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SOUTH SERBIA AND ALBANIAN QUESTION

South Serbia has been a neuralgic point ever since the opening of the Kosovo status issue. After NATO intervention /1999/ stability in three South municipalities -- Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja -- has been directly connected to the status issue. Both sides -- Serb and Albanian -- hoped for partition, which would place the three municipalities in quite a different context. In early August 2009, American congressman Dan Rohrabacher concretized the "partition idea" – according to him, Serbia and Kosovo should switch territories with each other: Serbia would get North Kosovo with Mitrovica and Kosovo South Serbia with the three above-mentioned municipalities.¹ Given that the entire region is of strategic importance for the Serb strategists ensuring it the control over the Vardar Valley, the "offer" is unacceptable to Belgrade. For the same strategic reasons expulsion of Albanians from the three municipalities was Belgrade's priority in the aftermath of the intervention. In this it succeeded only partially (in Medvedja). In response, local Albanians rebelled in 2001.

However, in tandem with UNMIK, KFOR and other international actors, the then central government (Premier Zoran Djindjic and Vice-Premier Nebojsa Covic, who was in charge of the operation) put an end to the armed rebellion. The signing of the

Konculj peace agreement halted the fighting and provided amnesty for members of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja /OVPBM/. However, no substantive progress has been made since in economic and social situation of the three "Southern" municipalities.

Among other things, the peace agreement resulted in the establishment of local ethnically mixed police forces. However, according to Sima Gazikalovic, vice-president of the Coordination Center, gendarmerie "competes" with local police forces in the security sector and the government's Coordination Center is inoperative. "The state of Serbia has not solved a single system problem in South Serbia... and repeats the mistakes it used to make in Kosovo... In other words, it is of no avail in the field."² To illustrate his point, Gazikalovic states that not a single Albanian has been granted a loan from Serbia's Fund for Development or given a chance to partake in the privatization process.³



Sima Gazikalović

² Borba, July 25-26, 2009

³ Ibid.

¹ Danas, August 3, 2009

For the official Belgrade, destabilization of South Serbia and Sandzak proves their thesis about Islamic fundamentalism that was allegedly a crucial factor of ex-Yugoslavia's disintegration and nowadays threatens the integrity of Serbia itself. This explains intensified actions by secret services both in Sandzak and in the South. However, back in 1992 the United States made it clear to Milosevic ("the Christmas warning" by President Bush and, later, President Clinton) that Kosovo and Macedonia were the West's spheres of interest and that US would react accordingly. This also explains prompt reactions by US and NATO to conflicts in Macedonia and South Serbia in 2001.

Incidents: Destabilization Attempt

Recent incidents in Serbia's South -- the attack at the gendarmerie patrol vehicle (July 9), a bomb explosion in front of the building housing families of army and police officers, as well as the action the gendarmerie took in response -- reminded of the complexity and fragility of the situation in South Serbia. Tension grew back in late 2008 when the so-called Gnjilane group was arrested -- its members have been in detention ever since. The arrest of the group in front of TV cameras was aimed at radicalizing Albanians both in Kosovo and South Serbia. The region's destabilization, therefore, cannot be perceived out of the context of ongoing developments in Serbia and the historical background of the past 15 years.

The intensified international engagement in the Western Balkans in the past months indicates the resolve to have this region completely stabilized. Apart from the economic crisis that considerably restricts Serbia's policies, this also explains Belgrade's more cooperative attitude towards EULEX in Kosovo. Such "new" attitude angers the opposition (Vojislav Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia in the first place), which also operates via the Serbs in Northern Mitrovica trying to prevent establishment of a different climate in the area. In a con-

densed form, all those factors are mirrored in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja.

Initial reactions in Belgrade were meant to fuel the tension through revived stereotypes about "Shiptar terrorists in action again," accompanied by detailed, terrorist "road map" from Presevo, through Guca to Belgrade. Indicatively, however, more rational rhetoric soon replaced reactions of that type. The change was also evident in the interviews with Albanian officials and politicians the media carried -- and those interviews underpinned numerous problems plaguing the municipalities bordering on Kosovo.

