

Helsinki
bulletin

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THE OPEN 'SERB ISSUE' - A CONSTANT THREAT TO REGIONAL STABILITY

The preconditions for the normalization of relations in the region still have not been attained. Bosnia and Herzegovina is blocked by an internal crisis, which is exacerbated by its surroundings. For Macedonia, the issue with Greece relating to Macedonian state identity (name) is still open, which has slowed down its European Union accession process and has dragged the country into a regressive process. The consequences of this unresolved issue are also reflected onto the region in its entirety. The situation with Kosovo is similar. The opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has confirmed the legality of Kosovo's independence, but Serbia is looking for a parallel in the case of Republika Srpska. Dick Marty's report on the human organ trade has significantly damaged the reputation of the Kosovo state (at least temporarily) and has additionally slowed down the process of its recognition by other states. With regards to Montenegrins, their autonomous identity is being denied. In school books, they are treated as part of the Serbian people and it is stressed that they have obtained statehood through the struggle against the Turks, which has had a major impact on them declaring their nationhood in the

20th century, thus dividing the Serb national being into two unequal parts.¹

STATE STRATEGY – A NEW ATTEMPT

Serbia has not given up its patron role over its neighbors. For this, they continuously instrumentalize Serbs in neighboring states by constantly playing on the theses (reflecting the text of the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences) about their alleged jeopardization. The direct trigger for stirring up the matrix of 'jeopardization' is the upcoming population census which will be carried out in all the countries in the region during 2011.

The thesis about 'jeopardization' has been developed in detail in the Strategy for the preservation and the strengthening of relations between the homeland and Serbs in the region². This document, which was adopted by the Government in January 2011, was being prepared for nearly two years. This task has brought together numerous experts, but also around 30 Non-Governmental Organizations

¹ Danas, March 4, 2011

² <http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/dokumenti/sekcija.php?id=45678>.

(NGOs).³ In addition to the Serbs in the region, all Ministries of the Government have given their opinions. Among them, there are a couple of young historians such as Cedomir Antic and Predrag Markovic, but also Zivadin Jovanovic, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the time of Slobodan Milošević.⁴

Cedomir Antic maintains that only in the case of Republika Srpska, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the status question of Serbs is well resolved as compared to other countries in the region. However, he feels that this is 'the only state entity in Europe which is under constant pressure', which the EU and the US want to abolish. Serbs in the Bosnian Federation, he stresses, do not enjoy even a portion of the rights and influence of Bosniaks in Serbia. He also feels that Serbs in Croatia do not have full rights which are guaranteed by the state of Croatia. Antic emphasizes that there is a campaign against the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in Montenegro, and that the Montenegrin state wants to suppress the Serbian language. In his view, Serbs in Macedonia do not have the right to religious freedom; they do not have the status of a national minority in Slovenia...'⁵

On occasion of the adoption of the Strategy, Srdjan Sreckovic, Minister of the Diaspora in Serbia's Government, has stated that 'a new era of relationships between the state of Serbia and Serbs abroad has been opened: Serbia's Government and the authorities have demonstrated that they are prepared to create institutional mechanisms for formulating a new, responsible and long-term policy and that is why this law is the basis of creating partner relations, which will, in economic, political and cultural terms, serve the benefit of everyone – both to

Serbia and to any man, wherever he may live'. The Strategy states that there are 2,120,000 Serbs in the region, which is more than a quarter of Serbia's population. Most of them live in Republika Srpska – around 1,1 million; there are roughly 200,000 Serbs in Croatia and Montenegro each.

REACTIONS OF NEIGHBORS

Throughout the region, the Strategy was received with distrust because it is primarily focused on concrete forms of 'concern' about the Serbian people, which reminisces of the concern for the wellbeing of Serbs stated in the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, which has initiated the war in Croatia, and then in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the Strategy is relying on Serbia's policy towards the region, which is either not accepting the new reality, or is marginalizing it. This is evident based on the modest scope of reciprocal relations in spite of contacts on a high political level.

This attitude of Belgrade towards neighboring Serbs is harmful to their status in the new states, a status which was being obtained with patience and for a long time. The Serbs in Croatia were the first to distance themselves from Belgrade's strategy (Slobodan Uzelac, Vice President of Croatia's Government), and they have, not without cynicism, asked of Serbia to discontinue 'helping' them.

