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"National Avantgarde" conference

Foto: Rade Prelić

SERBIA: FACTOR OF INSTABILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The idea about a disputable demarcation between the Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, Macedonia's agreement with Greece on its new name, uncertainties following Bosnian elections, too slow transformation of Balkan societies, misuse of the media, unreadiness for overcoming the past in the region, along with new players emerging in it (Russia, Turkey and China) – these are all the problems the West failed to place on the right track. The EU's demanding and late agenda for the Western Balkans may even destabilize the region, especially when in comes to Serbia.

With all this in mind and notably because of unfavorable trends in some EU member-states, the West, NATO included, have intensified their activities in the region.

Serbia's elites have manifested not only that they were not ready for necessary reforms Western alliance implies but also their poor capacity for understanding international context forcing them to make a choice. And it is this very choice – between Europeanization and regression – that is the problem the Western

community has been trying to solve to its benefit, meaning in the benefit of Balkan nations too.

Serbia's elite are unaware that in the said context they have lost their blackmailing potential for "sitting on two or more chairs" at the same time and that corruption, their arrogance, lies and inability for coping with people's existential problems has questioned their legitimacy among their "own" people. This is why they have been recycling nationalism and populism in order to maintain the status quo, nourishing their picture of victims and inducing the fear of neighbors and international players.

America's new administration wants to close up all the open problems in the Balkans and Middle East as soon as possible so as to be able to harness its diplomatic energy on the Pacific and relationship with China, perceiving the latter as its main challenge in the 21st century. In this context US high officials have been frequently visiting the region. Like EU, NATO is also very active; however, EU's strategy is slower as it has been trying to place the Western Balkans within the frame of values, itself implied in the accession process.

However, the presence of new players, especially Russia[1], faces the West with much more complex situation given that its potential for mobilization has melted considerably in the meantime. This is all about the very "character" of Balkan societies, its true human potential and readiness to accept European values. Implemented brutally – and criminally in most cases – transition produced new relationships in those societies, marked by gaps in equality, so deep and unbridgeable that the majority of people have become irrelevant and invisible. Value systems have not been transformed as they should have been; what flourished instead was the most brutal form of capitalism. The absence of economic development, permanent brain drain, and feeling of impotence for influencing changes for the better resulted in a large-scale apathy.

Despite Serbia's growingly evident regression at all fronts President Vučić still manages to create the impression about Serbia's restored international repute, a country everyone listens to, and the 1990s wars as not lost. Constant campaigns against enemies from abroad (neighbors) and home (the media, civil sector and feeble opposition) are just strengthening this delusion. Main messages these campaigns are putting across are about "justified warfare" and the Serbs as the only victims. This is all garnished with rehabilitation of Slobodan Milošević and his warring policy. Convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj plays a special role in all this: he is not only smearing everyone the President points his finger on but also systematically undermines foundations the international community has built for two decades as preconditions to Euro-Atlantic integrations.

President Vučić – the West had so much banked on to finally settle the Kosovo question – not only failed to fulfill all those high expectations but also himself became unpredictable and disoriented. This is evident in his daily, contradictory statements that barely make any sense. He failed to answer to answer many challenges asking for a much braver, wiser and able statesman. Besides, predominant political and other elite take that Serbia could cope successfully with the multitude of challenges not only should it remain outside NATO but the European Union as well. What is most important, they

1 Aleksandar Dugin, philosopher close to Putin, takes that freshly aggravated relations are due to the fact that Russia has recuperated from an almost deadly blow it suffered in the 1990s. He ascribes a new cold war to Russia's restored land force and rise of Euro-Asia. "Actually, this is the same old, permanent Cold War. In the 1990s marine forces just seemed to be invincible – hence, globalization and unipolarity," he says. *http://standard.rs/2018/05/29/aleksandar-dugin-putin-ima-dva-lica/*.

argue, is to stay out of Brussels' reach, either because Brussels is the seat of the Western Alliance or a capital of "oligarchic anti-Europe."[2]

As for the President himself, he is now putting more and more stress on the status of Serbs in the region and the need to have them protected. This only raises tensions in relations with all the neighbors recognizing Milošević's policy of a Greater Serbia in his concerns. The establishment is less and less focused on reforms, regional normalization and socio-economic development, while growingly occupied with the delusion about recomposition of the Balkans.

