

HELSINKI Bulletin



Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Rige od Fere #20/V, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

phone/fax: +381 11 30 32 408

e-mail: biserkos@eunet.yu; www.helsinki.org.yu

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NATO – YES OR NO?



In early April a debate on relations with the most important military-political alliance, the NATO Pact, has (un)expectedly been launched. Only several days after culmination of anti-NATO campaign on the occasion of the 10th anniversary (24th March) of the NATO operation in the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, “Allied Force”, to which many in Serbia wrongly and pathetically attribute a code name of « The Merciful Angel» - a more judicious tones appealing to the reappraisal of self-styled or self-proclaimed military neutrality of the country started to emerge in the public. Such a turnaround in rationalization of the debate on the most significant strategic orientations of Serbia should be viewed within the context of recent developments in Serbia proper, but also in the regional and broader international context.

Firstly, the global economic-financial crisis imposed to the key world actors the need to jointly look for common solutions, by all appearances shall impact redefinition of total relations between them. Small countries like Serbia, also hit hard by the crisis, shall be also compelled to adapt their strategic positioning to the newly-emerged circumstances. That positioning shall be to a large extent subordinated to the new dynamics in the making (the G20 summit in London) in the global scene. Added to that in early April Croatia and Albania became the full members of the North Atlantic Alliance. In other words Serbia is now totally encircled by the NATO member-countries, which empties her position of neutrality of any genuine content, and furthermore makes it obsolete and mindless. And finally the major economic downturn in the world has

laid bare the failed economic and social transition in Serbia. In the face of a real fear of a potential bankruptcy, Belgrade is compelled to turn anew to the US and European money, read –funds. The foregoing entails the change of rhetoric towards Brussels, not only as the centre of the European Union, but also as the seat of NATO headquarters.

Anti-NATO campaign

As early as during the second tenure of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, a visible distancing from the European integrations, was most reflected in an evidently cooling stance towards the NATO membership. From the official vocabulary the sintagm «Euro-Atlantic orientations» was covertly turned into «European integrations». Moreover the Serb Parliament in December 2007 adopted a resolution on the *military neutrality*, though the country, in December 2006, at the proposal of the US President, George Bush, was accepted in the Partnership for Peace program. Added to that the office of Serbia in the Brussels seat of NATO is yet to be open.¹In the meantime, thanks to a vocal smear campaign orchestrated in Serbia, NATO was branded as the leader of the anti-Serb mood in the West. Added to a permanent blame attached to NATO and its member-states for the 1999

¹Though Serbia has been accepted to the Partnership for Peace program two years ago, it has yet to move into the NATO headquarters building in Brussels. The foregoing is justified by the lack of funds. In connection with that President of the Atlantic Alliance, Vladan Živulović in the article he penned for daily *Danas*, of 4-5 April, disclosed a rather bizarre detail: «Serbia is waiting for premises to be vacated by Croatia and Albania, since they shall be moving to the part of the building housing the NATO full-membersva. Thus we shall fulfill our wish to be next to the Russian office with NATO.»

bombing campaign, the Serb political class and intellectual elite²took it to task for proclamation of independence of Kosovo, and the assistance rendered by that military organization in the process of formation of the Kosovo security forces. Thus **Vuk Jeremić**, Serbia's Foreign Secretary, has recently stated: «We lost confidence in NATO, after its ample assistance in formation and training of so-called, Kosovo security forces³».

What was also evident over the past and a half year was Serbia's shift, not only in the economic realm, to the East, that is, towards Russia. Within the framework of that, according to some, very important relationship, Serbia's membership of NATO would not fit at all. This is how **Miroslav Lazanski**, military analyst close to the conservative block, one of the stiffest media opponents of Serbia's accession to NATO has put it: «Membership of NATO carries an obligation, namely to join the war, if any NATO member-state is attacked. Shall anyone in Serbia go to war against Russia, if, for example, Russia attacks Lithuania (...) No-one says that Moscow would interpret Serbia's accession to NATO as «a hostile step». Or perhaps that is the last Serb secret.»⁴

