

HELSINKI Bulletin



Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia

Rige od Fere str. #20, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia
tel./fax +381 11 30 32 408; e-mail office@helsinki.org.rs
www.helsinki.org.rs

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Serbia and the World in 2009: Still Standing at a Crucial Juncture

Having applied for EU candidacy (in late 2009), the Serbian government made the first real breakthrough in its proclaimed EU-oriented policy that can not be revoked. Besides, the EU annual report was mostly affirmative for Serbia, the EU also unfroze the Transitional Trade Agreement with it, whereas Serbia met the preconditions for the white Schengen visa regime. Taking all this into consideration, it could be said that the year 2009 was more fruitful than the years before at least from the angle of EU integration processes.



Boris Tadic

Serbia's application for EU candidacy is more than a symbolic act: the decision itself is telling enough of the country's strategic course. And, as

such it removes the dilemma of Serbia's willingness to join Euro-Atlantic integrations. However, the dilemma still remains in Serbia's predominant political and intellectual circles antagonizing the West and Europe. Playing on its huge influence on the public sphere and the support from a considerable part of the media, this conservative bloc insists on the country's geostrategic orientation that does not imply the stance about "Europe without an alternative."

Serbian President Boris Tadic himself warned about the threats to pro-European policy and the fact that Serbia's course towards Europe could not be treated yet as irreversible. "Serbia has not yet crossed the critical line after which the processes of democratization, institutionalization and modernization are irrevocable," he said.¹ On the same occasion (at a round table on Serbia's European prospects, organized by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation) he

¹ Danas, January 27, 2010.

warned of the threat of “Serbia’s reversal.”²

Stalling off Kosovo’s inter-national recognition (65 states have recognized Kosovo’s independence up to now) was on the top of Serbia’s foreign policy agenda in 2009 too. Among other things, recognition of Kosovo was used as a pretext for very bad relations with neighboring countries, Croatia and Montenegro in the first place. Relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sarajevo) were scarred by Serbia’s aspirations for Republika Srpska that are also mirrored in its overemphasized closeness with the entity’s highest official, Milorad Dodik.

Factors influencing Serbia’s behavior at the international scene

Several crucial factors need to be taken into consideration when discussing Serbia’s foreign policy course and its diplomatic actions. First, the effects of the global economic and financial crisis bitterly shocked Serbia’s fragile economy and threatened it with bankruptcy. Second, the new American administration restored the Balkans in the focus of its foreign policy agenda, which resulted in Vice-President Joseph Biden’s tour of Sarajevo, Belgrade and Prishtina in May 2009. Third, the repeated referendum on the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland unblocked the functioning of the European Union, which is more and more aware that the stability of the Western Balkans is a major element of continental stability.

The overall diplomatic activity was more diversified than in 2009 and not only in the matter of Kosovo. In the attempt to avoid the country’s socioeconomic collapse, Serbian diplomacy knocked at many doors – from Washington, through Moscow to Beijing. To all appearances, the effect

of such endeavor was smaller than expected (with the exception of the three-million-dollar loan arrangement for budgetary support with IMF). The announced one-billion-dollar credit from Russia is still uncertain and rather disputable. The same amount, expected from business arrangements with China, ended up in a blurred contract on a bridge construction in Belgrade, which far from met the high hopes from Chinese engagement in domestic economy.

Turkey’s more active approach to “Balkan affairs” is a new and major foreign policy factor. In 2009 Turkish President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Davatoglu paid visits to Serbia (Minister Davatoglu visited Sandzak on the same occasion). Intensified tripartite meetings of foreign ministers of Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in late 2009 (they met six times in the period September 2009 – February 2010) indicated Ankara’s intention to be more involved in settlement of potential crises in the Balkans – in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first place, but also in Sandzak – and to contribute to regional stability more than before.



Boris Tadic and Abdullah Gül

Serbia’s relations with the United States – most developed in the domain of military cooperation – improved after the visit by US Vice-President Joseph Biden though both sides agreed that they “disagree” on a key issue: Kosovo.

Though Russian President Dmitry Medvedev paid a visit to Serbia (October 20, 2009) bilateral relations are not that close as they

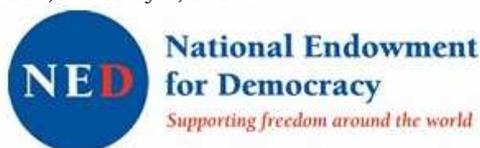
² Ibid.

were at the time of Vojislav Kostunica's premiership. No doubt that Moscow needs Serbia in the context of its geostrategic interests in Europe. However, seriously affected by the global crisis, Russia needs to reset its relations with the United States and the European Union. NATO will remain a watershed in Moscow-Belgrade relationship. Moscow messaged via its permanent representative to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, that it would recognize Kosovo should Serbia join the Alliance.³

