

Helsinki *bulletin*



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WESTERN BALKANS: BRUSSELS MEDIATES IN CONFIDENCE-BUILDING



FONET/AP

The threatening international situation (economic and financial crises plaguing Greece and other countries in the south of Europe, the crisis of the Euro-zone, annexation of Crimea, Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the refugee drama, etc.) prompted the EU to take initiative. Its neglect of transitionally unfinished countries and societies could have had a boomerang effect. Over the past months the unprecedented wave of refugees stressed out in the most dramatic way the Western Balkans' geostrategic significance.

Having kicked off a major involvement the 2014 Berlin Initiative was followed by the Vienna meeting of heads of state and government of Western Balkan countries in August 2015. The Vienna conference adopted a declaration whereby regional leaders committed themselves to cooperation "in the spirit of neighborly relations and mutual dedication to European integration." They have also committed themselves to peaceful solution of bilateral disputes and not standing in one another's way towards the EU.

However, the regional cooperation can hardly progress without regional actors' bigger involvement in relevant projects and pressure on the EU to keep its promises. Solution to serious economic and social problems depends on their ability to revive their economies that precondition structural reforms and improvement of regional relations.

Once again woke up Russia's "Mediterranean ambitions" also need the Balkans. Energy supplies – gas and oil – are its trump cards in political "bargains" with countries in the region, from Greece to Hungary, via Macedonia, Serbia and Republika Srpska /Bosnia-Herzegovina/. Over the past years these "bargains" have been intensified through its visibility in culture and, especially, in the media.

Waiting in line for the membership of EU – with uncertain outcomes – has undermined the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic enthusiasm. Public opinion surveys show that citizens' support to EU membership is on the downward curve. For, as Dejan Jović, a professor at the Zagreb University, put it, Brussels looks to them more and more "as a useful but not always reliable partner."¹ In other words, should an alternative emerge – even a less attractive one than the EU (like Russia, Turkey or some third party) – some of the Balkan countries may easily opt for it.

The Vienna meeting was preceded by a round of Belgrade-Prishtina talks resulting in four major arrangements after an almost two-year blockade in the implementation of the Brussels Agreement (signed in April 2013). Beside agreements on energy and telecommunications, as well as on unblocking of the bridge over the Ibar River in Kosovska Mitrovica, the two parties agreed in principle on the constitution of the Assembly of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo.

¹ Newsweek, August 24, 2015.

The Berlin initiative is the more so important since heated atmosphere has been characteristic of each marking of events of the recent past such as were, this year, the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide and the 20th anniversary of the "Storm" operation in Croatia. Political and media campaigns staged on these occasions have just reflected the deep differences on the interpretation of the 1990s wars. Serbia has been either marginalizing its responsibility for Yugoslavia's brutal disintegration or justifying it by Serb hardships in the WWII. So Vuk Drašković, the leader of the Serb Renewal Movement /SPO/ and a most prominent advocate for the Greater Serbia project in the 1980s, now claims once again that the establishment of an independent Croatian state (on April 10, 1941) is the source of all the crimes – from 1941 till the ongoing revival of the Ustashi ideology.²

Premier Vučić's initiative for a regional "memory day" for all civilian victims of the 1990s wars was also an attempt at "settling the accounts." Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo turned it down immediately. Be it as it may, there can be no reconciliation or a different attitude towards the past without a shared understanding of the history and the wars of the 1990s.

The Vienna summit did not discuss his initiative.³ Austria and Germany, like the EU as a whole, were once again pragmatic. They took that strengthened bilateral relations and joint projects, infrastructural in the first place, would contribute to mutual trust and eventually, sooner or later, bring up reconciliation.

² Nedeljnik, September 10, 2015.

³ The initiative was launched on the eve of the Vienna summit. The Premier calculated that acceptance of his actually formal gesture at the summit would leave aside the heavy legacy of the wars and hence turn the region towards the future.

THE BRUSSELS PROCESS CONTINUES

In late August in Brussels Serbia and Kosovo premiers, Aleksandar Vučić and Isa Mustafa finally reached agreements of four major issues: telecommunications, energy, the assembly of Serb municipalities and unblocking of the bridge over the Ibar River in Kosovska Mitrovica. Though just in black and white so far, the agreements have been raising controversies from the very start – and from both sides.

The Serbian government and the media close to it have pictured them as great outcomes of “difficult talks.”⁴ They have been stressing out that the Assembly of Serb Municipalities /ZSO/ would have executive powers, Serbia’s energy supply industry would have its companies in Kosovo and the Telecom would operate there without any problem.⁵ Opposition leaders and the media close to them, however, have argued that the things were quite the opposite: the government had made yet another major step towards recognition of the “false state of Kosovo.”

Belgrade critics – especially those from the anti-European circles – argue that ZSO will operate within Kosovo’s constitution and laws. The same as Đorđe Vukadinović of the New Serb Political Thought magazine, they agree with Kosovo officials: “the ‘famous’ ZSO will be invested with no authority whatsoever, let alone executive power, and will be constituted and function in line with the constitutional order of ‘the Republic of Kosovo.’”⁶

4 Head of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Đurić said triumphantly, „Belgrade defeated Kosovo 5-0;” TV Prva, August 25, 2015.