The strongest reactions came from Montenegro. Drasko Djuranovic, the editor in chief of the portal 'Analitika', states that official Belgrade has, for the first time after the ousting of Milošević, stepped into the zone of interfering with the legal system of neighboring states: 'Thus, the former slogan of Milošević 'All Serbs in one state' mysteriously transformed into some sort of remake by Tadić, something on

3 Politika, March 18, 2011

4 'Serbs, unprotected in Serbia and abroad', Vreme, February 17, 2011

5 Ibid.

the lines of: 'More states and Serbs in charge'.⁶ Montenegro's Government has sent an official demarche, stressing that the Strategy represents direct interference into Montenegro's internal affairs and that it is in 'total opposition to the basic principles of good neighborly relations'.⁷

In the meantime, Serbia's Government has erased from the Strategy the request of constitutiveness for the Serb community in Croatia and Montenegro. Vuk Draskovic, the leader of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) has distanced himself from the Strategy; whereas Srdjan Sreckovic, a member of the SPO party, is also the incumbent Minister for Diaspora. Draskovic has stated that this document is 'in line with Milošević's policy' and that Minister Sreckovic 'should not have proposed such a text to the Government'.⁸

(WHAT IS) THE BACKGROUND?

The 'Serb issue' is constantly present, and Belgrade is using every opportunity to 'deliver' it in a new form. However, due to vociferous reactions from the region, this latest attempt has failed. This does not mean that the conservative-nationalist block has given up on the idea. The Strategy's authors have responded to the Governments ceding and making concessions, and *Vecernje novosti* maintain that the Governments conduct has caused a 'wave of discontent' among political representatives of Serbs, not only in Montenegro, but also in 'other states in the region'.

Predrag Markovic, one of the Strategy's authors, says that by this document, Serbia has, for the first time, demonstrated that it has a

concrete plan for caring for its people outside its own borders and that 'this is why this decision of Serbia's Government is inexplicable'. He has stressed that it is absurd that 'the very state which has recognized Kosovo accused us of interfering into its constitutional system'⁹. Cedomir Antic, on the other hand, feels that the abandonment of some elements in the Strategy has 'created an (unfavorable) image about the Republic of Serbia' and that it is 'odd that someone can change their opinion twice in such a short time... We already have a range of humiliations with the 'yellow house', with Purda, with Divjak. This is also one of them. Our state is acting as if it fell from Mars straight onto the Balkans'.¹⁰

Regardless of the fact that the most contentious part of the Strategy (about the constitutive status of the Serbian people in Croatia and Montenegro) has been deleted, the renewal of an increased concern about Serbs in the region is part of a planned tactic stemming from the national project which hasn't been given up on. After the joint resolution with the EU on Kosovo at the UN General Assembly in 2010, Serbia has given up on defending its former southern province 'with all means'. The opening of the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade in March 2011 practically represents the beginning of gradual acceptance of reality with regards to Kosovo.

However, compensation is still expected in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has always been more important than Kosovo to the architects of the national project. This refers to the tendency that the state should expand to the northwest of the Balkans, in the case a 'historic agreement' with the Albanians is made, as they are hoping; which would imply Serbia's giving up on Kosovo, with eventual border

⁶ According to Danas, March 4, 2011

⁷ Politika, March 11, 2011

⁸ Politika, March 12, 2011

⁹ Vecernje novosti, March 14, 2011

¹⁰ Politika, March 23, 2011

corrections in the north (by adjoining the area north of the river Ibar to Serbia).

The second circumstance they are counting on is the opinion of the International Court of Justice about the legality of Kosovo's declaration of independence and the 'paralellism' which, according to the interpretation by Serbia's elite, is applicable to Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fact that the ICJ opinion explicitly states that there is no such paralellism is purposely being elided, in addition to the prevailing opinion that 'it is still unclear what will happen to the entire region because the borders are still not definitive'.

Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska, has formulated most openly the direction to which official policy of Belgrade should turn, should the circumstances allow it. Namely, Dodik uses every opportunity to deny the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state, which can function while receiving infusions from outside and creating an illusion of democracy.¹¹ He has stressed that for Serbs, Bosnia is an obligation, something that they would like to shake off like a weight off their shoulders.¹² Dodik's interpretation comes down to the fact that 'we (Serbs) want to clearly establish our rights so that in a potential situation in the future we can behave in the same way as the Albanians are behaving now. We must be patient and pay the price of the time we live in. In this time, we need to live for [Republika] Srpska and build it'¹³.

It is indicative, however, that this construction is getting a new 'foundation' which rests on the thesis that Republika Srpska is not only one of two equal entities making up Bosnia and Herzegovina, but that it has brought its statehood (acquired in war) into Bosnia and Herzegovina.

