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SERBIA: HOSTAGE TO ITS "NEUTRALITY"

The developments brimming over the Balkans definitely laid bare Serbia's position: its "neutrality" and denial to choose its path towards the future. With all the turmoil at the international scene (presidential elections in the US, Brexit, migrants, Syria, etc.) international players, the West in particular, are no longer interested so much in the Balkans thus leaving room to Russia's meddling in the region.

The events following Montenegro's elections and raising of the question of the ownership over the Trepča Combine in Kosovo testify of the attempt at reopening the status issues related to these two states. According to the media in Serbia, referendum in Republika Srpska – the international community has properly responded to – created a major precondition to further referendums, including the one on secession. And yet, this relatively skillful maneuver – though

held in the function of local elections – has symbolically opened the door to similar scenarios in other neighboring countries, say some analysts.

In its forecasts for the fourth quarter of 2016 Strategic Forecasting Inc., US, stresses out that after the disputable referendum in RS preparations for further actions of Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, aimed at strengthening their autonomy at the detriment of federal institutions, will cause interethnic tensions.¹

Some analysts in Serbia take that the referendum in RS proved that “American omnipotence in the Balkans has come to an end.”² The main obstacle to US power, they say, is Russia’s growing power in “our region.”³ True, Russia has “lost” Montenegro, they say, but Serbs have won in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Americans got a consolation prize in Montenegro.⁴

Presenting itself as an advocate of Serbia’s interests Russia is in the background of all these illusions and plans. Tabloids close to the government claim, “To Putin today Serbia is a matter of honor but also one of his most important strategic questions outside Russia. This is why he will do all in his power to help his friends in Belgrade and Banjaluka.”⁵ Ex-foreign minister (of the Milošević era) Živadin Jovanović has no doubts about Serbian-Russian strategic partnership ever since the time of the First Serbian Uprising in early 19th century. “Russia has major interests in the Balkans, and that’s one of the reasons why our economic, cultural but also

military cooperation is growing stronger and stronger,” he says.⁶

If the West does nothing but keeps calling Dodik (and other regional actors) to account Putin will go on complimenting him (and everyone else manifesting disobedience to US) as an alternative to the “moderate” Vučić. This will put Premier Alexander Vučić under the pressure and reveal his limitations: and, no doubt, this will make room to his rivals relying on Russia’s support. One of these rivals, so far, has been Ivica Dačić.

Through the *Informer* tabloid, close to him, Premier Vučić has “complained” of being under simultaneous pressure from the West, Russia and his own party /SNS/. The pressure from Russia is more and more evident. Moscow’s latest moves indicate that it will continue growing: the visit by Premier Medvedev, announced many a time, has been postponed once again and an agreement on the status of the Niš Humanitarian Center has been insisted on along with the calls to Serbia to join Russia’s up to now humanitarian action in Aleppo.⁷

Though Premier Vučić keeps pledging Serbia’s course to EU integration but friendly relations with Russia as well, the split between him and President Nikolić is more and more evident. Montenegrin elections also testified that he had nothing to do with the attempt at preventing Milo Đukanović from winning them. Namely, growing resistance to Euro-Atlantic integrations is evident in the circles closest to him as well as among influential and now parliamentary opposition parties (with close ideologies such as SRS, DSS and Dveri), conservative circles such as those in the Serbian Orthodox Church and other centers of power opposing any reformist moves, and especially those hinting at the rule of law. Premier Vučić is fully aware that Serbia cannot keep going without assistance from EU

1 <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/politika/97388/PRESUDNABITKA-BALKAN-Stratfor-prognozira-etnicke-tenzije-obracun-Zapada-Rusije>.

2 Pečat, October 14, 2016.

3 Ibid.

4 Pečat, October 21, 2016.

5 <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/politika/91224/STROGOPOV-Detalji-izvestaja-americkih-obavestajaca-CIA-upozorava-PUTIN-RATOVAO-SRBIJU>.

6 Ibid.

7 *Informer*, October 10, 2016.

and the West. “Let’s be fair and spit not on their taxpayers’ money. We have received hundreds of millions of Euro for floods only, and spent these moneys in a way no one has had any remark against.”⁸

Unless EU engages itself more in integrating Serbia – but other Western Balkan countries too (which seems almost impossible in present circumstances) – Premier Vučić will be forced to make a choice that will not favor European integration. Regardless of how sincere his commitment to EU is (considering his autocratic rule and intolerance) the alternative can be only more radical: no politician at Serbia’s arena is presently offering a clear-cut plan for the country’s future.