Recently established non-governmental organization named "National Avant-garde" follows this course and is fully supported by the regime, the President included. The organization's very first "big" activity was a conference held under the title "Towards a Safer Serbia" (October 5 in "Hilton" hotel); the purpose of the conference was to "throw light" on post-October 2000 developments "from the angle of security" and have ongoing security threats under discussion. The President himself opened the conference. The audience was made of almost the entire political top brass. Referring to October 5 said the event itself brought about something good and something bad. "What was good was that Serbia opened up to the world, but the bad outcome was brutal plunder and robbers who lost sight of state, demolished Serbia and led it into the biggest crisis," he said.[3] The stress he placed on "plunder" is anyway a part of his policy for criminalization not only of October 5 but also all of its players included in the democratic regime till 2012, especially the Democratic Party and its leadership.

In its program "National Avant-garde" recycles the "national program" but in a new political context; it clearly claims "liberation and unification" as a historical goal, the latter being indispensable for "Serbian national movement whose march through institutions would fend off the circle around the 'alternative Serbia'."[4]All this necessitates the government's active policy for Kosovo, Montenegro, Republika Srpska and Serbian minorities in neighboring countries.[5]

"Progressive Club" speaks along the same lines; the organization systematically and planningly spreads news about allegedly jeopardized Serbs in all neighboring countries. "Serbia's new national policy" for Serbs in newly established Balkan states, who have been turned into national minorities is among the organization's goals.[6] It argues that unification with all Serbian areas in Kosovo could put a stop to demographic fall in those municipalities, uproot corruption and enable democratization of all of their institutions. A new balance and mutual recognition would lessen the pressure on Serbian enclaves, says the organization.[7]

For the first time the EU Commission speaks openly about unfavorable trends in Serbia. Tania Fayon, MP of the European Parliament and member of its Serbia-Kosovo delegation, says that the region is not politically stable simply because a policy for stabilization is non-existent regardless of the fact that President Vučić claims quite the opposite. She points out a "dangerous rhetoric" and catastrophic situation in the media, as well as to the fact that opposition is practically non-existent, while Serbia's policy is not adjusted with that of EU.She especially speaks about the threats inherent in any change of

2 http://standard.rs/2018/03/10/srdja-trifkovic-srbima-preti-dvotruka-opasnost.

3 https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/2996930-aleksandar-vucic-otvorio-konferenciju-ka-bezbednijoj-srbiji-coveku-je-nakon-gladi-najvaznija-potreba-sigurnost-i-bezbednost.

4 http://www.nacionalnaavangarda.rs/o-nama/.

5 http://www.nacionalnaavangarda.rs/o-nama/.

6 https://www.napredniklub.org/ciljevi-kluba/.

7 https://www.napredniklub.org/7-tacaka-o-kim/.

borders and a number of EU member-states critical about Mogerini's stance on the issue.[8]

As it turns out the much wished for regional stabilization, given priority over democratization and reforms, is now fatal to development at home. The President's initiative for Kosovo's partition is melting away slowly since Hashim Thaci failed to secure support for the same option and most relevant EU member-states are against it (Germany and Great Britain). Vučić is banking on US that manifested flexibility about the option but never said clearly what kind of agreement between Kosovo and Serbia they would give their support to.

