

Helsinki *bulletin*



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VALUES OF THE MILOŠEVIĆ ERA REAFFIRMED

The Serbian elite has proved to be incapable of adjusting itself to new imperatives of a changed international constellation. Unwillingness for facing up the consequences of Milošević's policy blocked the country's political scene from profiling of the parties that would be founded on different values and promote political options important to Serbia's future. That's why today we witness posthumous glorification of Slobodan Milošević as yet another "tragic figure of national mythology." All of this indicates how modest liberal-democratic tradition of the Serbian

state and society are. Because of intellectual confusion in the matter of values a consensus on political-historical goals and objectives of public policies has not been reached.

In mid-1980s Serbia's intellectual, political, religious and military elites did reach a consensus on the way how to solve the Serbian question. Decisive for a consensus as such was the scholarly authority of the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (1986). It acted like a detonator; it set off a wave of

discontent with the 1974 Constitution proclaimed on the grounds of balance of power (Serbia versus other republics of both provinces).

The 1980s wars were waged “in the name” of unity of the Serbian nation, its equality with other peoples and restoration of a “lost” dignity. Serbia was after a centralized and unitary Yugoslavia. It was assumed that Serbs, being in the majority in Yugoslavia and having suffered the most in its establishment (WWI) and renewal (WWII), are entitled to political hegemony over the rest. Other nations were expected to subdue national interests of their own to the state’s unity; and in the same way as the once leader of the People’s Radical Party Nikola Pašić had placed civic freedoms in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the back seat of the Serbian nation as a whole. This actually imperial state concept and its territorially southward and westward strategy (WWI, 1914-18) suffered defeat in the wars waged in the late 20th century. While opposing hegemony other Yugoslav nations rounded off their integration processes. Serbia’s plan B also failed. Apart from ethnic cleansing (often called humane population exchange) the “Greater Serbia” concept implied a change in inter-republic borders, a mission impossible without a war.

GREATER SERBIA PROJECT PERSISTS

By its very nature the idea about all Serbs assembled in one state is totalitarian. Never has Slobodan Milošević questioned the existing political and economic system but only the position of the Serbian people in Yugoslavia. This was how he stirred up Serbian masses’ mobilization all over Yugoslavia. A domestic variant of Nazism was in sight. Philosopher and author of “Small Town Philosophy” strongly criticized by nationalist, Radomir Konstantinović wrote that Serbian nationalism had not been an import of

German national-socialism but the outcome of the “spirit of a small town...the spirit marked by collectivism, exclusion, disregard of the Other, fabrication of history and the cult of death.

Impossibility to find a solution to the Yugoslav crisis was not the reason why the war broke out; it broke out because Serbia, unlike other Yugoslav republics, turned down the plan for saving the country as a federation/confederation. Once it had nullified autonomy of its two provinces, so centralized Serbia made the first step towards the planned centralization of Yugoslavia. When other republics strongly opposed the very idea, Serbia, eager to round off a “greater state” began mobilizing Serbs in other republics and establishing “their” entities in those territories; the Yugoslav People’s Army and state security officers lend it their helping hand.

Extra fueled by international players, citizens’ expectations were high following on the year 2000: it was assumed that people would endorse the newly established reality, as well as the speed of reforms qualifying the country for European integration, the spirit of the time, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1980). Murder of reformist premier Zoran Đinđić (2003) turned all such expectations to dust. History was what had to be “skipped over;” and a “realistic” state was what had to be place on the priority agenda (the more so since “all Serbs in one state” concept suffered defeat).

