

Helsinki *bulletin*



**HELSINKI COMMITTEE
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SERBIA**
address: Rige od Fere 20,
Belgrade, Serbia
tel. +381-11-3032-408; fax. 2639-437;
e-mail: office@helsinki.org.rs
http://www.helsinki.org.rs

No. 65 // JUNE 2010

WEST BALKANS AND EUROPEAN UNION AFTER THE MEETING IN SARAJEVO

The EU – Western Balkans Ministerial Meeting of June 2, 2010 in Sarajevo was a failure in terms of the messages stemming from it. After the Sarajevo meeting the ten-year endeavor to bring the Western Balkans closer to EU looks like a paradox: Europe has never before been farther from the Balkans.

Even though the meeting did not close down the region's perspective for joining the EU, it shifted the accession accent to the requirements for all new members and their "intensified efforts to meet the criteria and agreed conditions on their road to the membership."¹ In other words, the EU has set more rigorous criteria for the SAA process.

The global crisis and difficult economic situation have forced the countries of the region to intensify bilateral relations and commit themselves to joining the European Union. In the last few months West Balkan countries have been emphasizing their readiness to advance mutual cooperation (with the presidents of Serbia and Croatia, Boris Tadic and Ivo Josipovic on top). This included Serbia's consent to sit at the same table with Kosovo.

Besides the obvious economic difficulties all the countries in the region are facing and the fact that EU is their only alternative, the Balkan countries, including Serbia, are more open to the key message from Brussels: regional cooperation. In 2009, Serbia realized that the only reliable support it could rely on came from European funds. Since 2000, out of all the countries in the region, EU has funded Serbia the most. Without the EU support, the consequences of the country's unrestructured economy and the effects of the crisis would have been by far more dramatic.

After the disorders within the Euro zone, EU has favored the argument by some member-states that after Romania's and Bulgaria's accession all other potential candidates should be admitted with more care - not only through slowing down the process of their integration, but also stopping it, at least temporarily. The collapse of the Greek economy and the potential danger of similar scenarios in other "south wing" EU countries (Spain, Portugal, etc.) were the additional arguments against further EU enlargement. Therefore, 27 EU member-states agreed on "fair and rigorous" criteria for potential candidates. Accordingly, warnings to

the Western Balkans were sent even before the meeting in Sarajevo. Miroslav Lajcak, Slovakian Minister of Foreign Affairs, warned the countries of the region that they first “have to do their part of the job,” emphasizing that the best way to do it was “to solve everything that is expected from them.”²

SERBIA'S POSITION

Despite its declarative commitment to European agenda, the “post-October” regime has done little for it in the past decade. Serbia has missed all significant opportunities opened to it, aware that EU would be come to its rescue should it cooperate the ICTY and manifest constructive approach to the Kosovo status issue. Late Prime Minister Djindjic was fully aware of these possibilities, but after his assassination Vojislav Kostunica's cabinet has kept the European integration process on thin ice for the next five years. After early Parliament elections in 2008, the pro-European block has accomplished some results – adopted a number of pro-European laws, extradited Radovan Karadzic, obtained the “white visa regime,” begun implementing SAA unilaterally and applied for EU candidacy. However, many crucial issues are still left intact – non-implementation of adopted laws, monopolies, system corruption, weak institutions, late judicial reform, and many more.

The biggest obstacle to more decisive step forward is the duality of strategic priorities expressed in the slogan “Both Kosovo and Europe.” The country's foreign policy and diplomatic activity aimed at obstructing further recognition of Kosovo independence, i.e. denying regional realities, aggravated bilateral relations with almost all neighbors. In addition, Serbia's “sponsorship” of Republic of Srpska stemming from unabated territorial aspirations towards

Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraged this Bosnian entity to obstruct constitutional changes that would have turned Bosnia and Herzegovina into a functional state and move it closer to Euro-Atlantic integrations.

Boris Tadic's absence from the summit meeting at Brdo Castle near Kranj, organized by Slovenia and Croatia, was a culmination of ignoring of the regional approach on which EU insists. After this fiasco suffered by Serbia's diplomacy, additional pressure was made on it through Turkish mediation in the first place. It was only then that intense resetting of regional relations begun. Along with frequent meetings with Croatian President Ivo Josipovic, Boris Tadic made the most important step forward when he went to Istanbul to meet Chairman of the Bosnian Presidium Haris Silajdzic and Turkish President Abdullah Gul, and sign the Istanbul Declaration. That, as well as the adoption of Declaration on Srebrenica by the Serbian parliament (an act also initiated by Boris Tadic), considerably relaxed the relations between Sarajevo and Belgrade. Dodik strongly reacted to Belgrade's “change of heart.” Nevertheless, Tadic-Dodik tandem are still crucial for relation within Serb ethnic corps.

The change in rhetoric and more constructive attitude will not free Belgrade from “fair and rigorous conditions” for EU candidacy. In addition to extradition of Ratko Mladic, as “the condition of all conditions,” the focus has now shifted to Kosovo. Influential international factors are more frequently calling Belgrade to start a dialogue with Pristina on unresolved problems. Ambassadors of Sweden and Great Britain were quite explicit about it.