MONTENEGRIN ELECTIONS

Đukanović’s electoral victory is a victory of Montenegro’s pro-Western orientation, the victory won despite all the support the opposition got to push the country into Russia’s orbit. The victory is the more so important since Đukanović has been faced with a well-organized front including para-military troops from Serbia who were after provoking disorder and possibly arresting Đukanović in the case he wins.

Montenegrin Public Prosecutor Milivoje Katnić said his office could prove that a gang of criminals had planned acts of terrorism in Montenegro for October 16. He told the audience in a live newscast that a list of suspects was not final yet. “They were after assisting the people protesting in front of the Assembly and break in masked in the uniforms of the Special Police Squad all of which was meant to make-believe the police shooting at citizens. By spilling blood of innocent citizens this group of terrorists wanted to

8 <http://beta.rs/izjava-dana/komentar-politika/40939-aleksandar-vucic-ni-eu-nije-uvek-pravicna-ali-je-eu-najveci-trgovinski-partner-srbiji>.

occupy the Assembly, arrest the Premier and take command over the parliament.”⁹

Montenegrin writer Andrej Nikolaidis takes that these elections were a historical “no” to Russia; since 1948 so strong anti-Russian campaign has not been staged in Montenegro. Should Montenegro give up joining NATO, he adds, that would mean “no” to integration into EU, and a dramatic U-turn given that the country would no longer be a part of Western civilization but return to Byzantine darkness.¹⁰

From the moment the elections were called Montenegrin opposition launched actions that were mostly anti-Montenegrin in character. Since the opposition controls a considerable part of the country’s media spectrum, its campaign had been after discrediting the ruling party and its leader – mostly because of their Euro-Atlantic policy.

Russia is among major investors in Montenegro. However, its investments have been considerably reduced because of its own economic situation but also Đukanović’s course towards EU and NATO. Investment was its major mechanism of blackmailing Montenegro; however, once the West imposed sanctions against it, Russia turned towards other channels of influence, to the media above all. The word has it that large sums of money meant for campaigning against NATO and EU have been sent to Montenegro over past couple of months. Most of the funds went to dailies *Vijesti* and *Dan*, and other media (about 15 outlets) working for the campaign.

Opposition parties and coalitions recognize not the outcome of the elections; they claim they

9 <http://www.vijesti.me/tv/katnic-uhapseni-htjeli-dasimuliraju-napad-policije-na-narod-907858>.

10 <http://www.avaz.ba/clanak/258603/andrej-nikolaidis-o-izborima-u-crnoj-gori-ovo-je-historijsko-ne-rusiji?url=clanak/258603/andrej-nikolaidis-o-izborima-u-crnoj-gori-ovo-je-historijsko-ne-rusiji>.

were marked by frauds, and more framed-up than any earlier in the history of Montenegro's parliamentarianism.¹¹

However, according to OSCE/ODIHR observers, the elections were held in competitive atmosphere and characterized by general respect for fundamental freedoms, whereas changes for the better testifying of genuine will to have election process promoted were manifest.¹²

Commenting on the elections EC leaders Federica Mogherini and Johannes Hahn said Montenegro had made big progress in the accession process and that months ahead had to be spent on speeding up political and economic reforms, especially in the domain of the rule of law.¹³

Russia officially released that the outcome of Montenegrin elections "testify that the Montenegrin society is deeply split off over a range of issues, mostly over this Balkan country's foreign policy and its prospects in NATO." The release also stresses out expectations from a new government to take into account people's opinion: almost one half of the electorate voted to the parties advocating "a referendum on NATO."¹⁴

The campaign Serbia's media – pro-regime and the so-called independent alike – staged following on the Montenegrin elections sided with the opposition. They were trying, says Prof. Žarko Korać, MP, to picture differently the situation in Montenegro with a focus on its regime's alleged electoral frauds. The attempted coup d'état, he adds, is threatening; however, as investigation reveals, it had nothing to do with some sort of manipulation by the Montenegrin regime but, evidently, with a plan to hinder the

country's membership of NATO and even integration into EU.¹⁵

Elections in Montenegro, writes Nataša Mičić, LDP MP, have always been a litmus test to assess the state of affairs in Serbia. As a rule, she adds, the outcome has always been the same - the alleged thin line between two Serbias is wiped out.¹⁶ The fact that during the Montenegrin elections a part of "intellectual" Serbia was all of a sudden ideologically too close to Serbian Radicals or some other right-wing parties is probably the most reliable proof of how come that there is no serious alternative to Vučić at present, she concludes.¹⁷

