

Helsinki bulletin



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SERBIA AND GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION FOR THE BALKANS

Aleksandar Vučić's convincing victory in the race for the presidency, a new government that was formed, reactions to everything from the opposition, feeble attempts at triggering off a resistance movement to dictatorship...all the rounded off the picture of Serbia's society actual potential for radical changes and reforms.

The ceremony of presidential inauguration and accompanying manifestations laid bare the nature of Serbia's ruling elite. In the past five years the Serbian Progressive Party/SNS/ has seized the power at all levels – from municipal to republican. That was the last wave of a "bottom-up

revolution" that finally established a new ruling political class in the country. This populist "people's" movement stripped the civilian layer of the society that, nationalistic and opportunistic as it was, missed the opportunity to set firmly the country on European course.

In fact, Aleksandar Vučić is today's mien of "European Serbia," notwithstanding all those disputable and blurred policies he uses to present himself to the world as a reformer and driving force of changes. The new cabinet he had actually formed - questioned with good reason by parts of the ruling coalition the same as by the

entire opposition – threw additional light on the newly elected president and the power concentrated in his hands.

In the latest cycles of his six-year rule Aleksandar Vučić practically summed up all the characteristics of his rise to the very top. First of all, he clearly demonstrated that he always has the final say. What apart from voluntarism in crucial decision-making, the omnipotence he has gradually consolidated since 2012 when elected “first vice-premier” and then the premier is unscrupulousness and, occasionally, bizarreness.

VUČIĆ’S PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION

The ceremony itself finely pictured Serbia of today – at national, regional, and international level. Not only did it display Serbia’s newly established elite but stood for Vučić’s self-promotion as a regional leader aware of the task awaiting him. In his inaugural address he emphasized the significance of regional cooperation saying that “the time has come to build bridges over our past, so Serbia has no more important duty than sharing with its neighbors the belief that it cannot do well if the others are not.”¹

Leaders from the region, Bakir Izetbegović and Kolinda Grabar Kitanović most of all, approved it. The former said he and the President were continuing the same policy of openness they had pursued during Vučić’s premiership, while the President of Croatia stressed that she had come “full of happiness and hope” that this would be a new breakthrough in Croatia-Serbia relations.²

1 http://www.danas.rs/politika.56.html?news_id=349240&title=Sve%20Dana+ceremonija+povodom+inauguracije+predsednika+Vu%20%28Di%20%287a.

2 Ibid.

Diplomatic corps also attended the ceremony. Statements by some diplomats clearly demonstrate how important Serbia was seen while still “choosing which side to take.” Representatives from the West mostly spoke about their countries’ support and belief that Serbia would persist in its reformist course and towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Brian Hoyt Yee of the US Department of State spoke about the developmental potential of Serbia-US relationship in many fields. He said there was “room for development of military-security cooperation” and reminded of the 10-year cooperation between the National Guard of Ohio and the Army of Serbia, and the interest American investors were showing for Serbia.³

In his message of congratulations French President Emmanuel Macron said his country would continue supporting Serbia’s progress towards EU, as Europe would “not be whole without the Western Balkans, especially without Serbia.” German envoy Gerhard Schroeder called Serbia’s president and Serbia “an anchor of stability in a troublesome region.”⁴ “We admire Serbia and wish it would join EU as soon as possible,” said Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern.⁵

Russia’s Vice-president Dmitri Rogozin emphasized traditional friendship between the two countries, which indicates that “relations between our countries are friendly.” He also stressed that the Serbian people should make a proper choice in its policy at, as he put it, complex political arena in the Balkans at this point. In any case, “Russia supports Serbia.”⁶

Leaders of the opposition were mostly critical about the inaugural ceremony, calling it

3 <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/hojt-ji-ima-prostora-za-unapredenje-odnosa-srbije-i-sad/9z4rxv5>.