REGIONAL GENERATOR OF INSTABILITY

No end to the long crisis in sight; permanent tensions between Serbia and neighboring state – former Yugoslav republics having turned into nation-states; mutual distrust that is deeper and deeper, taking all further and further away from reconciliation; nationalism and racism that

permeate public discourse; ostensible political pluralism (majority of Serbia's political parties promote nothing but variances of a single national program) and actual partisan monism and a one-party state; absence of reforms and truly disputable westward orientation of towards; foreign policy open to doubt; academically "questionable" elite in institutions; "unquestionable" elite in the streets: all of this – in brief, something between anarchy and autocracy – raises a question, "Is Serbia going back towards the 1990s, has it overcome the 1990s at all, and was the ouster of Slobodan Milošević, a consensual autocrat, enough for making the so much needed U-turn?"

Incapable of taking stock of the past wars Serbia has cocooned itself. The traditional-conservative bloc – made up of parties such as Democratic Party of Serbia, Dveri, Serbian People's Party, etc.), academic circles, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the University, tycoons and the mainstream media – oriented towards Russia and opponents to reforms has taken root. Consequently, Serbia's foreign policy can be defined as "sitting on two chairs." However, so seated Serbia is more and more uncomfortable and feels unsure since the Balkans has become the arena of clashing interests of more players – Russia, EU, US and, as of recently, Turkey. The country's alleged neutrality has practically boiled down to some self-imagined "balancing" and "equidistance" both the West and East are suspicious about, and are, therefore, more and more pressurizing Serbia.

Today's domestic scene dramatically mirrors the said foreign policy ambivalence. At the time the first accession negotiation chapters were opened (December 2015) and the country's course towards the European Union made official, citizens' Euro-enthusiasm was at its lowest ever since the fall of the Milošević regime. Russia is not present in the Balkans with a single purpose in mind. On the one hand, it tests EU and, on

the other, demonstrates its claim to the status of a big power with a sphere of "privileged interests" of its own. Serbia is here an "easy" prey considering its ambivalent elite and public, and attitude towards reforms. Russia's soft power offensive Serbia has been exposed to in cultural, scientific and especially in media spheres paid well: it made pro-Russian sentiments stronger in practically all strata.

The media, notably the (mainstream) right-wing ones such as Večernje Novosti, Pečat, Geopolitika, Russian websites (Sputnik and the Word of Russia), even including here the pro-governmental Politika daily, have been systematically stigmatizing and undermining the government's pro-European orientation – even regardless of its nothing but declarative character – reviving negative stereotypes about neighbors and the region as a whole, distancing Serbia from NATO and US (by reminding of NATO intervention, and advocating alliance with Russia on military, anti-market and Eastern Orthodox grounds.

SERBIAN PROGRESSIVE PARTY AND ALEKSANDAR VUČIĆ'S RULE OBSTRUCT REGIONAL STABILIZATION

The Serbian Progressive Party came to power once a legal frame for Serbia's integration into EU had already been established, Serbia's obligations to ICTY fulfilled, application for EU candidacy submitted (January 2012), standards for electoral process set, independent regulatory bodies established and functional and the media scene and freedoms turned out as relatively appropriate. All this had promised gradual democratization and social recovery.

When it came to power and for starters, the Serbian Progressive Party was campaigning against

corruption (it had won elections on anti-corruption pledges); and over seven years later the same issue has remained high on its agenda. In the meantime, however, all standards and freedoms attained in the previous period have been trampled underfoot, the entire political elite stained with crime, the parliament, political parties and political life as a whole turned senseless and the modest progress made in facing up the recent past belittled, while corruption spiraled up to unprecedented proportions. Relations with all neighboring countries have been disturbed, the narrative that distances Serbia from any responsibility for the 1990s wars promoted, the state and society made so autistic that they lost every sense for normal communication with neighborhood and the world. The outcome is an unprecedented brain drain and migration to the West.

As for the international arena, having proclaimed his orientations towards the membership of EU, President Vučić harnessed his energy towards all key players, Russia and China in particular. Against the background of a new international constellation and conflict between liberal and illiberal concepts, he sided with the latter, which actually corresponds with Serbia's long-cherished values. From this standpoint Serbia is closest to Russia – it upholds conservative values, is an Eastern Orthodox country, disrespects individual and advocates collective (just Serbian) rights, despises the rule of law, has an untouchable leader who arbitrates everything, has no media freedoms, has a marginalized civil society, etc.