SERBIA AS A FOCAL POINT

The West perceives Serbia as a focal point of Balkan dynamics given that it is still active at several fronts – practically in all neighboring, ex-Yugoslav republics. Though itself powerless and at the Balkans' bottom by all parameters, Serbia has not given up its ambitions. They are still determining its regional relations – as well as its own development. Banking on the fluid international context, Serbia has been waiting "for the historical moment for taking a formal step too (i.e. unification with Republika Srpska),[9] given that "as things stand now the Serbian people in Bosnia-Herzegovina are much more inclined towards Serbia than before the war."[10]

Recent elections in Bosnia have not brought about necessary change, which only strengthened Serbian elites' stance that "it is worth waiting" and that Milorad Dodik is irreplaceable when it comes to the safeguard of Serbian interests. The opposition that had tried to mobilize citizens' dissatisfaction with social situation and crime, disappeared almost overnight after the elections. But when it comes to national strategy, it sticks to the consensus on the safeguard of Republika Srpska and its course towards full independence. Besides, Dodik who still controls the electoral process has won on old, effective thesis about the threatened Serbian people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and people's fear of the West's annulment of RS in the case of his defeat. No major change took place, except for the fact that Croatian candidate for the Presidency Željko Komšić won for the third time in a row. On the other hand, the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) turned victorious at federal level which means that Dodik-Čović coalition remains in power. Future functioning of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina is uncertain given that Dodik, for sure, will be trying to turn the institution meaningless. As for the federal level, Čović is obviously preparing himself for its obstruction.

The situation in Bosnia plays into Belgrade's hands as it sees it as a new chance for Bosnia's disintegration.

As for Macedonia, Belgrade had done all in its power – and not only through its propaganda machinery – to undermine the historical agreement between Macedonia and Greece: from siding openly with ex-Premier Gruevski even during the crisis that finally forced him to step down, gloating over the failed referendum on the country's name, to making no bones about its wish to have any mutually acceptable agreement between incumbent Premier Zaev and his Greek colleague Alexis Tsipras failed.

While the West was assisting those two South Balkan leaders to reach an agreement on Macedonia's new name and implement it as soon as possible so as to make it possible for Macedonia to join NATO in 2019, and welcomed with much enthusiasm every step leading towards it, Serbia was holding "Macedonian card"

8 Danas, November 3-4, 2018.
9 Pečat, October 26, 2018.
10 Ibid.

up Russia's sleeve. Russia, a constantly present player in the Balkans, also made no bones about its dissatisfaction with NATO enlargement to South Balkans. Like in the case of Montenegro, Russia was trying – through its intelligence services[11]and propaganda, and with assistance of its allies in the Balkans (Serbia in the first place) – to obstruct implementation of the Prespan Agreement. However, it's become evident so far that "Russia is siding only with losers in the Balkans," as Vladimir Gligorov of the Vienna Institute for International Economy put it."[12]

Given that 37% of eligible voters cast their ballot at the referendum on Macedonia's new name, the outcome, as not being obligable, was interpreted in a variety of ways. The Macedonian government and its allies in the West insisted on the percentage of those saying "yes," while was gloating over the turnout (the percentage of less than 50 plus one).

Serbia was among the latter. "The Referendum on Macedonia's Name Fails," said the front-page banner of the Politika daily.[13]According to Ljiljana Smajlović, the columnist for *Nedeljnik*, [14]"Zoran Zaev managed to accomplish something that is barely accomplishable: to pull out of the jaws of his costly and long prepared electoral victory – a failure."

Belgrade's regime had distanced itself from the agreement and reserved about ever since it was signed. Something like, "Why be concerned about such general agreement Macedonia signed with Greece?" as Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić put it.[15] On the eve of his visit to Moscow where – according to him he had analyzed the situation in the region, in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia with President Putin – President Vučić said that the European Union was ignoring the "popular vote" manifested in the referendum. Though he said that "Serbia respects any agreement between Greece and Macedonia," he added, "One cannot ignore people's will and nothing can be imposed on them from abroad."[16]

The Prespan Agreement denied Serbia's majority political, media, academic elites and general public, all of whom had referred to the referendum as consultative rather than obligatory. Their expectations had banked on the fact that Zaev's ruling coalition numbered 72 MPs, while the vote for constitutional amendment necessitated "yes" from at least 80 MPs.