Ambassador of Great Britain Steven Wordsworth said, “For EU as a whole, the existence of Kosovo is a reality. All 27 member-states voted for Kosovo's European perspective, and one in Brussels would say that

Kosovo could simply vanish tomorrow.”³ He also confirmed that Kosovo and EU integrations were not separate matters any more and that there would be no new rounds of negotiations after the ruling of the International Court of Justice on the legality of Kosovo independence. He emphasized that “no one in EU wants new negotiations” because such process would be “an empty gesture involving continued confrontation between Serbia and 22 EU member-states.”⁴

So far, no major member-state advocates a candidacy status for Serbia. Before the meeting in Sarajevo, a reserved attitude towards Serbia and other Western Balkan countries was expressed in Berlin. The media speculated about the cold reception given to Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremic and the too brief meeting he had with his German counterpart.⁵ In addition, Germany sent the message to the Balkans by not sending its Foreign Minister to the Sarajevo summit. There are some indications that the pressure on Belgrade will grow this autumn, especially considering the behavior of Minister Jeremic.

EUROPEAN “GREEK EXPERIENCE”

Because of the problems notably manifest in weakened Euro at the international monetary market, Brussels is seriously revising its options in order to find strategic answers to the crisis. The enlargement policy vis-à-vis the South-Eastern part of the continent is also a part of its search for a new paradigm. The enlargement itself is not questioned – rather, Brussels insists on potential candidates’ suitability, notably economic. The Copenhagen criteria have been revalued, and it is obvious that the economic strengths and democratic potentials will be crucial in deciding on individual candidates (to all appearances, the idea about

admitting Western Balkans “in a package” is no longer valid).

The new approach to EU accession emphasizes the advantages for EU from new memberships, since, as the British Ambassador Eordsworth put it, “Each country that wants to become a member will have to demonstrate that it is truly ready for it.”⁶ Each candidate will have to offer convincing arguments to EU leaders, citizens and parliaments, testifying that “the Union will truly be better off and stronger with a new member.”⁷ That was the essential lesson EU learned from the “Greek experience” – Greece has lived better on mutual funds than the countries that contributed the most to these funds (for instance, the pensions in Greece are almost 3 times higher than in Germany, and much higher than in UK).

Even though EU is not giving up the integration of Western Balkans, the lesson from Sarajevo boils down to the following: cooperation between the countries of the region, and fulfillment of the criteria clearly marked in the Union documents are the fastest road to joining EU. The responsibility for the success should be taken by every country individually, but through the regional cooperation and collaboration with EU. EU will be paying more attention to Western Balkans until those countries are completely and irrevocably on their path toward EU membership.⁸

New British Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs William Hague was clear on the matter by emphasizing that EU had to be coherent when assigning the conditions and rewarding genuine progress. He said, “From our point of view, this region has to fulfill the required conditions, not to ask the conditions to be changed according to the region.”

CONSERVATIVE BLOCK REACTIONS

Most of the Serbian media is interpreting the outcome of the Sarajevo meeting as the end of the European perspective for the Balkans. According to some, Brussels is closing its doors to Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, and Turkey.¹⁰

Serbian anti-European bloc has interpreted a sudden change of approach and rhetoric as a certain personal satisfaction and realization of their constant warnings. They have always defended their anti-European and anti-modern orientation with a necessity that "Europe must have an alternative." The incumbent government's euro-enthusiasm has been criticized through objecting "always new conditions posed to Serbia." The bloc kept stressing the need for the country turn towards the East and rely on its own strength, especially because the uncertain future of the Union.

Slobodan Antonic, a commentator, takes that the emphasis on Serbia's obligations is supposed to veil "a lack of enthusiasm within EU, mainly in Germany and Great Britain for Serbia's EU admission." "11 Djordje Vukadinovic thinks that the West's present policy is the one allowing "Serbia to make only small steps towards EU under the condition that it makes big ones towards recognition of Kosovo independence."¹² Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik said after the Sarajevo meeting that a new approach and policy for EU should be developed.¹³

Commenting that the intensified regional cooperation was imposed from the outside, from Brussels and Washington, columnist for "Kurir" Zeljko Cvijanovic says that ongoing reconciliation is "benefits others more than us."¹⁴

In spite of expectations to open a new chapter considering the relations between the EU

and West Balkan countries, ministerial meeting in Sarajevo proved that EU lacks a clearly defined strategy for supporting the process of EU accession.

During last decade all West Balkan countries have been significantly progressing in reform programs, and achieved considerable results in the implementation of the priorities of the Thessalonica agenda and European partnerships. EU dedication to European future of the region has contributed to a successful establishment of regional cooperation, democratization and development of each country, as well as strengthening of the stability of the West Balkans region.

The governments in the region have proved their ability to make progress when conditions are well defined, transparent and measurable, as in the case of visa regime liberalization.

However, the Zagreb Declaration and the Thessalonica Agenda are neither enough for further democracy consolidation in Western Balkans countries nor do they guarantee the continuing implementation of necessary reforms, advancement of regional cooperation, and preservation of hard earned progress in terms of peace and stability.

Only clear-cut EU policies for integration can help Western Balkan countries. The support and assistance to them as they get pave their ways to EU membership should be EU priorities – given that a stable, prosperous and cooperative Western Balkans is in its best interest.

Only clear-cut EU policy can help to strengthen the regional pro-European bloc that as motivation comes only from clearly defined goals. When it comes to Serbia, there is a real danger that anti-European bloc grows stronger on the account of "a lost European perspective."