The signature he put under the Brussels Agreement was the only advance he made at the international scene. For a brief period of time it seemed that the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue headed towards normalization; but then a plan for Kosovo's partition popped up, blocked all relations and placed the dialogue on a waiting list.

Progressists' regime has not given up Milošević's project of unification of all "Serbian territories"

while banking on some changed international circumstances. Its almost daily meddling into political lives of neighboring countries, mostly under the excuse of allegedly endangered local Serbs, made it quite clear. And so, it not only hazarded the country's future in Europe but also made EU reconsider the 1990s and its attitude towards Serbia marked by flattering it and meeting all its demands at the detriment of others in the region. Paradoxically, but this was actually the only good done by the regime that has further collectivized Serbia's responsibility of the 1990s wars, ridiculed proceedings before ICTY and mocked at every endeavor for bringing Serbia closer to regional realities. This regime has been humiliating citizens of Serbia, tried to prove that every civilian action made no sense, arrogantly raised itself above the rest and turned Serbia into an unkempt and utterly incompetent state.

CONTRADICTIONS OF EUROPEAN POLICY FOR THE REGION

EU's neglect of transitionally half-done states (societies) over the past years now has a boomerang effect. The unprecedented wave of refugees dramatically testified of the region's geostrategic significance. The context of the Western was no more treated as a post-Yugoslav problem; the refugee crisis, terrorism, ISIL fighters from the region, etc., logically connected in with context of the Middle East. All this makes the security situation in the Balkans even more complex but also calls for a new strategic approach.

It was the refugee crisis that stirred up EU's concern for the Western Balkans; true, that was almost too late as Russia has already outrun it in the region. Marking the beginning of its more intense engagement in the region the Berlin Initiative in 2014 was followed by the Vienna Conference of Heads of State and Government of Western Balkan Countries (August 2015). The

Conference adopted a declaration obliging leaders in the region to neighborly cooperation “in the spirit of neighborly relations and shared commitment to European integrations.”

Outcome of the British referendum dramatically pointed to Europe that lessons drawn from fragmentation that started in Yugoslavia a quarter of a century ago have been neither duly nor properly learned. This extra dimension of the Balkan crisis that challenge Europe simply calls for its more responsible approach to the region.

However, regional cooperation cannot come to life unless regional leaders start intensely coming up with relevant projects, while together placing EU under the pressure to meet the promises made. Their capability for acting this way preconditions settlement of serious economic and social problems plaguing their countries. Economic growth preconditions structural reforms and better regional relations alike.

Russia's revived ambitions in the Mediterranean are also involving the Balkans. Energy supplies, gas and oil, are the trump cards in its “trade” with political influence on the countries in the regions – from Greece to Hungary, especially via Macedonia, Serbia and Republika Srpska (in Bosnia-Herzegovina) where it has been

additionally strengthened by its presence in cultural and media spheres.

Keeping Western Balkan countries too long at Brussels' doors, uncertain about being let in at all, badly undermines their once enthusiasm for Euro-Atlantic integration. Public opinion about the membership of EU is on a downward curve, the more so since Brussels growingly proves to be “a useful but not always a reliable partner.”

Serbia's facing up the past preconditions any new national policy. It is imperative that the government and elites replace warring goals with those adjusted to modern civilization that pose a threat to no one. Only such policy can guarantee that citizens of Serbia will join the global arena. Neither are reconciliation nor a different attitude towards the future possible without joint understanding of history and the 1990s wars.

Against the backdrop of international complexities and regional stagnation and even regression, EU's engagement in the region, especially in Serbia, should be more active and consequent in order to curb negative trends and block another wave of nationalism, fatal to the atmosphere implementation of reforms, establishment of the rule of law and respect of human and minority rights necessitate.