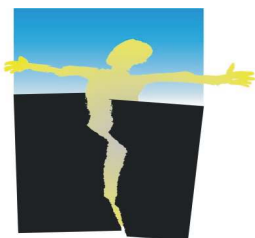


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EU CANDIDACY – A HISTORIC BREAKTHROUGH

After three decades of wandering, the defeat of the Greater Serbia project and all the attempts to keep it alive, the Serb elite was divided over a crucial issue: accession to EU. During his two-year premiership (2001-2003) Zoran Djindjic defined Serbia as a European country. Contrary to all expectations, his assassination put this option to death. Extradition of Slobodan Milosevic to the tribunal in The Hague was among Zoran Djindjic's legacy. And that was a watershed in Serbia's policy in the years that followed.



Citizens of Serbia casting a ballot for a pro-European coalition in 2008, whereby they practically defeated their elites, were those who decided the country's course. Tadic's signature under the Stabilization and Association Agreement with EU – Vojislav Kostunica had turned down only several months before – secured him a razor thin victory over Tomislav Nikolic, leader of the Serb Radical Party.

Over the past year, Serbia's pro-European cabinet made a major turn towards EU by taking appropriate

measures and adopting Europe-oriented legislature. The Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ helped it to secure a thin majority in the parliament at every critical point – by giving its vote to pro-European laws LDP contributed to maintenance of the country's course towards EU.

In the meantime the Serb Radical Party split up and the Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ emerged with Tomislav Nikolic at helm. This changed Serbia's political climate. Pro-European discourse became a common denominator though perceptions of European course practically had little in common.

The global crisis was a key factor in reviewing Serbia's pro-European course, notably after the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos. Since Russia – a partner a considerable part of Serbia's elite perceived as crucial for the country's "neutral" positioning – was badly affected by the financial crisis, EU remained the only serious alternative.

After Russia's invasion of Georgia and subsequent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia's and the West's spheres of interest became more clearly defined. US Vice-president Joseph Biden's tour of the Balkans was decisive in this context – it passed on the message that US was interested in the regional stabilization. US' new administration helped to speed up the Western Balkans movement towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. Promised a faster accession to EU under the condition of being a constructive partner in the revision of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Serbia is a key link in this process.

In all these circumstances, the pro-European coalition not only managed to secure support for the changes preconditioning “a white Shengen regime” and to activate the SAA but also to submit an application for EU candidacy.

Irrevocable European Course

Serbia applied for EU candidacy on December 22, 2009. It can be said that it was a historical act whereby the country strategically charted its future. After almost two decades of disorientation and wandering, the ruling political elite made a crucial decision – to transform Serbia into a modern, democratic society in keeping with European standards.

By the end of 2009 the process of accession accelerated – EU Council of Ministers decided to unfreeze SAA signed back in April 2008 and the European Parliament annulled the visa regime with signatory states of the Schengen Agreement on December 19, 2009. Several major factors were decisive in all this.



First, President Barrack Obama’s administration decided to get more engaged in the Western Balkans, still a potentially instable region (a newly emerged state of Kosovo, a dysfunctional state of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia blocked by its own territorial aspirations). Vice-President Joseph Biden’s visit of May 2009 was decisive when it came to US’s new role in the Balkans.

Second, after a repeated referendum in Ireland and adoption of the Lisbon Treaty the European Union managed to overcome the crisis standing in its way for over a year. At the same time this made it possible for EU to take a more active stance

towards potential member-states and to contribute to stabilization in the Balkans together with US.

Third, it could be said that the economic-financial crisis shaking the world in 2009 sobered up Serbia. Faced with the economy on the edge of collapse, high rate of unemployment and huge social problems, Serbia’s political elite was seeking financial assistance from all sides, from Beijing to Moscow, but received substantive support from EU only. Some member-states such as Germany, Italy, Austria, Greece, Norway, etc. backed it individually as well. These states had invested in Serbia’s structural reforms (state administration, judiciary, healthcare, education, etc.) in the past decade too. As of 2000 nine billion Euros have been invested in Serbia mostly by these countries¹, whereas its governmental and public intuitions received two million Euros of irrevocably assistance from EU funds².

Last but not least, the incumbent government formed after the early elections in May 2008 thanks to a thin majority of pro-European parties winning parliamentary seats was “duty-bound” by the electoral outcome to follow a European agenda.

The breakthrough in Serbia’s pro-European course – made by the incumbent cabinet and President Boris Tadic – dealt a serious blow to the conservative, anti-European bloc predominating the Serbian society ever since the ouster of Slobodan Milosevic (2000). Though not marked by overt opposition, the very act of application for EU candidacy was gave rise to critical tones all of which are well-known and could signal serious obstruction.