All this leads to the conclusion that international actors are operating behind the scenes. The Belgrade regime, therefore, promptly manifested that growing tensions in South do not suit them. Minister of the Interior Ivica Dacic demonstrated this attitude in the meeting with mayors of three South municipalities -- and, according to Albanian politicians, the demands for withdrawal of the gendarmerie from Serbia's South dominated those talks.⁴ On the same day, Mayor of Bujanovac Saip Kamberi paid visits to several embassies in Belgrade, which he addressed earlier by letters warning of "continued repression against Albanians in the region."⁵ Albanians were obviously prepared for another attempted provocation by Belgrade.



Saip Kamberi

Tensions at the border with Serbia do not suit Prishtina either -- because the authorities in Prishtina have been trying hard to release the wave of recognition of Kosovo's independence that has been "frozen" for considerable period of time.

⁴ *Danas*, July 25-26, 2009

⁵ *Borba*, July 25-26, 2009

Who Could Benefit from Conflicts in South Serbia?

In the aftermath of the first incident (on July 9 when two policemen were injured by a hand grenade thrown at their patrol vehicle in the village of Lucani) the Belgrade media run headlines that clearly accused “Albanian terrorists” of the attack. For instance, *Press* carried a news story under the headline “Assault by Albanian Terrorists,”⁶ despite the fact that the story itself quoted that “investigation is underway.”

After visiting the wounded police officers, Minister Dacic told the press it was “obviously an act by a terrorist group and an attack at Serbia’s territorial integrity.”⁷ He added, however, that the search for perpetrators was underway and was the more so difficult since it was conducted in the land security zone that was also “politically most quaky.”⁸



Ivica Dačić

Indicatively, most commentators of those incidents were former members of secret services, who were spinning the thesis about Albanian terrorism in a rather well-orchestrated manner.

Invoking his experience in the field, retired General Ninoslav Krstic (ex-commander of the Associated Security Forces operating in the area in 2001) claimed that the attack was ordered from Prishtina (“They do nothing without Prishtina’s approval”)

and carried out by former troopers of the KLA.⁹

Krstic also takes that groups of criminals were behind the attack -- those groups, as he put it, have the support from political parties in South Serbia the membership of which is composed of once members of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (OVPBM).¹⁰ Indicatively, however, Krstic holds that Serbia cannot solve the problem on its own. “The entire Balkans should join Euro-Atlantic integrations because our police, in that case, would be obtaining more information from UNMIK police, EULEX and other services monitoring movements of those groups in Kosovo.”¹¹



Ninoslav Krstic

In a story titled “Shiptars’ Blackmail” *Kurir* (the most active tabloid in all anti-European campaigns) quotes anonymous “security sources” and claims that the assault has to do with the demand by Albanian leaders from Bujanovac and Presevo for the establishment of a special region that would, apart from three South municipalities, include the municipalities of Trgoviste and Bosilegrad.¹²

In the meantime, the Assembly of Albanian Deputies, composed of municipal representatives from Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, requested the establishment of a separate region -- the Presevo Valley. The Assembly adopted a declaration renouncing any violence lea-

⁶ *Press*, July 10, 2009

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Borba*, July 10, 2009

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Kurir*, July 11, 2009

ding to destabilization of the Presevo Valley, as well as opposing “spectacular” actions by the special police and the threats of arrests of former members of OVPMB aimed at “intimidation of Albanian civilians.” The Declaration underpins that the latest actions taken by the special police made part of continued attempts at criminalizing Albanians as a collectivity.