4 <http://www.tanjug.rs/full-view.aspx?izb=338954>.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

inappropriate to the actual situation of the country. Bojan Pajtić, ex-president of the Democratic Party, argued that “foreign policy effect of the inauguration was nil” while its costs were just another burden on the shoulders of Serbia’s citizens. Ana Brnabić was elected as an ideal premier, he said, given that her election ensures continuity to Vučić’s authoritarianism.⁷ He was also critical about the opposition calling it preoccupied with itself instead of sending its leaders “to door-to-door” campaigns.⁸

Some hundred citizens staged a protest against the inauguration under slogans such as “Re-sign,” “A false inauguration,” “Freedom to the Media,” etc. Opposition parties and movements had been invited to join the protest. Activists of Zoran Živković’s New Party, Janko Veselinović’s Movement for Radical Changes and ex-president Boris Tadić’s Social Democratic Party accepted the invitation. Saša Janković’s Movement of Free Citizens released it would not attend but supported the rally.⁹

Aleksandar Vučić called the citizens in protest – harassed by supporters of the ruling party – provocateurs, while offering his apology to reporters of Danas, Insider, WICE and Espresso portal who had been threatened while doing their jobs. As for the persons who were harassing journalists - their faces clear at several published photos – he said they were his party’s security officers.¹⁰

7 http://www.danas.rs/politika.56.html?news_id=349407&title=Pajti%C4%87%3a+Opozicija+%C4%8Deka+da+vlast+padne+s+kru%C5%A1ke.

8 Ibid.

9 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/28575527.html>.

10 Ibid.

PREMIER AND THE NEW CABINET

No doubt that the election of the premier and composition of the incumbent cabinet were Vučić’s choices. In the region, as well as in Europe, Ana Brnabić’s appointment was welcomed as a sign of the President’s pro-Western liberal orientation. He had composed the cabinet by partially reconstructing his own. On the other hand, a new, notably pro-Russian official, Nenad Popović of the Serbian People’s Party, became a new member of the cabinet, while Aleksandar Vulin was given the high office of the defense minister.¹¹

In Vučić’s cabinet Ana Brnabić was the minister of public administration and local self-government. For the time being she is mostly seen as “a loyal successor to the fauteuil” to be working as ordered by the presidential office. A handful of officials, mostly from the ruling party, claims that she is qualified and hard working, which is supposed to warrant her autonomy as the premier. Be it as it may, it is still too early for any prognosis though the experience has shown that skeptics were right.¹² The first interview she gave in her capacity as the premier to American Blumberg Agency indicates that they are in the right – she said that Serbia, if forced to make a choice, would choose the European Union, rather than Russia.¹³ Her choice of a course towards Europe was obviously not welcomed by Moscow.

SNS party members quite openly told reporters after a meeting with President Vučić (still their

11 „Only in Serbia is it possible that in ten days only a sensationally pro-Western minister turns the steering wheel of her cabinet toward Russia,” columnist Zoran Panović, Danas, July 1-2, 2017.

12 Many associate Brnabić’s premiership with Mirka Cvetković’s during Borisa Tadić’s second term in office as the president (2008-2012). He was generally seen as someone „not interfering into his own work.”

13 Politika, July 5, 2017.

party leader) that they had wanted a future premier to be a SNS member. One of coalition partners – United Serbia /JS/ would not obey and stuck to its principles: six JS MPs voted against the new premier and her cabinet.¹⁴

Some commentators noted that SNS profited the least from the election of a new cabinet: not a single new office was allocated to the biggest party in the ruling coalition, while the premier was a non-partisan figure (officially, at least). Out of 22 members of the cabinet, only six-seven can be considered as true SNS cadres. “Many SNS bellies remained empty” and hungry men cannot be satisfied, notes editor of the NIN weekly Nikola Tomić. “In her confused rule the weak premier need not fear as much of the opposition as she has of dissatisfaction in her own ranks.”¹⁵

As for now, it is still early to clearly identify the mood prevailing in the ruling party. The leader’s public statement about the obligation of all of 129 SNS MPs to give their vote to the proposed mandatory and the fact that he had to intervene on her behalf within his own party indicate a rather thorny road.¹⁶

The most important coalition partner, Socialist Party of Serbia, welcomed the mandatory but charged dearly its welcome, as most analysts note. It got another two ministerial seats (in addition to three it already has): the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-government and the Ministry of Ecology. Two new ministers were added to the government to satisfy SPS’ appetite.

14 JS leader Dragan Marković Palma said, „Ana Brnabić is not my premier.”

15 NIN, June 29, 2017.

16 According to one „school of thought” Vučić was making a „drama” himself so as to demonstrate how much trouble he has to cope with to attain something.

