

# HELSINKI Bulletin



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## **Anti-European Bloc Goes on Counter-Offensive**

The Serbian cabinet's decision to apply for EU candidacy in late 2009 was a breakthrough in Serbia's history as a European country. The decision provoked strong, though not necessarily overt, resentment of the anti-European bloc. Apart from populist parties (DSS, SNP, SRS, NS, etc.) the bloc assembles the greatest part of the country's scholarly elite – mostly the circles from the Academy of Arts and Sciences and the University – the Serb Orthodox Church, various right-wing groupings and non-governmental organizations, parts of the Army and most media. This is the same bloc that defined Serb national program in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus confronting the country with the entire world. Premier Zoran Djindjic's assassination in March 2003 was the most dramatic outcome of the bloc's anti-Europeanism. The murder of the Premier stalled off Serbia's orientation towards Europe for almost a decade.

US Vice-president Joseph Biden's tour of the region helped to speed up Western Balkans countries' movement towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. This refers to Serbia as well. The effect of the global crisis

that laid bare the region's economic devastation was practically the same. With the Western Balkans seen as a hotbed of instability (Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina), special attention had to be paid to Serbia so as to cement its option for Europe.



Faced with the country's economic collapse and the global crisis, the Serbian government made a fresh advance towards EU. In 2009 it took a number of steps that opened the door to Europe. In early 2009, the government decided to unilaterally implement the Provisional Trade Agreement with EU, while the Ministry of the Interior signed an agreement with EULEX mission in Kosovo. In October, EU issued an affirmative report on Serbia's advancement towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. In November ITCY Main Prosecutor Serge Bramertz positively assessed Serbia's cooperation with the Tribunal. The Netherlands made

a concession over the arrest of Ratko Mladic for the time being, which contributed to the Prosecutor's positive assessment. All this led to the European Parliament's decision in late December to include Serbia in "white visa regime" and to have the Provisional Trade Agreement unfrozen by EU.

Serbia's faster movement towards EU created a positive climate in the society as a whole (a number of public surveys testify of that). President Boris Tadic seized the "moment of great change"<sup>1</sup> to launch the initiative for adoption of a parliamentary resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. He called such a resolution, postponed for years, "Serbia's obligation towards the Tribunal in The Hague."



Angered by such a U-turn towards EU, Serbia's mainstream elites went on counter-offensive based on three-decades-old stereotypes: the West's conspiracy against ex-Yugoslavia, Serbia and Serb nation, NATO bombardment, the international community's support to Kosovo's independence, its efforts to keep Bosnia together, etc. The proposed resolution on Srebrenica only added to their grudge. Such a resolution, they say, "segregates innocent victims" and is meant to "morally legitimize the regime and

thus make it possible for it to force Serbia into NATO."<sup>2</sup>

Their resentment culminated in an appeal for calling a referendum on Serbia's membership of NATO – a move meant to counteract any government's motion in this direction. However, judging by the reactions to the appeal publicized so far, Serbia's orientation towards EU gains momentum.

### **Initiative by "two hundred intellectuals"**

Though extensively discussed in expert circles, the question of membership of NATO is still open. Even *Politika* daily started a regular column for experts to cross swords over the topic.

Serbia practically remained isolated when Croatia, Montenegro and Albania were admitted to NATO membership in 2009. The very fact that, except for Bosnia and Kosovo, Serbia is surrounded by NATO states could not but fundamentally change the regime's attitude towards the Alliance.

So changed landscape in the country's closest neighborhood, along with Serbia's application for EU candidacy, only spurred a counter-offensive by the anti-European bloc. In early January 2010 it launched an initiative for calling of a referendum on Serbia's membership of NATO. The main purpose of the initiative is to cement Serbia's military neutrality in keeping with a relevant parliamentary resolution. For their part, the media fuel anti-NATO climate by bringing to mind NATO intervention and "seizure" of Kosovo. Objectively speaking, a referendum vote – particularly the majority vote against

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<sup>2</sup> Milorad Vucelic in his editorial, Pecat, January 15, 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Milica Delevic in an interview with Vreme magazine, January 14, 2010.

– would slow down Serbia’s movement towards EU.

Signatories of the initiative are academicians, writers, university professors, church dignitaries, actors, artists, etc. The list includes public figures such as Dobrica Cosic, Matija Beckovic, Svetozar Stojanovic, Djordje Vukadinovic, Vasilije Krestic, Milorad Ekmečić, Cedomir Popov, Dusan Kovacevic, Metropolitan Amfilohije, Bishop Artemije and former high officials like Vojislav Kostunica, Dusan Mihajlovic (police minister in Djindjic’s cabinet) and Dragan Jovic. Assembled around Memorandum and supportive of Slobodan Milosevic, they are now struggling to safeguard Milosevic’s legacy – Republika Srpska in the first place.