In parallel to the anti-NATO mood, the pro-Russia mood peaked on the 24th March 2009, during the marking of the 10th anniversary of NATO campaign. On that day Serbia saw many important and vocal visitors from Moscow, ranging from retired generals, retired DUMA MPs, prominent artists, like film director **Nikita Mihalkov**, to active representatives of Putin's «United Russia» Party in the Russian

² Prof. Jovo Bakic for example is against NATO membership because «NATO is a criminal organization», *NIN*, 9 April 2009

³ «We lost faith in NATO», *Blic*, 8 February 2009

⁴ «The last Serb secret», *Politika*, 1 November 2008

parliament, most notably president of the Foreign Policy Committee of Duma, **Konstantin Kosačov**. In an exalted tone daily tabloid *Kurir* reported that «at the protest rally in the Republic Square, in the city centre, on the 24th of March, patriotic and Russian songs resonated well.»⁵ In further and very detailed description of the event the following was noted: «The rally was attended by numerous guests from Russia. Many of them also spoke at the rally. Slogans like «Serbia and Russia, we don't need the European Union» were also heard. On that occasion **General Leonid Ivašov** praised the Serb people for their «struggle against Western fascism» and sent a message that «When they are united, Serbs and Russians, are invincible.»⁶

Maksim Miščenko, an MP of «United Russia» Party in DUMA, and one of the guests in the aforementioned two-day conference, gave an extensive interview to daily *Pravda*. In that interview he expressed his conviction that «the Serb people shall never pardon and forget crimes which NATO committed against Serbia.» In the same interview he went on to note: «Bombing of Serbia was an act of piling pressure on all the Slavic countries..and that pressure, alas, still continues. Serbia is a thorn in the flesh of the West for it does not want to bow to the new world order, for the latter would result in the loss of its faith and identity.» Mischenko also maintained that Russia was the biggest obstacle to the US expansionism and its bid to geopolitically subjugate the planet: «The West and the US need Russia because of its resources...that is why they try to convert into the NATO members all our neighbouring countries...that was one of the reasons for the bombing campaign against you, while your resistance to the NATO membership is punished

⁵ *Kurir*, 25 March 2009

⁶ Idem

by the wresting of Kosovo from Serbia».⁷ Russian ambassador **Alexander Konuzin** in Belgrade warned that Serbia's membership in EU would change its relationship with Russia because of „institutional reasons“. He also claimed that it would lead to breaking of the Agreement of Free Trade between Russia and Serbia.⁸

In a lengthy text titled «A state or a puppet state?» weekly *Pečat*, among other things, commented the announcement of Serbia's President, **Boris Tadić**, that «Serbia shall ponder the membership of NATO» and went on to note: «Since through the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement and legalization of EULEX the incumbent authorities amnestied the EU's role in the break-up of Serbia, now on the agenda is apparently justification of the NATO aggression against Serbia and consequences thereof. For if Serbia were to join NATO that would be factually tantamount to Serbia's recognition that it has bombed itself! Is there a better and more original amnesty for the crime committed against Serbia!».⁹

A two-day international conference called «Let us not forget» was held in Belgrade. One of the most «prominent» guests was **Borislav, Milosevic**, a resident of Moscow, and brother of the late president Slobodan Milosevic. One of the participants was the Interior Secretary and Vice Prime Minister, the highest-ranking member of the Socialist Party of Serbia, **Ivica Dačić**. This is what he said on that occasion:» Unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo and international, that is, the West's recognition of that independence is tantamount to continuation of

⁷ *Pravda*, 26 March 2009

⁸ www.b92.net 11 April 2009, His statement at the Round Table on the «Contemporary Foreign Policy of Russia» held in Ruski Dom in Belgrade 10. April 2009.