The application for EU candidacy is a big test of readiness for radical reforms for the entire Serbian society. Despite the fact that almost all public opinion polls showed that the majority of citizens supported “EU option” (60-70 percent of respondents), Serbia is challenged with serious tasks on its path to Europe. Many of these tasks relate to all citizens, notably when it comes to adoption of a new value system and European standards and criteria. The application also implies that Serbia rounds off its

¹ *Press*, October 21 2009.

² *Blic*, October 24 2009.

cooperation with the ICTY and arrests the remaining two fugitives from the Hague justice, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic.



Further movement towards EU integration implies adjustment of tons of legislation and regulations to EU standards and, moreover, their implementation. Though enacted, some “European” laws have hardly been implemented so far. For instance, the Anti-Discrimination Act (passed despite many obstacles and overt opposition by the Serb Orthodox Church) did not make it possible to finally stage a pride parade in Serbia in September 2009. In addition, establishment of the rule of law, fight against corruption and organized crime, professionalization of the army and a number of other reforms will be the challenges Serbia will have to come to grips with in quite a different way in the years to come.

Relations with neighboring countries, including Kosovo, will be among key tests of Serbia’s readiness for “Europeanization.” Belgrade is responsible for keeping relations with all neighbors – actually with all the states emerging from ex-Yugoslavia and in 2008 – permanently tense.

Application for EU candidacy: submittal

On December 19, 2009 the actual cabinet decided to submit Serbia’s application for EU candidacy. Serbian President Boris Tadic – who attended the governmental meeting and, three days later, officially handed over the application to Swedish Prime Minister Frederick Reinfeldt – labeled the act a watershed. Serbia is facing “a difficult period of radical and often painful reforms,” he said, adding, “It will be hard but more advantage for every

citizen of Serbia and the society as a whole is awaiting at the end of the road.”³

Tadic emphasized that Serbia looked forward to becoming a full-fledged member in the next ten years. “Today, we are paying tribute to Zoran Djindjic and his vision of a European Serbia. He kept this vision alive through a dark age of dictatorship and the day has come when his ideas became a reality,” said Tadic.⁴

A historical breakthrough – as Sweden Prime Minister Reinfeldt put it – was preceded by dynamic diplomatic actions in several European capitals. Over the past months, President Tadic – more active at the international scene than ever before – met with major European leaders from Nicola Sarkozy and Angela Merkel to Silvio Berlusconi. All these meetings resulted in encouraging messages to Serbia – though none of them made it clear whether the application for candidacy should be submitted as soon as possible or put it on ice for some time.

No doubt that European Commission’s affirmatively intoned report on Serbia’s progress towards EU (publicized in October 2009) and ICTY Prosecutor Serge Bramertz’s report to the UN Security Council in November – “more affirmative than ever before” as interpreted domestically - contributed to the climate propitious to application. Probably under the pressure from other EU member-states, the Netherlands became more flexible about Serbia. Not only did it give a green light to unfreezing of SAA but also its Foreign Minister Max Ferhagen decided to pay a visit to Belgrade in mid-December and thus signal a major change in his country’s unbending position. (Arrest of Ratko Mladic has been the Netherlands’s arch precondition for Serbia’s movement towards EU.)

“Serbia is returning to a runaway of its once prosperity – to foreign partnerships, respect for international balance of powers and respect for people’s will,” wrote columnist Momcilo Pantelic. Reminding of the strong support Serbia’s is getting for its application for EU candidacy from both

³ *Politika*, December 20, 2009.

⁴ *Politika*, December 23, 2009.

abroad and domestic scene, Pantelic singles out EU, US and Russia.⁵

The right moment for submitting the application was the subject of many domestic debates. Views differed not only within the ruling coalition but also among cabinet members. Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic was among the most agile advocates of prompt application, while, say, Bozidar Djelic, vice-premier in charge of European integrations, was among those cautious.⁶ After much polemic, President Boris Tadic asked all actors to stop “the bidding” on the date for submittal of the application.