All Albanian politicians from the South strongly condemned both incidents (in the second incident in a row, on July 14, when the bomb exploded outside a condo in Presevo, a women and a child were injured -- and they were both Albanians) but were by far more cautious when referring to potential perpetrators. Mayor of Presevo Skender Destani warns that “peace in the South suits someone not.”¹³ Explaining he knew not whether that “someone” was Serb or Albanian, he says, “But it’s obviously a work of a professional.”¹⁴

Riza Halimi, local politician of longstanding experience and the sole Albanian MP, underlines that incidents do happen “despite massive presence of the gendarmerie.” “Judging by the number of gendarmes, this can only be explained as an unofficial state of emergency imposed on the municipalities in the South inhabited by majority Albanian population.”¹⁵

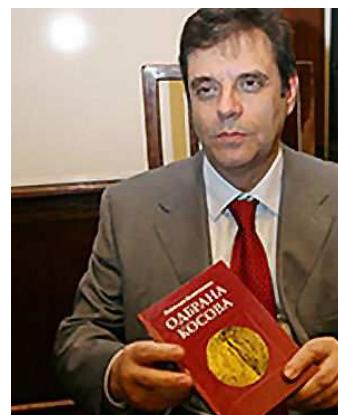


Riza Halimi

In an interview with *Politika*, Redza Aslani, villager of Lucani where the first incident took place, says, “Not a single person who has been fighting for Kosovo remained in the village: one half of them are in prison and the other half moved abroad.” He takes that there would be no terrorist attacks should the gendarmerie withdraw from the region for a year or two.¹⁶

According to Miroslav Filipovic, military analyst, peace in Kosovo or in South Serbia suits not Belgrade at this point. “Unless it obtains considerable funds from abroad, the government will be faced with difficulties to pay out pensions, salaries to teachers and doctors, and the like. But if someone continues maltreating Serbs in Kosovo or in Sandzak and, moreover, focuses on South Serbia all the way to Nis, hungry citizens might refrain from the expected protests,” says Filipovic.¹⁷

Everything indicates that parts of the opposition (Kostunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia in the first place) and some segments of security services acting beyond governmental control have been masterminding renewed tensions in South Serbia.



Vojislav Koštunica

Alleged Danger of “Exported” Terrorism

Despite the fact that Albanians have not “exported terrorism” to Serbia during the Kosovo crisis – or before or after it – speculations about “danger of terrorism” followed every new rise in tension in Serbia’s South. In any case, the first to comment the latest developments were

¹³ *Kurir*, July 15, 2009

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Politika*, July 16, 2009

¹⁷ www.helsinki.org.rs

politicians, notably those from the Democratic Party of Serbia.

Some military analysts, however, commented the situation in South Serbia in a similar manner. Zoran Dragisic, professor at the Faculty of Security, warns of possible escalation of the conflict, claiming it is all about “a serious attempt at destabilizing Serbia.”¹⁸ For the ex-director of the Military-Security Agency /VBA/, Momir Stojanovic, an attack was a possibility if “foreign elements” were involved in it. “If involvement of foreign elements is proved, all the highest ranking state officials need to make an in-depth analysis of the situation because no one is safe over here.”¹⁹ Under the headline “Terrorists Prey on Serb Capital” *Glas Javnosti* carries a statement by Tomislav Kresovic, analyst of the Anti-Terrorism Center, holding that “the capital will be endangered” unless Albanians’ demands are met.²⁰

Pravda treats the alleged danger more dramatically than any other paper. In the issue of July 22, the daily publicized a map of Serbia showing assumed targets – from Presevo in the South to Palic in the North, including Nis, Guca and Belgrade.²¹ According to Nikola Sandulovic whom the paper presents as an expert in security issues, Belgrade will be the first target of terrorists from Kosovo – Nis, Leskovac, Vranje and all bigger towns in Serbia’s south will come later.²² He also pinpoints Guca as a potential target at the time of the traditional trumpet festival.²³ The former head of the Belgrade Police Department, Marko Nicovic, holds that “Albanian terrorists are ready to hire professionals from Afghanistan, Moldova or some third country to carry out terrorist attacks throughout Serbia, including Belgrade, Nis, Leskovac, Vranje, etc. instead of them.”²⁴