THE PREMIER’S ATTEMPT AT MAKING A CHOICE

As said above, the premier’s first interview caused scores of reactions at domestic and international scene; and not because she opted first for an American news agency (Blumberg) rather than for a domestic media outlet but because she said, according to Blumberg, “Should Serbia have to choose between closer ties with Russia and membership of the European Union, the latter would be its choice.”¹⁷

“The statement caused a political earthquake in Serbia,” wrote the Blic daily. This is quite understandable, says the daily, as that was the first clear-cut answer to the question that has “troubled” for years European diplomats and EU envoys meeting with Serbia’s officials.¹⁸

“Ana Brnabić’s statement clearly indicates that the new-old cabinet will turn its back to Russia,” released the Serbian Radical Party.¹⁹ As for the Dveri Movement, it argued that the premier’s task was not to take Serbia towards EU but to separate it from Russia – “to make it possible for Brussels to easily go on with its colonial rule of Serbia.”²⁰ President of the Democratic Party of Serbia /DSS/ Miloš Jovanović said that her statement laid bare the policy of prioritizing EU over everything else, including Serbia, while his predecessor Sanda Rašković Ivić called the premier “to call a referendum and ask the people, as a European.”²¹

Having opted for EU rather than for Russia “Ana created a chaos in the government,” concluded the Kurir tabloid.²² In any case, reactions from some members of the cabinet were prompt.

17 Politika, July 5, 2017.

18 Blic, July 5, 2017.

19 Ibid.

20 Politika, July 5, 2017.

21 Blic, July 5, 2017.

22 Kurir, July 5, 2017.

“Crucial to a wise policy is to avoid being faced with a dilemma – EU or Russia,” commented the first premier and foreign minister, Ivica Dačić.²³ A statement by Vice-premier Zorana Mihajlović was interpreted as “pouring water on” the premier’s Euro-fanaticism. Serbia is too small to “quarrel with big and important partners like Russia, China, US and EU,” she said. “But Serbia is really big and responsible in looking after its political stability,” she added nevertheless. President Vučić stayed neutral. He just commented that he knew “what Ana thinks” and, therefore, never doubted the trust he placed in her.²⁴

He interview with the American news agency resounded in Moscow too. While the Sputnik portal was wondering “has Ana Brnabić overthrown Serbia’s policy for Russia?” the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zaharova said she hoped Serbia would never have to face a dilemma between EU and Russia. Just a day later she released that Ana Brnabić had handed over the transcript of her interview with Blumberg to Russian Ambassador to Serbia Chepurin; according to her, the transcript testified that her statement was taken out of the context.²⁵

The same as the interview to Blumberg disturbed Serbia’s anti-European, conservative parties, the news from Moscow about handing over the transcript to the Ambassador “woke up” the so-called pro-European opposition.²⁶ Her gesture was almost unanimously criticized as Serbia’s humiliation before “an ambassadorial clerk”

23 Politika, July 5, 2017.

24 Politika July 9, 2017.

25 „The Serbian Premier said her words were misinterpreted by the American new agency, and handed over the integral transcript of her interview... which did not contain the phrase ascribed to her. We judge on the basis of these explanations,” said Maria Zaharova, Politika, July 9, 2017.

26 Only the Liberal Democratic Party and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina called her favoring of EU over Russia „a brave gesture.” Other parties of the same bloc refrained from any comment.

(Vesna Pešić) who had the transcript brought at “his door.” “For, what else was the purpose of her gesture but to show, cap in hand, to Putin’s touched Russia that she is as much on a string as domestic Russophiles infatuated with myths and propaganda?”²⁷ DS President Dragan Šutanovac argued that she “openly questioned not only her but also national credibility,”²⁸ while Saša Janković of the Movement of Free Citizens said her gesture “unworthy of the Republic of Serbia and its citizens, and breaks the principle of independence in international relations and the law that forbids Serbia’s subjugation to any foreign power.”²⁹

Minister Zorana Mihailović said that the Premier probably should have show to cabinet members first.

Finally, Ana Brnabić admitted that she had handed over the transcript to Chepurin, but said she had not tried to justify herself on the occasion. “I made no excuses. I spoke openly in interviews to Blumberg, Sputnik and BBC. I wanted to show that mean what I say, although some of my statements were completely taken out of the context.”³⁰

REACTIONS FROM RUSSIA

Unlike Western officials who had unanimously welcomed Ana Brnabić’s premiership, Moscow seemed to be rather nervous about her appointment. Its nervousness was evident not only in its Belgrade-seated Ambassador’s excessive activity but also in undiplomatic statements by Russian high officials such as Dmitri Rogozin and Maria Zaharova. Judging by everything, Kremlin was not fully satisfied with the newly established balance in the Serbian government in

27 Danas, July 11, 2017.

28 Vreme, July13, 2017.

29 Novi magazin, July 13, 2017.

30 Interview with Blic, July 9, 2017.

which Russia “tipped the scale,” a stronger position of Vice-Premier Dačić (tasked with political matters while Brnabić mostly in charge of the economy, according to the President’s concept), Alexander Vulin’s appointment as the Minister of Defense and the newly incorporated cabinet member, Nenad Popović, an overt advocate for the Russian option.