They were also expecting a political crisis to follow the outcome of the referendum: "Rather than putting an end to the political crisis (over the agreement with Greece) the referendum just added to turbulence," argued the Politika daily. "It strengthened the opposition and created conditions for a schism that tore Macedonia before the last elections that made it possible for Zoran Zaev's party to come to power."[17]

Macedonian Premier's efforts to win over parliamentary majority was seen as an unattainable goal. "While staring into the abyss its foreign 'friends and allies' have created for it, Macedonia is still trying – now in the Parliament – to legalize a solution imposed on it, although the people voted it down at the referendum," concluded the *Pečat*.[18]

In the meantime Macedonian MPs had denied them: with the two-third majority vote they approved constitutional amendment and paved

11 Once the Prespan Agreement was signed, Macedonia proclaimed two Russian diplomats, suspected of espionage, personae non grata.
12 Novi magazin, October 25, 2018.
13 Politika, October 2, 2018.
14 Nedeljnik, October 4, 2018.
15 Danas, October 3, 2018.
16 Ibid.
17 Politika, October 2, 2018.
18 Pečat, No.541/2018.

the way for implementation of the Prespan Agreement.

Montenegro is still Belgrade's target: Belgrade's is aspires to have its independence and statehood invalidated. Its extreme right wing claims that Serbs in Montenegro are subject to "identity genocide" and disqualified in advance as higher state or public officials. Serbian Patriarch Irinej even said that Serbs' status in Montenegro was the same as it used to be at the time of NDH. All this indicates that they want to create an atmosphere that would justify some more aggressive acts. Some cabinet members have joined this campaign (such as Nenad Popović), along with some SPC dignitaries, army officers and members of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences /SANU/ (Matija Bećković). Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said, "Montenegro's judiciary and Prosecution is maltreating Serbian citizens, arresting them for no reason at all, some are being detained for years, while some others are prevented from leaving Montenegro, let alone that Montenegrin Serbs are being discriminated and deprived to all human rights – from getting jobs to using their mother tongue in schools; Serb political leaders are persecuted…Not a single nation in Europe in 21st century is such bad position as Serbs in Montenegro are."[19]

Extreme rightist from Serbia have been frequenting Montenegro to organize, almost on daily basis, provocative actions against Montenegro's independence.

While President Vučić is keeping troops ready for combat, in the Parliament of Montenegro the Democratic Front MPs are announcing a rebellion and civil war.

19 https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/2986053-srbi-u-crnoj-gori-zrtve-torture-i-diskriminacuje-dacic-ostro-reagovao-drzavljani-srbije-trpe-maltretiranje-od-strane-crnogorskog-sudstva.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The international community (US and EU) have been building foundations to the Balkans' accession to Euro-Atlantic integrations. In this context, any assent given to a change in borders – presently a hot topic of Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue – would be fatal to the region and its future; all agreements reached so far to lead the region towards membership of EU and NATO, as most realistic frames for restoration of trust and reconciliation, would be turned null and void. Opening the door to any initiative for recomposition of the Balkans would be just a prelude to new conflicts and violence. Serbia has not given up its ambitions despite its considerably undermined potential for conflict.

EU should be more engaged in Serbia. What is imperative apart from cooperation with the government and its institutions is its full support to the media, civil society and opposition. Up to now its attitude has been rather flawed, as it banked solely on Vučić while he was misusing these hopes pinned on him: while simulating the dialogue with Kosovo, he was blocking all the processes in the country, strengthening his autocracy and turning all institutions meaningless.

The regime has to be cajoled no more: leniency towards it only adds to Serbia's destruction. The regime's plan for sitting on several chairs at the same time turned out as a failure. This is why the upcoming settlement of the Kosovo crisis makes it behave more and more aggressively so as to divert popular attention from crucial problems of the society.

Without EU and US' stronger engagement, a plausible trans-Atlantic association to stand up not only for Bosnia-Herzegovina but also the concept of civil states, the entire region will be sliding towards instability. Only with it, disintegration processes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and other countries in the region can be stopped, and absolutistic identity policies leading towards tribalism and nativism cut off.