Goran Svilanovic, Serbia’s ex-foreign minister, was among those calling for a prompt reaction. “There will always be people hurrying you up and those discouraging you,” he said. However, for him an application for EU candidacy was an act of pressure on EU. “This act of pressure is a necessary supplement to everything Serbia has been doing to meet European standards,” he said.⁷

Though the application was labeled “timely” after the ceremony in Stockholm and the great majority of 27 member-states sided with Serbia’s decision⁸, some influential countries and figures seemed less enthusiastic. Less than a week before Serbia submitted its application, British Ambassador in Belgrade Stephen Woodword said it should wait for the support from all the 27 countries. According to him, by the “step by step” logic, Serbia should wait until June (2010), i.e. until EU ministers decided to start the process of SAA ratification.⁹

Jelko Kacin, EU rapporteur for Serbia, was also skeptical about the right time for Serbia’s application. Application, as he put it, is “a big deal” rather than “a poker game.” “That’s a game with clear-cut rules that win you the trust of all the 27 member-states,” said Kacin.¹⁰



Jelko Kacin

Positive Echoes

The news that Sweden, at the end of its EU presidency, accepted Serbia’s application was not exactly met with euphoria in Serbia. But that does not mean that the overall atmosphere failed to emanate (unexpected) optimism. No political party – including those from the extreme right – opposes Serbia’s accession to EU, at least not declaratively, though some raise the question of “the price” Serbia will have to pay.

For Premier Mirko Cvetkovic, Serbia’s decision to submit the application for EU candidacy charted its future course and proved that it shared the aspirations of European countries. “That’s a joint success of the government and all factors in the society,” said the Premier.¹¹

Zoran Zivkovic, ex-premier, called the day on which the application was submitted “a big day for the country” that should “mark the beginning of a new, better and more prosperous era in Serbia’s history.”¹²

Politicians from the parties making the ruling coalition seemed quite pleased while commenting on “Europe’s gift” from Stockholm. Referring to the accepted candidacy as a “happy event,” the chairwoman of the Serbian parliament (of the Socialist Party of Serbia), Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic, said, “This testifies that Serbia has made much progress.”¹³ For the leader of the Democratic Party’s parliamentary caucus, Nada Kolundzija, that was “a proof that Serbia has taken a one-way street to EU.”¹⁴

⁵ *Politika*, December 25, 2009.

⁶ *Danas*, September 19-20, 2009.

⁷ *Blic*, December 13, 2009.

⁸ Boris Tadic while in the visit to Novi Sad, RTS prime-time newscast, December 23, 2009.

⁹ *Blic*, December 15, 2009.

¹⁰ *Blic*, November 22, 2009.

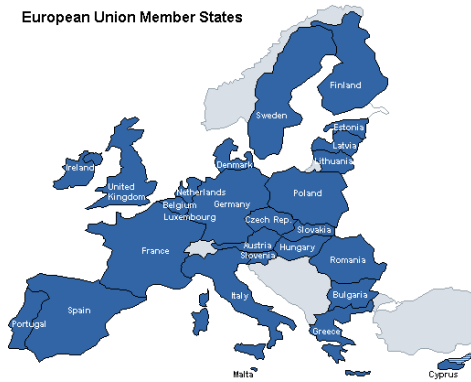
¹¹ *Press*, December 21, 2009.

¹² *Danas*, December 22, 2009.

¹³ *Pravda*, December 21, 2009.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

European Union Member States



The leader of the parliamentary caucus of G17 Plus (a party that, along with LDP, most openly advocates European integration), Suzana Grubjesic, says the application for EU candidacy is yet another proof of Serbia's strategic orientation towards EU. For 79 percent of citizens opting for Euro-integrations this motion testifies that "we are pursuing European course," she says, adding, "Candidacy additionally motivates all those working on Euro-integration for start-up of reforms and rounding ongoing ones off. Citizens are those who will benefit the most from a reformed society."¹⁵ Once Serbia becomes a candidate for EU membership citizens may look forward to economic progress, she explains.¹⁶

According to Serbia's ex-Ambassador to France and actual professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Predrag Simic, timing was most important in the case of Serbia – for Serbia has seized the favorable opportunity to apply as soon as the Lisbon Treaty was ratified. "The fact is that we were ready when we saw a chance...Even those submitting the application in person seemed surprised at the successful outcome."¹⁷

For Dragoljub Zarkovic, columnist for the Blic daily, the application for EU candidacy is "a vaccine of sorts against social and bureaucratic apathy and can favorably affect political relations in Serbia." "And if it at least speeds up access to pre-membership funds from which Europe assists even candidates

for candidates, the benefit will be more than obvious," writes Zarkovic.¹⁸

Critics and Skeptics

Before leaving for Stockholm, President Boris Tadic reminded that everybody had not favored European integration in near past and that opponents of the process were still there. "Some even threatened with force or eternal punishment. It's good that some of them have changed their mind," he said.¹⁹ Regardless of whether or not the people the President referred to have truly changed their mind in the meantime, the fact remains that no one held out against the motion. However, the populist bloc (Democratic Party of Serbia and New Serbia) criticizes the government for applying "too soon" since, as they put it, "EU member-states and the European Parliament have not ratified SAA yet" (Slobodan Samardzic) or for "political marketing" because "Serbia is not ready yet for EU accession." (Velimir Ilic)²⁰