The Western community’s renewed interest in the Balkans has a boomerang effect on Moscow. As it seems, Kremlin interpreted Brnabić’s appointment as Vučić’s concession to the West. Each step she makes is, therefore, observed carefully and analyzed, and not by Sputnik only. Ambassador Chepurin had several meetings with Serbia’s highest officials, from President Vučić, newly appointed Minister of Defense Vulin, ex-president and Head of the Office for Cooperation with Russia and China Tomislav Nikolić to almost every member of the cabinet, individually.

The media reported that one of Putin’s closest associates and secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Patrushev, was unofficially Russia’s new key strategist for the Balkans.³¹ The Blic daily quotes him saying that Russia will direct its efforts toward strengthening the existing alliances in the Balkans.

The person to be dealing with Serbia officially from now on is Russian Vice-premier Dmitri Rogozin Putin had assigned to the National Council for Cooperation with Russia and China as a partner to Nikolić. Rogozin used the opportunity of his visit to Belgrade (to attend the inauguration ceremony) to repeat his statements that Serbia would never become an EU member-state because that would be preconditioned with recognition of Kosovo – something Serbia would never do.³²

31 Blic, June 25, 2017.

32 Večernje novosti, June 26, 2017.

Even more openly than him was philosopher and leader of the International Euro-Asian Movement Alexander Dugin. He suggested to Belgrade to strategically opt for Euro-Asian Union and ODBK, saying, “Should that be the case, the problem of Kosovo becomes Russia’s problem too. And we can then, with all our nuclear arms, military component and authority in the East, roll up our sleeves and start solving the problem.”³³ He has been arguing anyway that prospects for Serbia’s membership of EU, many would run away from if they could, are dim.³⁴

Status of the personnel of the Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš has been on the agenda all the time and the main point of Russia’s growing pressure on Serbia; probably of blackmail too given that, according to some analysts, Serbia’s denial of diplomatic status to the staff is the reason why Russia has not yet delivered the promised military aircrafts and arms. Dmitri Rogozin raised the question (again) during his recent visit to Belgrade, while the United Russia’s high official, Sergey Zeleznik said that diplomatic status for Russian rangers would be “a sign of respect for their work and a deposit for even stronger cooperation in the future.”³⁵

REACTIONS FROM THE WEST

The United States has reactivated itself in the Balkans. Having solved the Macedonian crisis in favor of Premier Zoran Zaev and supported Montenegro’s membership of NATO, US turned its attention to Serbia considering it as Moscow’s biggest stronghold. American officials are now in frequent visits to Serbia.

In mid-July, at Vice-president Michael Pence’s invitation, Aleksandar Vučić was in visit to

33 Politika, July 1, 2017.

34 Ibid.

35 Politika June 30, 2017.

Washington. Belgrade officially labeled it “the most important diplomatic event” of the year.

Persons close to the new US administration, but other observers of developments in Europe and the Balkans as well, were putting across various messages occasioned by this visit. Luke Kofi of the Heritage Foundation close to the new administration said that Serbia should be more cautious about its foreign policy decisions. It may develop good relations with Russia even without a humanitarian center and even if not participating in joint military exercises or not organizing a meeting between Republika Srpska leader and (Russian president) Putin on its territory. Serbia should be let know that we are aware of that, he concluded.³⁶

And Janos Bugaysky of the Center of European Policy Analysis takes it is high time for Serbia to decide on taking sides – with the West or Russia. Vučić’s visit is important as he will be told firsthand what it is the American administration expects from the Serbian government.³⁷

Damon Wilson of the Atlantic Alliance points out that it is on Serbia to definitely decide what to do with the Russian center, adding that the question US should ask itself is about being present too in the Southeast Europe. He suggests that the presence of American troops in KFOR and in Camp Bondsteel should not be temporary but permanent so showcase that America is a power that will be there in the future too.³⁸

At request of Congressman Eliot Angel, US Congress suggested a measure that calls for reports on military cooperation between Serbia and Russia.³⁹ He argued that Russia has donated 600-million USD worth weaponry to Serbia.