President Nikolić has been stressing out for long that over the past couple of years Montenegro has made several mistakes, especially by imposing sanctions on Russia. Besides, he also emphasizes, /Montenegro/ "has neither been treating Serbs fairly and has been living in fear that the Serbian element could carry the day again given that the awareness about the existence of Montenegrin language or church has not taken root yet."¹⁸

NIKOLIĆ: ADVOCATES RUSSIAN INTERESTS MORE AND MORE OPENLY

A line of demarcation between Premier Vučić and President Nikolić is more and more visible when it comes to Russian interests and Russia's pressure on Serbia. At a recent opening of Serbia's consulate in St. Petersburg Nikolić missed no opportunity to thank Russia, especially President Putin, for their "genuine support" to

11 <http://mondo.rs/a948604/Info/Ex-Yu/Crna-Gora-Opozicija-ne-priznaje-rezultate-izboraq.html>.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 <http://rs.n1info.com/a202205/Svet/Region/Rusija-o-izborima-u-Crnoj-Gori.html>.

15 Danas, October 20, 2016.

16 Danas, October 20, 2016.

17 Ibid.

18 <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:630127-Nikolic-Srbija-nikada-nece-uci-u-NATO-duzan-sam-narodu-jos-jedan-mandat>.

the safeguard of Serbia's territorial integrity and national interests at the international scene.¹⁹

Russia supports openly President Tomislav Nikolić's anti-European stances as it sees him as a partner in the obstruction of Serbia's European integration. The President has been in collision with the Serbian cabinet's proclaimed policy for long, advocating openly Russia's interest at home and in the region.

Now he is often saying that Serbia will never become an EU member-state if it has to recognize Kosovo's independence in return. He also keeps saying that Serbia will never be in the membership of NATO for its being a military alliance: "This is not what we need. We do respect their standards when it comes to the rights of minorities and migrants."²⁰ The time has come to talk to Brussels in a different language, he says, and ask it whether the membership of EU will equal "an ultimatum on Kosovo's independence and what it is it /Brussels/ thinks about property appropriation."²¹

Nikolić counts on yet another term in office and Vučić's support for it (most probably, Vučić's support will be crucial to anyone's victory in presidential elections). Bearing in mind the support he has been receiving from Russia – as well as little room for Vučić to maneuver in – Nikolić now says, "If I decide to run for the office no one will be powerful enough to jeopardize my triumph."²²

19 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nikolic-srbija-je-vecno-zahvalna-putinu-na-podrsci-on-je-veliki-vizionar/pxz4fzd>.

20 <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/2407091-nikolic-nemamo-nameru-da-udjemo-u-nato>.

21 <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/2404535-nikolic-vreme-je-da-pitamo-da-li-je-kosovo-uslov-za-eu>.

22 <http://www.naslovi.net/2016-10-20/beta/nikolic-ako-budem-kandidat-nece-biti-dovoljno-jakog-protivnika/19111125>.

KOSOVO: ATTEMPT AT RAISING AGAIN THE QUESTION OF KOSOVO'S STATUS

Adoption of the Law on Trepča²³ in Kosovo's parliament generated scores of reactions in Serbia, all of which actually boiled down to an attempt at raising again the question of Kosovo's status. The first to react were ministers and governmental officials. Minister Vulin called the law an attempt at destabilization, saying, "Those who are after destabilization do not have only property in mind but want to create the situation that can hardly be kept under control." "Our neighborhood has turned fragile – the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina remained tense even though the elections are over... Montenegro is agitated and so is Macedonia, and there is now trouble in the territory of Kosovo and Metohija," he said.²⁴

Marko Đurić, the head of the Office for Kosovo, went so far as to say that the Serbian government would call for an urgent session of the UNSC on "appropriation" of Trepča and violation of Res. 1244.²⁵

Milovan Drecun, SNS MP, called the Prishtina regime's decision on Trepča an attempt at rounding off ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija. "That's a blow to the people's right to existence in a territory since Trepča makes the foundation of our existence in Kosovo and Metohija," he said.²⁶

23 The Law provides that the Trepča Combine shall be a joint-stock company; the Kosovo government shall have possession of 80% of stocks whereas the remaining 20% shall go to workers and other stakeholders.