Claiming that they also stand for Serbia's accession to EU, the leader of the Radicals' parliamentary caucus, Dragan Todorovic, insists that accession must include the entire country, "meaning Serbia with Kosovo and Metohija." Given that EU is a leading power snatching Kosovo away from Serbia, "this is something we cannot accept."²¹ Further, he points out that EU will continue its policy of conditioning, including the condition that "Serbia enables citizens of Vojvodina to vote in a referendum, envisaged under the provincial statute, and thus decide whether or not to stay in Serbia."²²

The editor-in-chief of the New Serbian Political Thought magazine, Djordje Vukadinovic, also takes that no one should be allowed to counterpoise a single step towards EU – from "white Schengen regime," through unfreezing of SAA to a possible end of some chapter of negotiations with EU – to "the protection of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and not only when it comes to Kosovo and Metohija." "There is a reasonable doubt that Serbian train has

¹⁵ *Politika*, December 23, 2009.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Politika*, December 24, 2009.

¹⁸ *Blic*, December 21, 2009.

¹⁹ *Politika*, December 20, 2009.

²⁰ *Pravda*, December 21, 2009.

²¹ *Politika*, December 23, 2009.

²² *Ibid.*

been moved from a dead stop at a simply indecent, and un-European cost,” says Vukadinovic. According to him, annulment of the visa regime for citizens of Serbia and adoption of Vojvodina’s Statute were not a mere coincidence.²³

Serbia’s conservative bloc must have been shocked by the speed at which the application was submitted. For the time being, this is illustrated by rather mild criticism of the country’s movement towards EU. However, there is no doubt that with joined forces the bloc will do its utmost to slow down inasmuch as possible Serbia’s anyway long journey to Europe. For this purpose, the bloc will be trying to overthrow the government and thus provoke early parliamentary elections.

This was what it tried to accomplish in late summer 2009 when the Public Information Law was at the parliamentary agenda. Adoption of the republican budget for 2010 in late December 2009 was another “critical point.” The Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, the member-party of the ruling coalition, sided with the opposition and voted against the budget (the Alliance has good relations with Tomislav Nikolic’s Serb Progressive Party).

Leader of the Serb Progressive Party Tomislav Nikolic – having taken up pro-European rhetoric in the meantime – avoids to back pro-European efforts of the actual cabinet. He has been strongly criticizing it in the parliament – for the statute of Vojvodina, the proposed budget, election of judges and prosecutors, etc.

The anti-European block “tightened its ranks” at the round table discussion on the role of the Serb Orthodox Church, organized by the Slobodan Jovanovic Fund. President of DSS Vojislav Kostunica, DSS Vice-president Slobodan Samardzic and academician Matija Beckovic were among the panelists, too. Metropolitan Amfilohije said on the occasion, “Europe’s spiritual crisis is much deeper than we – hurrying towards it somewhat thoughtlessly – could imagine.” Claiming that Serbia

has always been a part of Europe, he said he felt “ashamed” of the fact that “Europe showed mercy to give us visas so that we can wander from one European pub to another.”²⁴

Application for EU candidacy is a major breakthrough that finally gets Serbia on the same track with other countries in the region. This fact will considerably speed up integration processes in the Balkans, the more so since regional cooperation is among key preconditions for EU membership.

Despite the fact that the majority of Serbia’s citizens support the country’s orientation towards Europe, it is to be expected that the conservative bloc will be counterattacking under the pretext of objective difficulties imminent to integration process. Therefore, what Serbia needs in period to come is fresh support by all liberal segments of the society, as well as EU’s support to these segments of the society.

Only the society itself can effectuate a radical change – but do to that the society needs permanent support from EU, which should particularly focus on the part of civil society advocating European values, small and medium-sized enterprises, regions and all areas in Serbia manifesting readiness for transformation.

Apart from undertaking necessary reforms, Serbia can hold its orientation towards Europe only if it makes some economic progress to avoid social turmoil – a turmoil that would only play into the hands of anti-European forces trying to overthrow the government.

European orientation also necessitates support from the media as major opinion-makers. For this purpose, the Public Information Act needs to be revised and reporters themselves capacitated to better inform the public both about the advantages and the obligations stemming from EU-oriented policy.

Campaigning for Serbia’s movement towards EU needs to be non-stop so as to mobilize all citizens for the project.

²³ Column “Happy New Year 2009,” *Politika*, December 22, 2009.

²⁴ Beta News Agency, December 23, 2009.