

HELSINKI Bulletin



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Biden's Regional Tour: Echoes

The reactions to Vice-President Biden's Balkan tour – before and after – indicate its far-reaching significance. First and foremost, because it testified that the region was still in the sphere of interest of US and EU. Further, it testified of US' dedication to stabilize the Balkans and, last but not least, of its wish to have all the Western Balkan countries in Euro-Atlantic integrations as soon as possible.

The American administration's choice of Bosnia-Herzegovina as the first country of Mr. Biden's tour indicates that it is seriously intent to discourage all territorial aspirations vis-à-vis Bosnia on the one hand, and to ensure a constitutional reform that would help it function as a unique state on the other. This is best mirrored in Mr. Biden's key message to Sarajevo about "the job that has to be finished."

During his visit to Belgrade Vice-President Biden underlined that "the region cannot succeed without Serbia" whereby he messaged all and sundry that Serbia was responsible for both stability and instability in the entire region. He carefully spelled out America's offer to Belgrade: Belgrade needs to be most constructive in its support to EULEX mission in Kosovo. Serbia is also "expected to assist US and EU in their efforts to establish a sovereign, democratic and multiethnic state in Bosnia-Herzegovina."

In Prishtina, Vice-president Biden said, "The success of an independent Kosovo is a priority for our administration and my country, and a key element of our policy of assisting peoples in Western Balkans to integrate into Europe." In the American

military base Bondsteel, Mr. Biden stressed the significance of NATO presence by saying, "Here in Kosovo you are protecting the innocent. You have been protecting the innocent for a decade and providing Kosovars security they need and the space they need to develop independence, democracy and, most importantly, and multiethnic state."

Significance Recognized

Taking into consideration the overall climate surrounding Mr. Biden's visit to Belgrade (including criticism and reminiscences of NATO bombardment) the manner in which major political media covered the event testified that the significance of the administration's new approach to the Balkans was recognized. The *Politika* daily (columnist Bosko Jaksic) stresses that the fact that Mr. Biden resorted to diplomacy rather than to threats or dictates actually means that he places a part of responsibility on local Balkan actors, notably those in Serbia. According to the newspaper, America made no bones about its expectation from Serbia to be constructive. "The international community and America in particular are resolved to help the High Representative to block the fission processes initiated from the other bank of the Drina River and provide new constitutional arrangement for all the three peoples. Whoever opposes this,

risks too much." By recognizing that Serbia's attitude towards Kosovo was no reason for noncooperation, says *Politika*, Biden's practically crumbled one of the pillars on which Serbia has been building its policy over past years. "From now on, domestic leaders are left without the argumentation whereby they have been justifying everything with Kosovo and its fate. Without Kosovo as a cliché – used with reason and, more often, with no reason whatsoever – the Serbian state policy is seriously challenged," concludes the newspaper, adding, "Up to now, Kosovo has been a screen for many missed chances and failures." "The biggest legacy of Biden's visit is the opportunity it created for clear definition of some of Serbia's strategic stands."¹

In its weekend issue the *Danas* daily run an in-depth article (by columnist Dragan Bisenic) on Mr. Biden's visit. The author dissects the Vice-president's messages and quotes him, focusing in particular the quote about a new beginning in Serbia-US relations. His reminds that this is not about forgetting the past but recomposition of the course of events, which will somewhat detract from interpretation of the causality. Mutual relations, he says, will be packed into separate "files" one of which will contain all the disputes between Serbia

¹ "Buy, Buy, Biden," *Politika*, May 24, 2009.

and US – in other words, all disputable issues will be there but placed at another level.²

Politika runs yet another article by columnist Miroslav Lazanski. “The most important aspect of Vice-president Biden’s visit to Serbia is the fact that he came at all,” writes Lazanski. During his blitz tour, continues Lazanski, Biden offered “Sarajevo, Belgrade and Prishtina three different options: the first were given regionalization, the second separatism till sovereignty and the third a ‘soft’ unitarization.” Accordingly, Mr. Biden “failed to hinge together not a single regional triptych, and after his visit everyone will be interpreting things at will. If America really wants a permanent stability for the region the American Vice-president should have offered a really big deal.”³