¹⁸ Press, July 15, 2009

¹⁹ Kurir, July 16, 2009

²⁰ *Glas Javnosti*, July 16, 2009

²¹ *Pravda*, July 22, 2009

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Albanians’ Angle

The demand by local authorities of Presevo and Bujanovac for withdrawal of the gendarmerie from the territory of the three South municipalities and for the control over citizens’ security by local, ethnically mixed (Serb and Albanian) police forces threw light on the other, more objective side of the problems plaguing the area. Firstly, the demand for withdrawal of the gendarmerie came immediately after “the search for perpetrators” during which special police forces were searching homes, “acting brutally and maltreating even children.”²⁵ Mayor of Presevo Ragmi Mustafa said, “Should the brutal action by the gendarmerie continue, every yard and house in Presevo and neighboring villages would be open to them, because we do not want to have our gates, doors and windows smashed. Everything will be available and open to them.”²⁶ Reminding of similar developments in Kosovo in the past decade, he wonders, “Is this the way for Serbia to push the Presevo Valley too towards Kosovo?”²⁷



Ragmi Mustafa

Local Albanian representatives from Presevo and Bujanovac also circulated a letter to some embassies in Belgrade (US, French, German, etc.) and to the OSCE Mission. The hue and cry in the media seemed to calm down once international actors have been addressed. And several relevant newspapers such as *Vecernje Novosti*, *Danas*, *Borba* and even *Politika* carried

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Politika*, July 19, 2009

²⁷ Ibid.

articles with more complex analyses of the South Serbia problematic. All those stories notably insisted on good neighborly relations between local Albanians and Serbs, as well as on the fact that the two ethnic communities share the same problems, particularly when it comes of underdevelopment.

Real-Life Problems Challenging Three Municipalities

Though the tensions seem to calm down in South Serbia, the region's problems remain and have a destabilizing effect on it in the long run. Access to university education of young Albanians is problematic given that there is no faculty in the entire region. Young Albanians, therefore, go to Prishtina to study. Now there are announcements that branches of Nis-seated faculties of law and economics will be opened in South Serbia this fall. Serb authorities would not recognize diplomas issued by the Prishtina University -- a decision made at the time of Kostunica's cabinet. All this additionally complicates access to proper jobs for educated Albanians, who are thus forced to leave the country – and actually, this was the reason for which the said decision was made. For, in the long run Albanian community will disappear due to brain drain.

This is how Mayor of Presevo Fahmi Mustafa sums up the situation: "Serbian government does not communicate with us, our elementary school students do not have textbooks in their mother tongue, diplomas of our intellectuals who have graduated from the Pristina University are not recognized, the gendarmerie brutally searches the cars and homes of our citizens, and our citizens cannot move freely."²⁸

According to Belgzimi Kamperi, president of the Committee for Human Rights in Presevo, "Albanian leaders and Belgrade alike are trying to instrumentalize the developments in Presevo." "Albanians are accusing the state of repression, and the state is accusing Albanians of terrorism, which contributes to destabilization of

the region and serves as a pretext to their inability to solve real-life problems," says Kamperi.²⁹

Destabilization of three municipalities in the South -- in two of which Albanians make the majority population – may trigger off regional instability. In addition, the whole area borders on Macedonia and Kosovo, and is among major smuggling corridors (arm, drugs, human trafficking), which only multiplies the risks. The situation should also be analyzed in the context of open questions -- Serbia's denial to "put an end" to the state issue and stop aspiring to Kosovo's partition.

Against such backdrop the international actors' intensified engagement – which Belgrade accepts for the time being – is most important. During the brief "crisis" in Presevo, Serbia's relevant ministers, Ivica Dacic and Dragan Sutanovac, were in contact not only with NATO but also with EULEX and UNMIK. This was usually justified by the international institutions' responsibility towards regional security. On the other hand, regional security indicates the need for rapprochement.

Belgrade is presently faced with the same calls for decentralization Kosovo Serbs were granted under Ahtisaari plan. Given that decentralization is a mainstream international standard and trend, Belgrade should better show more understanding for such demands if it wants to avoid further radicalization of the situation.

Only substantive integration of the Albanian community in wider political and economic society could put an end to its isolation and segregation. Only substantive decentralization could encourage Albanians to actively partake in local self-governments but also in republican policies. The region's multiethnic character calls for intensified engagement in confidence building between Serbs and Albanians.

²⁸ *Vecernje Novosti*, July 23, 2009

²⁹ Ibid.