5 After the meeting Premier Aleksandar Vučić told the press that the agreements reached were „excellent” as they guaranteed „scurity, safety and survival of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija.” Politika, August 26, 2015.

6 Vreme, September 3, 2015.

Leaders of the non-parliamentary right-wing bloc headed by the Democratic Party of Serbia and parties emerging from it, share this view. Even analyst Dragomir Anđelković – usually supportive of the Premier and his policies – argues, “Brussels and Washington will be pushing us to accept some new Brussels agreement that will eventually round off the abduction of Kosovo.”⁷

Prishtina officials also spoke about agreements as great successes, claiming that ZSO would be invested with no authority whatsoever and “would stand for a legally independent entity.” The opposition – Albin Kurti’s Self-Determination Party in the first place – counter-argued that the agreement on ZSO was the groundwork of a new “Republika Srpska” in Kosovo.

Even some more moderate analysts and politicians than those of the Self-Determination were seriously reserved about ZSO. So, Azem Vlassi, high ex-Yugoslav official, says, “Considering powers invested in it, ZSO will be an autonomy within Kosovo.” Veton Suroi, a journalist and writer, was even more explicit: a legal entity the two governments agreed on, he says, “is nothing but Kosovo Serbs’ territorial autonomy.”⁸

In the next four months ZSO is supposed to adopt a statute to detail its position in Kosovo legal system. According to the agreement that has been publicized, this position will be adjusted to Kosovo Constitution and laws, while ZSO will have certain powers in economic development, education, healthcare and urban and rural planning. Given that ZSO will enable legal communication with Serbia’s government (as a signatory of the Brussels Agreement Serbia is obliged to guarantee its implementation and finance ZSO partially), some commentators

7 Politika September 3, 2015.

8 Ibid.

claim that Belgrade and Prishtina will share sovereignty over Kosovo North.⁹

The agreement on ZSO is crucial not only to Kosovo's functionality but also as a model. Ethnic autonomy (rather than, say, geographic or economic) as the only mode of Serb communities' protection in neighboring states has proved to be a dangerous precedent leading towards societies' divided along ethnic lines (Bosnia and Macedonia).

Quite legitimately, Serbia's minority communities are asking for the same model. In early September five ethnic Albanian political parties from Preševo, Bujanovac and Medveđa assembled their deputies in local self-governments in South Serbia in an association. Leaders of these parties argue that the status of this association of municipalities is as legal as the one of ZSO.

Serbia's President Tomislav Nikolić restrained himself from commenting on the Brussels Agreement II. It was only two weeks later that his media adviser Vuk Fatić told the press, "The country's foreign and domestic policies are in the hands of the government the President supports in full."¹⁰

A STEP CLOSER TO EUROPE

As it seems, Serbia has been preparing itself for full recognition of Kosovo realities. This is how once outstanding Serb Kosovo leaders such as Rada Trajković and Marko Jakšić,¹¹ the same as the critics of the incumbent Belgrade regime have been interpreting the latest stage of the Brussels process.¹²

⁹ Pečat, September 4, 2015.

¹⁰ Danas, September 10, 2015.

¹¹ Radio Slobodna Evropa, September 13, 2015.

¹² Speaking about the agreements of August 25 political analyst of the Institute for Foreign Policy and Economy, Dragan Petrović, called them „debacles” and

Aleksandar Vučić's statements about fulfilling "difficult" and "tough" conditions of Serbia's course to Europe indicate the same.¹³ Commending the outcomes of the Brussels meeting German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she believed the latest agreements with Prishtina would "be a major impulse to Serbia's progress towards European integration."¹⁴

Intensified high-level meetings all over the region (visit to Sarajevo and, especially, to Srebrenica in July, exchange of visits and regular communication with Albanian Premier Edi Rama, attendance at the inauguration ceremony of Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitanović, etc.) seemed to earn him reputation among key international actors, especially those in Germany and the United States.¹⁵

Since regional cooperation is at EU's priority agenda at this stage, international factors are still turning a blind eye to the Premier's authoritarian rule, destruction of institutions and the media, populism and actual non-recognition of European values at home. They are also shutting their eyes to Serbia's and its leadership's unwillingness to seriously face up Serbia's and their own responsibility for the 1990s wars.¹⁶

operationalisation of the 2013 Brussels Agreement which recognized „the sovereignty of Kosovo on the one hand, and gave up its north to Prishtina,” Svedok, September 8, 2015.

¹³ Politika, September 7, 2015.

¹⁴ Politika, September 8, 2015.

¹⁵ In 2015 Vučić met with the German Chancellor three times, at her explicit request not long ago, visited Washington twice at invitation of US Vice-President Joseph Biden and will be paying a visit to Moscow in October.

¹⁶ Up to now, Vučić has been „honeymooning” with the international community thanks to his cooperativeness in the matter of Kosovo; however, he will be on heavy trial when it comes to Bosnia-Herzegovina /Republika Srpska/ at his attitude towards the revision of the Dayton Accords. .