24 <http://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/svi-treba-da-budemo-zabrinuti-vulin-trepca-je-pokusaj-destabilizacije-kosmeta-clanak-2481107>.

25 <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/politika/96076/DJURIC-Vlada-Srbije-traziti-hitnu-sednicu-Saveta-bezbednosti-otimanju-Trepce-krsenju-rezolucije>.

26 Ibid.

Serbian People's Party /SNP/ and its pro-Russian leader Nenad Popović warned that Serbia has gone too far in making self-destructive concessions to EU in the matter of Kosovo and Metohija, and requested the official Belgrade to insist on the respect for the international law and Res. 1244 with reliance on all the assistance and support it could get from "the friendly Russia and its leader Vladimir Putin."

Newspaper stories are suggesting that, following on the referendum in RS, Americans are after Serbia, exerting "awful pressure" on it in the matter of Kosovo. US takes that Russia has influence on Serbia, they say; therefore, it is crucial to it to force Serbia to recognize Kosovo's independence as this recognition will automatically weaken Russia's political influence not only on Serbia but on the region. Nikola Vrzić, reporter for the *Pečat* magazine, says that if Serbia accepts the ultimatum on telecommunications it will have sign another Brussels agreement in almost no time, under which it will have to say yes to Kosovo's membership of international organizations, UN above all.²⁷

Everything referred to above has already been agreed on in Brussels; however, all these new

'requests' are now presented to the public as US plan for "a knockdown blow" to Serbia.²⁸ Protagonists of these theses claim that Brussels has been put out of the picture and any mention of it is nothing but pro forma. "The US has anyway been displeased with EU's snail-paced and unsuccessful functioning."²⁹

Russia's commentator Ana Filimonovna of the Strategic Culture Fund argues, "Integration of Kosovo and Metohija Serbs into 'Republic of Kosovo' is one of key goals of US policy for the Balkans."³⁰ She warns against NATO's Balkan strategy of "controlled chaos of medium intensity:" "orange revolution" in Macedonia and Republika Srpska; street protests of Serbia's "civil society" mobilizing up to 30,000 people (which is not enough for a rerun of the October 5, 2000 scenario, but enough to destabilize the country's political regime).³¹ She also argues that Balkan countries are under the pressure to join NATO and that some Albanian 'elements' are being organized into armies of subversive-punitive character and trained in "in-depth suppression" of resistance in the event of an armed conflict between NATO and Russia.³²

27 <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/politika/96271/NOVINAR-PUBLICISTA-NIKOLA-VRZIC-UPOZORAVA-Krajnji-cilj-Amerike-potpuni-SLOM-SRBIJE>.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 <http://www.informer.rs/vesti/politika/90625/ZABRINJAVAJUCA-SAZNANJA-RUSKE-NOVINARKE-NATO-priprema-siptarsku-vojsku-kojom-potciniti-sever-Kosova>.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Serbia has reached the point when its neutrality and vacillation are sustainable no more. Since it has declared itself for European integration, it simply has to adjust its policy to that of EU – and in this context is under the pressure from the West.

Russia's presence in the region is more and more palpable and aggressive; this can be partially ascribed to the slowdown in Western Balkan countries' integration into EU. Russia has been occupying the media sphere thanks to non-transparent privatization of the media and their commercialization.

The Serbian society is torn between two extremes: on the one hand, there are expectations for a better life once country joins EU and, on the other, frustration with defeats suffered, which Russia has been fueling, and with elite's incapacity to economically revive the country.

Russia has been skillfully weaving people's sense of humiliation into all media contents, especially in tabloid; and in all these stories Putin has been dominating as a key to solution.

To prevent possible disintegration of the Western Balkans EU should speed up integration processes though more flexible approaches, and engage itself in the region's economic recovery.

Serbia can hardly have a relevant alternative option unless it takes stock of Milošević's policy; until then, the regime and the opposition will be overlapping in all "critical points" of the recent past (Sarajevo, war in Croatia, Montenegro, Kosovo, etc.). Sticking to nationalism, as the only legitimate policy, fatally undermines Serbia's democratic potential.

In the ongoing negotiations under its auspices EU should insist more energetically on the implementation of the Brussels Agreement. Otherwise, Belgrade-Prishtina normalization will be constantly obstructed from one side or the other; and over the past months this is exactly what Belgrade has been doing (agreement on telecommunications, reactions to the law on Trepča, etc.)