36 Ibid. .

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 <https://inserbia.info/today/2017/07/us-requests-reports-on-military-cooperation-of-serbia-and-russia/>

It was also publicly speculated in Serbia that once in Washington Vučić would be forced to make no bones about Serbia’s future strategic orientation. Some of his statements were also indicative in that sense.⁴⁰

According to another “school of thought” Washington not insists yet on Serbia’s definite answer. “I wouldn’t say the issue is so much pressing... America is concerned about two issues: regional stability and dialogue with Kosovo,” says ex-Ambassador to US Ivan Vujačić.⁴¹ Sonia Licht of the Fund for Political Excellence practically shares his view, saying she sees not any reason why to think that Vučić will be asked to spell out Serbia’s position.⁴²

Serbia-Russia relations were discussed at the meeting between Vice-president Pence and President Vučić (July 17). After the meeting Vučić told the press, “Serbia cannot fulfill everyone’s requests.”⁴³ Referring to Serbia’s position towards Russia, he made no bones – at least according to domestic press – about Serbia’s stance about certain developments in the region and “the issues for which it can count on Moscow support unlike on the support from other countries.”⁴⁴

Judging by everything, the meeting was focused on the situation in the region with special emphasis on Belgrade-Prishtina relations. “We also discussed the issues problematic to Serbia and the region. We gave straight from the shoulder that these problems should be solved peacefully and in a civilized manner, and that we are doing our best not to maintain them as frozen conflicts in the next hundred years but to see what it is that can be settled in the period to come.”⁴⁵

40 Politika, July 17, 2017.

41 Danas, July 18, 2017.

42 Ibid.

43 Večernje novosti, July 18, 2017.

44 Ibid. .

45 Ibid.

RESPONSE FROM EU

The European Union, most of all Germany, tries to define a platform for the Western Balkans (within the Berlin process) that would guarantee membership of EU to all WB countries. The Trieste Summit Conference (the fourth in a row) brought together leaders of Western Balkan countries and those of Germany, France and Italy, as well as Croatian Premier Plenković. German “Die Welt” daily point out that EU is not presently in the situation to accept new members and, therefore, has decided to focus on the establishment of a regional customs union. According to the daily, the purpose of the union is to deactivate the Balkan powder keg prior to admission. Yugoslavia had kept that explosive mixture of nations stable, and that task is now

on EU’s shoulders. Tensions in the region are growing, warn “Die Welt.”⁴⁶ In a constellation of a customs union “Serbia would be a pillar all the other countries would gravitate towards...No wonder, therefore, that official Belgrade strongly supports this European, or to put it precisely, German idea.”⁴⁷

EU takes that a common economic space would facilitate accession process given that the Union itself started as a more or less customs union. As things stand now, Kosovo would remain a problem since Serbia sticks to the argument that it is a part of it, while Montenegro would be at loss in such a union considering the progress it has already made in its accession negotiations with EU.

46 <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/659088/EU-pravi-novu-Jugoslaviju>

47 Ibid.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Exposed to pressure from both sides Serbia balances between two chairs with more and more difficulty. Neutrality it has been formally invoking gradually turns into a growingly heavy burden, while the chairs it sits between teeter more and more.

In today’s geopolitical competition of big powers in the Balkans Serbia should clearly demonstrate its European orientation and harness all the social energy in that direction.

Serbian nationalists in Vučić’s circle take that Serbia cannot “defend” Kosovo and Republika Srpska without Russia. For them, cooperation with the West in a mere necessity that buys time until some “safety belt” shows up.

Nationalists take that only Russia can prevent establishment of some anti-Serb order in the Balkans. They do not expect much from economic and military cooperation not only because of Russia’s economic situation but also the geographic distance between the two countries.

EU wants to maintain its influence on the region where “two rivalry big powers are already in confrontation.” Therefore, it has to encourage regional cooperation more actively, and in line with conclusions of the Trieste Summit of early July. It also needs to speed up its search for a formula for admission of the Balkans in the present phase.

Russia has already made its first step by obviously siding with Milorad Dodik’s decision to undermine the regional infrastructural project.

US is above all interested in security issues since the Western Balkans (and especially Kosovo) is seen as a major geostrategic point between NATO south wing and the Middle East.