⁹ *Pečat*, 3 April 2009

bombing campaign, pressures and aggression, albeit in a peaceful way.»¹⁰

Marking of the 10th anniversary of «war against NATO», gave rise to numerous media public opinion polls and surveys relating to a potential Serbia's membership of the alliance. This is what the former ideologue of the Socialist Party of Serbia, currently the member of the Serb Progressive Party, **Mihailo Marković** said about that topic: «I am totally against any co-operation with that organization.» His opinion was shared by his new party chief, **Tomislav Nikolić**, who additionally opposed «Serbia's membership of any military alliance». In the same poll, **Dragan Šormaz** from Democratic Party of Serbia, made public his stance: »Serbia should remain militarily neutral, not only because NATO had bombed us, failed to show any repentance for that act, and failed to offer us any compensation, but because they are damaging us anew, by forcibly grabbing Kosovo from us.»¹¹

In the same-themed poll carried by *Kurir*, deputy president of the Serb Radical Party, **Dragan Todorović**, stated: « For us, accession to NATO is inconceivable. If we did that, we would tramp upon all the victims who had fallen in the defense against the NATO aggression.»¹²

More rational rhetoric

In the aforementioned surveys both politicians and citizens were polled. Though the majority of citizens shared stances of the elite, some of them rationally opted for the NATO membership. Added to that some military experts and analysts started bldly exposing their reservations towards «military neutrality». In commenting the 10th anniversary of NATO campaign, a

¹⁰ *Pravda*, 24 March 2009

¹¹ *Idem*

¹² *Kurir*, 25 March 2009

military analyst, **Aleksandar Radić**, noted the following «ten years on from the war, Serbia in its relations with NATO Serbia knows what it does not want, but does not know what it wants...that is why it is simultaneously flirting with that alliance and proclaiming the military neutrality». According to Radić, official policy must take a clear stance, that is, «decide whether it wants a shift towards the West and then do it fully, and not by the current half-steps. Current situation is confusing, without a clear strategic vision and unsustainable.»¹³

President of a relevant NGO, the Atlantic Alliance of Serbia, **Vladimir Živulović**, in early April, made important statements to several print media. Živulović claimed that after accession of Croatia and Albania to NATO, neutral Serbia is becoming a military «black hole» in the Balkans, since Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are on the doorstep of the Alliance: «Croatia, just like Bulgaria, Romania, Hungaria, Lithuania, and Estonia, before the EU, had first to join NATO.» He went on to underscore that the military neutrality of Serbia was not feasible, notably in the view of the fact that « a serious and mighty army is necessary for implementation of foreign policy».¹⁴ In the text «Serbia sends different, confusing signals», penned for daily *Danas*, Živulović noted the following: »Barring the Načertanije¹⁵ we did not

¹³ *Pravda*, 24 March 2009.

¹⁴ «Serbia is encircled by NATO», *Press*, 6 April 2009

¹⁵ In the formative period of Serbia as a nation state in XIX century, the idea of Serbia's resurrection became the core of the Serbian foreign policy program. This plan was formulated in 1844 as the «Nacertanije» (or «Draft Plan») of Ilija Garasanin, minister of internal affairs in the government of Prince Aleksandar Karadjordjevic.

In the Nacertanije, Garasanin set out the goals of Serbia's territorial reconstruction as fol-

try to formulate national interests to benefit exclusively Serbia, and not only Russia or the West. Because of the clash of the latter two orientations, the Serb foreign policy looks somewhat awkward and confused. As of late the previous and the incumbent authorities have been sending different signals which have been only puzzling the foreigners». Živulović then went on to illustrate the foregoing: «Serbia joined the NATO program Partnership for Peace, but then stalled all the program related activities. After that it proclaimed the military neutrality and then vocally proclaimed its interest to speed up its accession to the European Union, leaving totally aside the NATO and Partnership for Peace matters. After some time it concluded an agreement with Russia on the pipeline crossing through its territory towards EU, or rather was the only country which gave Russia a concession to manage that pipeline in Serbia proper. How can then the EU interpret all this, how can NATO one day ask us to join the organization, when we are still calculating with the Partnership for Peace.»¹⁶

Military commentator of daily *Politika*, **Ljubodrag Stojadinović**, in his commentary „Wobbly Neutrality of Serbia“ maintained that „Serbia proclaimed a military neutrality at the time when it does not have well-defined borders, and consequently a well-defined territory, when that territory is being fragmented as a consequence of the pre-emptive use of force by the coalition forces, and when in play is the state which does not have not a single state element. In such circumstances the neutral status is militarily and politically contradictory, and it is in collision with any logic and is not sustainable

lows: “The Serb state, which has got off to an auspicious start but must yet spread and grow stronger, has its firm foundations in the Serb empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and in the rich and glorious Serb history.”