Addressing the press academician Matija Beckovic, professor Svetozar Stojanovic and president of the Journalists’ Alliance of Serbia Ljiljana Smajlovic (ex-editor-in-chief of *Politika* daily) said a referendum on NATO membership was necessary because of justifiable concern that “a decision on Serbia’s membership of NATO could be made behind the scenes and behind citizens’ back.”<sup>3</sup> According to them, such crucial decisions “should not be left to politicians.” In their appeal they strongly argue that by joining NATO Serbia recognizes Kosovo’s independence.



The persons drafting the petition have prepared the initiative for some time now – they only waited for “the right moment” to come public

with it. In an interview with *Danas* daily in November 2009, Aleksandar Nikitovic, former head of Vojislav Kostunica’s office, voiced the same demand. Behind the people’s back and in conspiracy with NATO leadership, the government works for Serbia’s admission, he argued. “Instead of acts behind the scenes and attempts to attain a goal through the policy of delusion, it would be only fair and democratic to have a referendum on this issue crucial for Serbia’s future,” he said.<sup>4</sup>

The same circles have rather contributed to deposal of Zdravko Ponos, chief of General Staff, and has tried the same in the case of Dragan Sutanovac, defense minister. What motivated them in the first place was the fact that, despite all limitations and difficulties, Serbia’s army is transformed with full support from NATO states (US, Great Britain and Norway) and successfully cooperates with US military forces (National Guard of Ohio).

Defense Minister Dragan Sutanovac was not deposed. He is seen as an advocate of Serbia’s membership of NATO. In the interview headlined “We Should Not Fear NATO” he gave to *Press* daily on January 9, 2009, Sutanovac stresses the significance of Serbia’s joining Euro-Atlantic integrations. “Endorsement of European values implies Euro-Atlantic security system,” he said. Serbia needs not join NATO, he said, adding that moving towards NATO is “a natural course of events in Europe.” Asked what is in Serbia’s best interest – military neutrality or membership of NATO – Sutanovac replied, “People coping with everyday life, those concerned with economy and security, should be the ones to answer the question.”<sup>5</sup>

Opposing NATO membership and arguing for military neutrality instead, Professor Svetozar Stojanovic points out a major aspect, as he sees it – attitude towards Russia. By

<sup>3</sup> Press, January 12, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> *Danas*, November 6, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Press, January 9, 2010.

joining NATO Serbia would hamper a through reconsideration of its role and relations with Russia, as well as consideration of the Russian concept of international security, he says, adding that “the Russian initiative for a new international security agreement calls for a constructive approach.”<sup>6</sup> “As a country caring for its independence and dignity, Serbia should restrict its military cooperation to US, Russia, EU countries, China and India,” he says.<sup>7</sup>



### **How Serbia came to be a “military neutral” country?**

In late December 2007 (a year after the country joined Partnership for Peace), the Serbian parliament voted in Serbia’s military neutrality. The resolution on “the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia” dealt with Kosovo and was adopted on the eve of (expected) independence declaration. Actually, a single article of the resolution relates to “military neutrality” and runs as follows:

*“Because of the overall part NATO played – from illegal bombardment of Serbia in 1999 without the approval from the Security Council to Annex 11 of the rejected plan by Ahtisaari providing that NATO shall be ‘ultimate authority’ in ‘independent Kosovo’ – the People’s Assembly of the Republic of Serbia decides to proclaim military*

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<sup>6</sup> Politika, January 14, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. .

*neutrality of the Republic of Serbia vis-à-vis existing military alliances, which implies the possibility of calling a referendum to decide the issue for good.”*

MPs from the Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ were explicitly against the provision and voted down the resolution. MPs from G17 Plus (a part of the ruling DS-DSS coalition at the time) shared their view though discussed the issue with some reserve. And so it happened that “military neutrality” was incorporated in a document dealing with quite a different matter.

No public debate on military neutrality took place at the time. According to Dragan Janjic, columnist for *Politika* daily, the actual opposition that used to be in power at the time never even mentioned a referendum on military neutrality. “It would only be logical to apply the same procedure now that it changed its stance,” says Janjic.<sup>8</sup>

Military and security experts warned at the time that such “neutrality” was internationally invalid since genuine neutrality implies international and bilateral agreements.