In her article in the *NIN* weekly Ljiljana Smajlovic stresses that “the goals of the American policy are absolutely identical to those of two decades ago” and that “Biden’s visit was nothing but “a comeback with pomp and circumstance.” Major tasks have been accomplished but there are still “things to do.” The bottom line is, writes Smajlovic, that “the Balkans is the only spot on the Earth where Americans gained /people’s/ trust – moreover, they won over loyalty and love of the

² Ibid.

³ Miroslav Lazanski, “Biden – No Happy End,” *Politika*, May 23, 2009.

country with majority Muslim population. Bosnia and Kosovo would probably not exist as states at all was there not for Americans’ military and political support to their emergence, let alone their influence on Europeans to join in.”⁴

Interviews by Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic and Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac with the *Vecernje Novosti* daily testify that NATO was on the agenda. Vuk Jeremic said the membership of NATO was “contrary to our state policy, based on neutrality in the defense sphere.”⁵ For his part, however, Dragan Sutanovac emphasized “American satisfaction with the cooperation between two armies and two ministries.”⁶

Denouncement of American “Intentions”

Though not so intensively as on the eve of the visit tabloids continued to manifest their dissatisfaction with the visit and its results by denouncing America’s plan to have Serbia boiled down to “Belgrade pashadom.”⁷ Some of them protested against America’s intention to reactivate its

⁴ Ljiljana Smajlovic, “European Trump Card up America’s Sleeve,” *NIN*, May 21, 2009.

⁵ *Vecernje Novosti*, May 22, 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dragan Todorovic (SRS), *Pravda*, May 22, 2009.

presence in the Balkans and called it “occupation.” “We would feel much better had they literally occupied us and appointed Biden a governor.”⁸

The Serbian opposition seized the opportunity to accuse the regime of the loss of Kosovo – which, by the way, became independent during Kostunica’s premiership. In this context the visit was also used to advocate for new elections at which the opposition would most probably play on it to “prove” that the incumbent government plots with US. A column in the *Pecat* weekly speaks of the government’s unreserved acceptance of American stands, i.e. of “unconditional surrender.”⁹

The media in Republika Srpska were mostly concerned with the messages about the future of the entity. In a story about Mr. Biden’s visit, *Novi Reporter* quotes Ljiljana Smajlovic, ex-editor of the *Politika* daily, saying “Americans and Europeans plan for a more rigorous policy of conditioning and amendment of the Constitution of Bosnia-Herzegovina that will centralize it...They are intent to have Bosnia more concentrated around Sarajevo rather than strengthen it in Banjaluka.” “The reason why a constitutional reform was placed in the forefront is to be tracked down in

⁸ *Kurir*, May 22, 2009.

⁹ Aleksandar Nikitovic, “Biden’s Serbia,” *Pecat*, May 29, 2009.

the actual administration’s belief that Bosnia-Herzegovina is the American foreign policy success scored at the time of the earlier, democratic administration. The new-old administration is now intent to confirm that success – i.e. to buffer everything it sees as a failure in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” the paper quotes Smajlovic. Further, it quotes her saying that “this means not that the political goals schemed in Washington and Brussels will be attained in Bosnia-Herzegovina” because “they /goals/ will reveal conflicts within the Bosniak community as soon as the means leading to them are implemented in practice.”

