Chancellor Angela Merkel might request from Vučić during her visit to Belgrade in early July.

29 NIN, June 11, 2015.

CONCLUSION

Serbia's neutrality is unsustainable in the long run. Serbia has to determine its foreign policy priorities. Its proclaimed commitment to the membership of EU implies redefining of foreign policy priorities.

Being less dependent on Russia's energy supplies is a rational choice. Vučić's statement about it on the eve of his visit to US is a welcome signal, but the one to be followed by concrete deeds.

By opting for EU and NATO Serbia would manifest maturity and wisdom when it comes to its national interests. Serbia can be a stable state only within regional and NATO frame. All other countries in the region have already opted for this frame.

Serbia should intensify talks about joint infrastructural project and general improvement of economic cooperation that would help relax overall relations in region.

Respect for European value system at home – respect for human rights, independent institutions, the rule of law and, in particular, readiness to face up the past in full sincerity – would be a crystal clear signal of Serbia's commitment to European course.