### **Reactions to the initiative**

Signatories of the initiative on (anti) NATO referendum – assembled around DSS - have hardly expected so many reactions against their idea. Even Aleksandar Vucic, vice-president of the Serb Progressive Party, avoided backing the initiative by saying, “We have not launched it in the first place, though we take Serbia is a military neutral country.”<sup>9</sup> Ivica Dacic, deputy premier and SPS leader, takes that Serbia should remain military neutral. He points out that this is what he always thought “unlike some signatories of the petition riding on the wings of the

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<sup>8</sup> *Politika*, January 14, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Blic, January 13, 2010.

West and NATO at the time of Slobodan Milosevic and coming to power with their assistance.”<sup>10</sup> Only Serb Radical Party openly supported the initiative.

Commenting the statement by the Serbian Defense Minister, Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Committee for International Relations of Russian Duma, said he hoped it was “only a personal opinion.” Decisions as such should not be made by individuals, ministers included, but by the people and “preferably in a referendum,” he said. He doubts that Serbs would decide in favor of NATO after “the tragedy they went through in 1999” but should they make such a decision nevertheless, Russia would respect it, said Kosachev. Asked about the effect such a decision would have on Serbia-Russia relations, he replied, “These relations would aggravate to some extent, surely. That’s unavoidable.”<sup>11</sup>

Dusan Petrovic, DS deputy president, takes that what really motivated signatories of the “petition 200” and their shadow mentor (DSS) was their “lack of courage to call for a referendum against EU accession.” Hence, DSS raises hue and cry against some imaginary membership of NATO.”<sup>12</sup>

Membership of NATO has become a topic now discussed openly and without prejudice. Zoran Dragisic, program director of the International Institute of Security, says in 2009 his organization held a series of conferences throughout Serbia under the common title “Serbia With Powerful Allies or Neutral?” The conferences were meant to inform citizens about NATO and present reasons why Serbia should join its membership. No opponent to Serbia’s membership of NATO would accept the invitation to partake in conferences. However, representatives of the Ministry of Defense were among the participants.

“Being soldiers, they were not raising political issues but only making no bones about the fact that the army can get reformed in two ways only: by NATO standards or in a wrong way,” says Dragisic.<sup>13</sup>

As things stand now, a large majority of citizens of Serbia opposes NATO membership. Findings of a survey conducted by Strategic Marketing showed that over 50 percent of respondents are against the Alliance, while only some 20-odd percent would vote for it.<sup>14</sup> Summing up the interviews with several public figures (Ninoslav Krstic, retired general, Vuk Draskovic, SPO leader, and Zoran Dragisic, professor at the Faculty of Security), Glas Javnosti and Kurir dailies conclude that “appealing to public opinion at this moment would leave Serbia out of the military-political alliance and thus deprive it of the opportunity to become a leading military power in the region.”<sup>15</sup>

Resentment for NATO has been deliberately generated by the anti-West block over past years. “NATO bombarded us” and “NATO snatched away Kosovo from us” are their main arguments. Military analyst Aleksandar Radic says, “The referendum initiative is a cheap manipulation of public opinion and citizens’ emotions by the same people who have imposed military neutrality on us.” For him, the topic itself is too specialized to be discussed emotionally and, therefore, needs to be preceded by “public education.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Press, January 13, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> IPolitika, January 13, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Press, 13. januar 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Politika, January 13, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Blic, January 13, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Glas Javnosti, Kurir, January 15, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Kurir, January 14, 2010.



In his regular column for *Danas* daily writer Svetislav Basara says that “penchant for lawlessness,” “buddy-buddy dealings” and “settling the matters on Cosic’s divan” are major driving forces behind the petition. “The initiative is a swan song of the conceited clerk from Belanovica and fully in concert with his conceptual-psychopathological policy...He tries at all costs to revive the model by which the reality, the future and history are shaped in referendums and by decrees...They are all frightened with good reason at the thought that, at long last, decisions in this country would be made after rational analyses and realistic political calculation.”<sup>17</sup>

Officials from the political elite in power are more and more outspoken about rational arguments on which Serbia should build its strategy for Euro-Atlantic integrations, a goal set back in 2000.

According to *Danas* daily, apart from LDP that openly advocates for NATO, most parties of the ruling coalition are in favor of Serbia’s membership of the Alliance.<sup>18</sup> Parties on the list are G17 Plus, SPO, League of Vojvodina Social Democrats /LSV/, Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians /SVM/ and Bosniak parties. Officially, the Democratic

Party sticks to the stance that the time is not ripe yet for NATO membership debate – and the decision on it, once “the moment comes,” will be made in a referendum.