¹⁶ *Danas*, 4-5 April 2009.

without a good definition of the state of affairs.»¹⁷

President of Forum for Democracy, General **Ninoslav Krstić**, reasons in the similar way: «I don't know how we think to join the EU, if we declare our neutrality. All the EU member-states have first joined NATO, and then the EU. Anyway our neutrality is dead-letter. How can we be neutral when 'in the heart' of Serbia we have Bondsteel base? How can we be neutral, when we have signed the Partnership for Peace program? We have also signed agreements with NATO on flights over Serbia and Montenegro and on passage of NATO troops through the land corridor?!»¹⁸

Defence Secretary **Dragan Šutanovac** recently has been flouting deftly balanced formulations. In his interview to daily *Danas* despite defending the «neutrality», he however noted that «Croatia's credit rating increased by one degree, when it was invited to join the Alliance.»¹⁹ In Radio B92 program *Kažiprst*, several days later, Šutanovac stated that the credit rating of Croatia, by its full-membership of NATO, increased by three degrees.» He also underscored that «the anger at NATO because of bombing campaign ten years ago, cannot last forever...because we cannot always dwell on the past.»²⁰

It is obvious that there are dissonant voices in the Serb government. Thus **Srdjan Srećković** (Serbian Renewal Movement), the Serb Minister for Diaspora, urged that co-operation within Partnership for Peace be stepped up, and asserted that by Croatia's and Albanian's accession to NATO, Serbia «started losing its leadership potential in the region. We cannot be held hostage to the past, despite the injustice done to us». In commenting

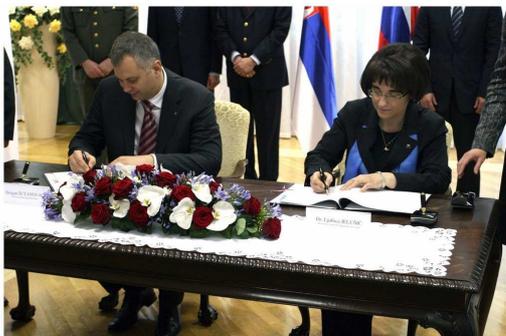
¹⁷ *Politika*, 3. april 2009.

¹⁸ *Press*, 6 April 2009

¹⁹ *Danas*, 4-5 April 2009

²⁰ «Kažiprst», *Radio B92*, 6 April 2009

a positive message from the Strasbourg summit of NATO, Srećković stated «the fact that NATO has so openly invited us to join the organization, and welcomed such a move of ours is-encouraging».²¹



Conclusion

After a pronounced opposition to and obstruction of Serbia's two-year long process of drawing closer to NATO, this sudden presence of different voices and stands in the public scene is an important indicator of a turnaround. Though it is perhaps too early to draw definite conclusions, one however gets the impression that another taboo has been dispelled as regards the geopolitical and strategic orientation of Serbia.

Aside from the fact that the theme of Serbia's accession to NATO was until recently a taboo, one should also mention that recent policy towards Euro-Atlantic integrations also had most concrete consequences. The most important consequence was undoubtedly the December 2008 replacement of Head of Chief of Staff of the Army of Serbia, General Zdravko Ponoš, who had a reputation of being a vocal advocate of closer ties with NATO. It is also noteworthy that Serb citizens support for NATO membership - always lower than the one for accession to the European Union - fell drastically from 38% in 2007 to 29.32% in early 2009 (according to the Strategic Marketing Poll).²² According to other public opinion surveys the percentage of citizens favouring Serbia's membership of NATO is even lower. For example, in the poll of the daily *Danas* web site, which lasted from 9-25 March 2009, a convincing majority of visitors opposed Serbia's membership of NATO - 2,252 of a total of 2,773, or 81.21%, while only 521 visitor or 18.79% were in favour of that membership.²³

²¹ *Večernje novosti*, 6 April 2009

²² *Blic*, 7 April 2009

²³ *Danas*, 4-5 April 2009