The government's and the Premier's attitude towards the Middle East and African refugees, thousands of them daily traveling through Serbia over the past couple of months, certainly contributed to the Premier's present international repute.

All in all, almost two years after starting accession negotiations with EU (January 2013) it seems that initial negotiating chapters will be opened soon. To all appearances, the Chapter 35 will be the first to enable monitoring of Belgrade-Prishtina normalization, as well as the Chapter 32 dealing with finances.

ENTHUSIASM: ON A DOWNWARD CURVE ON BOTH SIDES

As a transitional country Serbia has been moving towards EU at snail's pace (let alone a number of wrong turns it took over the past 16 years since proclaiming its European orientation). Now that it finally reached the major step at the ladder of accession negotiations the situation changed: in Europe and in Serbia itself.

Even before the refugee crisis testing its readiness and ability to cope with challenges, EU's enthusiasm for new member-states has been declining. In the meantime just Croatia was admitted to the membership of EU (2013). Other West Balkan countries, Serbia included, are at various stages of accession, each with small chances for reaching its goal.¹⁷

Serbia, uncertain in many ways about its geostrategic orientation – West or East – has lost a momentum. Paradoxically, now that the regime has opted for EU unconditionally and not a single party in the parliament opposes the

course, the country's European future has never been so far away as it is.

Latest public opinion polls show dramatic decline in citizens' disposition to the Brussels club. According to the survey conducted by the governmental Office for European Integration and Factor Plus Agency only 42 percent of citizens support the country's membership of EU. Or, the Politika daily observes, their enthusiasm declined to almost "historical minimum" similar to the one of December 2012 when it was lower for one percent.

ANTI-EUROPEAN BLOC

This tendency of declining support for EU plays into the hands of the influential anti-European bloc, and academic and media circles. Though not represented in the parliament, their Euroskepticism and advocacy for Serbia's closer alliance with Russia found an echo in the public.

They also try to profit from the refugee drama by inciting xenophobia and religious intolerance. For this end, they are circulating a variety of theories: from international players' plan to Islamize Serbia by settling in with refugees from the Middle East, through dangers of transmittable diseases to threat of Islamic State "sleepers" hidden among asylum seekers.

Unfortunately, xenophobia of domestic conservatives is pillared by the ever stronger right-wing all over Europe. Critics of the government's tolerance for refugees remind that government of almost all neighboring countries – from Bulgaria, through Macedonia to Hungary – are not so "generous" and are trying to suppress and control the asylum seekers' wave. Every state's independence in deciding who is and who is not allowed to enter its territory, they argue, is among its sovereign rights.

¹⁷ When inaugurated in 2014 EC President Jean Claude Juncker said "in the next ten years" there would surely be no further enlargement of EU.

Commending Hungary and its barbed wire fence against refugees, leader of the Serb People's Party Nenad Popović insists on construction of a similar wall at the border with Macedonia. Hungary has become a raw model for other xenophobes and conservatives too. "We should follow the Hungarian example, as Hungarians are clever enough to build a wall," says leader of the Radicals Vojislav Šešelj, suggesting that the government should arrest all men

old enough to fight in a war as they had fled Syria.¹⁸ Analyst Dragomir Anđelković argues, "Serbia alone does not protect its borders and may pay dear for it once hundreds of thousands immigrants get in and raise further the tension."¹⁹

For the time being the government resists all the pressure and, as it seems, has its former brothers in arms under control.²⁰

¹⁸ Politika, August 25, 2015.

¹⁹ Informer, September 14, 2015.

²⁰ The police banned the anti-immigrant rally planned by the right-wing movement, Dveri. .

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The refugee crisis laid bare disunity and disharmony within EU. The interests of individual member-states proved to be above shared values making EU foundations. Inability to develop a common policy for refugees unveiled the major European organization's weakest point – the instinct for closing inner and outer borders when faced with challenges of a crisis.¹

This will negatively affect Serbia's and other Western Balkan countries' European prospects. No doubt that accession negotiations will be protracted and, moreover, criteria for membership made stronger.²

Faced with new challenges European leaders (Angela Merkel in the first place) will be trying to maintain stability, at least a fragile, in the Balkan "backyard." Regional economic cooperation and renewed ties in other spheres such as culture – which are the purpose of the Berlin process – may become mutually acceptable.

The neglect of the Western Balkans may additionally undermine EU. This is the reason more why the accession policy should ensure finances for infrastructure and economic renewal for all countries in the Balkans. The funds mentioned in Vienna (600 million Euros) are not insufficient, as they mostly relate to IPA funds these countries have already received.

¹ "This trend will negatively affect Serbia as a part of the main corridor for migrants and refugees since the multicultural and open EU has now become 'fort Europe,'" says CIRSD program director Nikola Jovanović, Politika, September 7.

² "There seems to be a tacit deal between EU and Serbia – and EU and other countries of the Balkans – whereby EU pretends to want us in, while we are pretending to want in," says Milan Ignjatović of the Institute for European Studies; Blic, September 6, 2015.