Attitude towards Kosovo

Kosovo still crucially determines Serbia's foreign policy and diplomatic actions. The debate on the legality of Kosovo's independence declaration before the International Court of Justice (November 2009) was yet another in the series of Serbia's diplomatic actions to block international recognition of Prishtina and renew Kosovo status negotiations. According to some analysts, Serbia will use the autumn 2010 session of the UN General Assembly for the same purpose: it will try to impose adoption of a resolution calling on Kosovo to renew the status negotiations. (The strategy itself veils the plan for placing Kosovo's partition on the negotiating table under euphemistic slogan, "one side could not possibly get everything, while the other losses everything.") Milorad Dodik also joined the lobbying for Kosovo's partition. "Partition of Kosovo is the only long-term and lasting solution that benefits Albanians as well," he messaged from Republika Srpska. "Serbia cannot afford to be hostage

³ Blic, February 6, 2010.



to Kosovo for another 50 years. Serbia needs a satisfaction to be able to say, 'OK, we agree.'⁴

In the months to come, relations with Brussels will be seriously tested on the issue of Kosovo. Though EU does not formally stand behind the plan for North Kosovo's integration into Prishtina's legal system, developed by Chief of Civil International Office Peter Feith and the International Management Group, major European countries obviously side with this segment of Martii Ahtisaari plan. This is evident in the intensified West European diplomatic campaign calling on Belgrade to find ways and means for communication with Prishtina with a view to solving economic and social problems plaguing Kosovo Albanians and Serbs alike.



Milorad Dodik

Points of dispute with EU

Serbia is still standing at a critical juncture of its course towards Europe. Though ITCY Chief Prosecutor Serge Brammertz submitted an affirmative report on Serbia in late 2009, the arrest of Ratko Mladic remains the biggest stumbling block, notably in the way of Serbia's EU candidacy. Serbia has not yet arrested and extradited Ratko Mladic indicted of the Srebrenica genocide (to all appearances, Belgrade kept promising to have him arrested throughout 2009), whereas an offensive by "patriotic forces" practically turned the parliamentary

⁴ Tanjug, March 13, 2010.

debate on a Srebrenica resolution meaningless. Belgrade again began treating its neighbors with arrogance and paternalism. At the international scene it often deviated from the common EU foreign policy (when it came to third countries).

Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic's arrogance and aggressiveness growingly weight Serbia's diplomatic actions. Though allegedly ensuring him high ratings at home (he is almost as popular as President Tadic)⁵ and unequivocal support from the nationalistic-conservative bloc and its political promoters (from Democratic Party of Serbia led by Vojislav Kostunica in whose cabinet he got his first portfolio), an attitude as such is a bigger and bigger factor of limitation in international communication.

Croatian Premier Ivo Sanader conditioned his visit to Belgrade with Jeremic's exclusion from Serbia's official delegation. US Vice-President Joseph Biden had the same request. After the scandal with the luxurious apartment for Ambassador to UNESCO Zorica Tomic whom Jeremic called "probably the best and the brightest of all Serbia's ambassadors," his statement that Serbia, if pressed to choose between Kosovo and Europe, would opt for Kosovo inflamed the domestic scene.⁶



Vuk Jeremic

⁵ Ljiljana Smajlovic, president of Journalists' Association of Serbia, in „Impression of the Week“ show aired by TV B92, March 7, 2010.

⁶ Politika, March 4, 2010.

This statement came only a month after a group of major countries – US, Great Britain, Germany, France and Italy – requested him in a demarche to “cool down his Kosovo rhetoric.”⁷ Given that Jeremic handles the Foreign Ministry with the same arrogance – which gives rise to tensions in the institution itself – the word has it for some time now that he will be deposed. However, his deposal depends in the first place on the balance of powers at domestic scene.

In the period to come, Serbia's pro-European option will be on test again, particularly taking into consideration that the conservative bloc, led by Tomislav Nikolic's Progressive Party of Serbia /SNS/ went on an offensive. SNS pave the way to a pro-European strategy of its own and so becomes more and more attractive even to the circles considered faithful to the Democratic Party.

The global recession is still on and it is still disputable when major economies will begin to recuperate. This is not only the biggest crisis affecting the European Monetary Union since 1999 but also the one the banking aspect of which could cause huge problems in South East Europe as well, primarily in Albania, Macedonia and Serbia. Serbia cannot sustain another wave of financial difficulties unless supported by EU and international financial institutions. Otherwise, the government will be faced with expanding, nationwide protests that would only play into the hand of “progressists” and their demands for early parliamentary elections.

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<http://waz.euobserver.com/887/29432?print>

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Therefore, the coalition government – Democratic Party and President Tadic in the first place – need to make fresh advances to attract public support.

In other words, they need to be more straightforward in their pro-European policy rather than stick to the “Serbia is Europe” mantra. They need to stage an efficient campaign to explain to citizens what it is that such policy implies not only in the domain of economy but also that of value system. This is the only way to prevent further dissolution of social fabric and mobilize the society as a whole for a creative vision.



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