Another author quoted in the same story, Bogdan Koljevic of the Institute for European Studies in Belgrade, does not rule out the possibility of establishment of a third entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. For, he says, the ideal of multiethnicity is nothing but unitarization and centralization of Bosnia-Herzegovina that could never function. “When the Balkan gets over the fever called Joseph Biden all Serb politicians on both sides of the Drina River can do is cope with its consequences...True, Serbian politicians will have a smaller space to maneuver in but, on the other hand, under by far more unfavorable international circumstances Serbs have had little space for political maneuver and yet they managed to attain a place for themselves in the

Balkans,” concludes Slobodan Durmanovic who bylined the story.¹⁰

RS Premier Milorad Dodik – who was, in a way, in the focus during Vice-president Biden’s visit – tried to convince the general public that US had not changed its stance about Republika Srpska. “Vice-president Biden clearly manifested his dedication to the balance established by the Dayton Peace Accords. This implies full support to Republika Srpska within the Dayton frame,” said Dodik.¹¹ After his reelection as president of the SDA at the party congress, Sulejman Tihic announced that the Prud process (negotiations on constitutional reform) would be continued and that another two party leaders, Haris Silajdzic and Zlatko Lagumdzija, had joined the team. The SDA congress also adopted a resolution on constitutional reform. Milorad Dodik reacted promptly by saying, “In this way SDA can pursue constitutional reform in Bosnia-Herzegovina only by itself.”¹²

¹⁰ “Fate of Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina and Republika Srpska after Joseph Biden,” Slobodan Durmanovic, *Novi Reporter*, May 19, 2009.

¹¹ Milorad Dodik, “America Shows Understanding for Srpska’s Position and Existence,” *Glas Srpske*, May 21, 2009.

¹² PINCOM INFO, May 28, 2009.

Rushed Interpretation

Belgrade and Banjaluka rushed for interpreting the visit in their own way and sending “constructive” messages to Bosniaks and Americans. A couple of days after Mr. Biden’s visit the president of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nebojsa Radmanovic, came to Belgrade. The main message deriving from the meeting was worded by Serbia’s President Boris Tadic. “Special ties between Serbia and Republika Srpska pose no threat whatsoever to integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina,” said Tadic, adding that the official Belgrade was “interested in establishment of special, parallel ties with the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina as well.”¹³ This implies that Belgrade considers Bosnia-Herzegovina’s entities separate states and tries to keep the idea of partition alive even after Mr. Biden’s visit. In this context, all references made to a third entity (Croatian) are meant to round off this scenario. Interestingly, denial of multiethnicity – itself so much emphasized in Vice-president Biden’s speeches in Bosnia and Kosovo – was what Dobrica Cosic has insisted on in his recent statements. Namely, Cosic still insists that “the Balkans cannot Europeanize as long as it is not defined in terms of ethnicity and states.” “The American and contemporary

¹³ “Respect for Dayton Preconditions Stability,” *Nezavisne*, May 25, 2009.

European philosophy of multiethnic states and societies in the Balkans, in the territories of Bosnia and Kosovo, figures as violence and a new form of colonialism,” says Cosic.

Actually, Serb nationalists have scored a considerable success: they have imposed ethnic principle as a sole criterion for resolution of all territorial disputes. They had rounded off all Serb territories in war, they have ethnically consolidated them and now they are only waiting for the circumstance more favorable for unification. Over two decades – in the shade of the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo – they have managed to ethnically consolidate Serbia proper. The right-wing nationalistic radicalism that is still in full swing in Serbia, xenophobia and hatred for the Other (including minorities) still keep alive the tension over borders. Now that it has attained almost all of its goals, the Serb elite could not possibly miss “a unique historic occasion” to “finally liberate Bosnia” and put the finishing touch on the Serb ethnic space even at the cost – as things stand – of disintegration of Serbia proper. On the one hand, Serbia is agonized by economic crisis and, on the other, has victory at hand. The NIN weekly summarizes Serb nationalists’ aspiration by insisting on “the memory of several simple historical truths.” Among them, says the paper, is the truth about “absolutely legitimate struggle of

the Serb people in the past decade of the 20th century, and Serbia’s absolutely legitimate struggle for the safeguard of Kosovo and Metohija.” “The battles have been lost only for the time being,” concludes the weekly.¹⁴

This is why Joseph Biden’s visit was crucial for the Balkans. But what is more important than the visit itself is implementation of his messages to the region.

¹⁴ Milos Jovanovic, “Litmus Test Visit by Joseph Biden,” NIN, 28. maj 2009.