### **Resolution on Srebrenica before the Parliament (at long last)**

In the context of the government’s advance towards Euro-Atlantic integrations – implying respect for some moral norms in the long run – President Tadic initiated a resolution on Srebrenica to be adopted by the Serbian parliament. He said that was Serbia’s obligation towards ICTY, though adding he was aware the idea would not be exactly welcome either in Serbia or in Republika Srpska.<sup>19</sup>

The first initiative for a resolution on Srebrenica to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide was launched by a group of non-governmental organizations<sup>20</sup>. This initiative has never been placed on the agenda due to balance of powers in the Serbian parliament: in the meantime, though, the International Court of Justice ruled that Serbia was responsible for not preventing the genocide (2007) and the European Parliament adopted the declaration whereby July 11 was proclaimed the Day of Srebrenica (2009).

Boris Tadic’s initiative testified once again that the society, and Serbia’s elite in particular, were not ready yet to probe into the recent past. First negative reactions to this initiative were grounded on the argument that Srebrenica victims were not “an exception” and the others, particularly Serb victims, deserved to be paid the same homage. Soon after, another initiative was launched – a resolution on

<sup>17</sup> *Danas*, January 15, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> *Danas*, January 15, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> *Danas*, January 16, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Women in Black, YUCOM, Humanitarian Law Center, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Youth Initiative for Human Rights, Civic Initiatives, Center for Cultural Decontamination and Belgrade Circle.

innocent Serb victims of the past wars in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia.

Vojislav Kostunica, DSS leader, opposes adoption of two documents. That would “segregate innocent victims,” he argues, whereas “people are morally obliged to pay equal homage to all innocent victims.”<sup>21</sup> Milorad Vucelic, editor-in-chief of *Pečat* magazine and one of signatories of the initiative by “200 intellectuals,” vehemently argues that simultaneous adoption of two resolutions would segregate victims by their ethnic origin. “For Serbia’s regime the Srebrenica resolution is a proper one, while the other one focusing Serb victims is sporadic, enforced and conciliatory. Muslim victims of Srebrenica will be sanctified and privileged, they will get a resolution of their own, and then the other resolution will condemn ‘those crimes’ committed against Serbs,” says Vucelic.<sup>22</sup>

According to some news stories, the parliamentary resolution on Srebrenica will bypass the term “genocide.” In response, Cedomir Jovanovic, LDP leader, said his party would not vote for the resolution unless it properly named the Srebrenica massacre. “Any debate would be pointless unless focused on a text that just and clear-cut. A pointless debate would only prove that we are incapable of breaking with the policy leading to ICJ’s ruling about Serbia’s responsibility for not preventing the genocide and punishing culprits,” said Jovanovic.<sup>23</sup>

All these reactions forced President Tadic to take a clear stance. According to him, adoption of two resolutions would be only proper. “In that way we neither equalize nor compare victims. Anyone trying to do that must be lost in political and ethic space,” he said.<sup>24</sup>

Latest public opinion polls (conducted by Strategic Marketing) indicate a major progress in public

perception – 43.32 percent of citizens take that the parliament should adopt a resolution on Srebrenica, while some 25 percent says the opposite (31.84 percent are undecided).<sup>25</sup>



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<sup>21</sup> Kurir, January 14, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Pečat, 15. januar.

<sup>23</sup> Danas, 16. januar 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Prema Danas, 16. januar 2010.

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<sup>25</sup> Blic, 14. januar 2010.

In 2009, Serbia made a crucial step towards defining its future as a European country. The measures taken by the Serbian government opened the avenues to Europe. All this provoked negative response by a part of Serbia's elite that vehemently defends its standing by sticking to the Greater Serbia project. Its resistance is above all mirrored in the attitude towards NATO membership, interpretation of the recent past and advocacy for status quo in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Expert circles back Serbia's membership of NATO without reservations – and so does a part of the public opinion aware of the option's rationality. Reactions to the referendum initiative testify that public opinion shifts towards Euro-Atlantic integrations and indicate the need for thorough public information about the character of NATO and the significance of Serbia's incorporation into collective security system.

The media were rather captured by the appeal for calling of a referendum. At the same time, the appeal provoked a debate the predominant tones of which hardly play into the hands of petition signatories. All newspapers, including tabloids, were more focused on the figures deliberating the issue of NATO membership rationally and soberly. This leads to the conclusion that “the moment of big change” affected most citizens more than expected – i.e. that some processes in Serbia's strategic orientation are moving in the right direction.

On the other hand, President Tadic's initiative for the adoption of a resolution on Srebrenica activated both emotions and debate manifesting small progress in the society. Srebrenica will probably be denied and relativized for long. Serbia's elite are not

ready yet to responsibly discuss the recent past.