11 Vecernje novosti, July 28, 2010

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

This thesis, which is being launched by Dodik, amongst others, is shaping up in Belgrade more and more precisely. Historian Cedomir Antic claims that the 'Croatian model of national autonomy has been applied in totality' in Republika Srpska in the early 1990s.¹⁴

Special ties between Serbia and Republika Srpska are becoming more and more intertwined and solid. Apart from the fact that they are the basis of economic and cultural relations, they have recently taken on a specific political dimension. In Banja Luka, a joint session of the Governments of Serbia and Republika Srpska has been held in Banja Luka for the first time, which is considered inappropriate conduct by the standards of international relations and the international practice. Joint sessions have been announced to be held in the future as well; whereas there has not been a response by anyone from the international community to this.

MANIPULATING THE PROSECUTION FOR WAR CRIMES AND REFUGEES

Regardless of some relevant accomplishments, the regional cooperation on the level of war crimes prosecutions has not yet been able to build relations on a firm basis of trust and mutual appreciation. The cases of Ganic, Jurisic, Purda, Divjak, and the 'yellow house' imply that the Serbian war crimes prosecution has harmed its own credibility by such conduct, because there is a growing distrust of the Serbian judiciary; which will have a big impact on future cooperation and willingness of certain witnesses to testify before courts in Serbia.

Belgrade has transferred the 'summing up' of the 'truth' about the wars in the 1990s to the legal court as well, in order to concretely illustrate that it was a civil war, in which the

14 Vreme, February 17, 2011

Bosnians and the Croats have initiated the conflict with the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA).

All cases are far fetched because numerous adjudications in the Hague Tribunal have already presented a reliable framework and timeline of war events. These cases are aimed at relativizing responsibility; however, this strategy of Belgrade has proven to be transparent and unsuccessful, because, in all the stated cases, confessions were extorted (Purda), or there were situations resulting from tensions created by the JNA and the Serb forces ('Dobrovoljacka ulica' and 'Tuzlanska kolona').

By such conduct, the Serbian War Crimes Prosecution has harmed its own credibility, because the region is growing to be distrustful of Serbia's judiciary, which will have a large impact on cooperation in the future and the willingness of certain witnesses to testify before courts in Serbia.

Serbia's Government has adopted the National Strategy for Resolving the Issue of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons for the period of 2011 to 2014. One of the Strategy's main priorities is the promotion of the necessary conditions for the safe and dignified return of refugees to the Republic of Croatia and to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the institutional mechanisms for the exercise of acquired rights in countries of origin in their entirety and up-to date.¹⁵

The question of refugees has played a significant role in the resolution of the 'Serb national issue' From the very beginning of the war, the inflow of Serbs was being encouraged, firstly from Croatia and then from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and they were being granted refugee status, which was supposed to prove that 'living together is not possible'; The expulsion

15 http://www.srbija.gov.rs/vesti/dokumenti_sekcija.php?id=45678.

of all non-Serbs from areas which have been proclaimed as ethnic Serb territories was part of the same strategy. Both the opposition and Milošević's regime consented on preventing the return of refugees, because they have served as an instrument in the consolidation of the ethnic Serb space - Republika Srpska and part of Croatia (which they have given up on later on); which would satisfy the aspiration of Serb nationalists (at least one part of them) for 'moving' the country to the northwest. In this case, Kosovo could be divided with the Albanians based on the model of territorial division in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina: therefore, by large 'population transfers'.

In the past two decades, Belgrade's policy towards refugees was their integration into Serbia, especially in areas which are pronouncedly multiethnic, such as Vojvodina. The refugees were populated in the north of Vojvodina, along the border with Croatia, as well as in some places which were pronouncedly inhabited by certain minorities (Slovaks in Stara Pazova), Zemun and Zemun Polje... Attempts to inhabit the depopulated areas in inner Serbia have failed. The issue of return was not a priority, except for the function of denouncing neighboring countries, especially Croatia's accession to the EU. Initiating a petition by refugee organizations in Serbia also serves the purpose of slowing down Croatia's future membership in the EU.

With regards to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the return was only encouraged in the case of Republika Srpska in the context of its ethnic consolidation, because part of its territory was inhabited by a majority of Muslim population before the war.

One of the goals, as defined at the roundtable 'Serbian people in the new geopolitical reality' (1997), (...) The greatest danger for the survival and prosperity of Republika Srpska is the

Annex 7 of the Dayton Agreement, that is, the Agreement on Refugees and Displaced Persons (...) From the point of view of Serbian national interests, this agreement is a two-bladed sword. Republika Srpska is losing its cohesive power by its implementation, and the role of those

forces which are molding Republika Srpska into a unified state of Bosnia and Herzegovina is growing stronger; and, what is worse, the interests of the Serbian people are being subordinated to the interests of the Muslims.¹⁶

SUMMARY

Serbia has not given up on its regional aspirations, it has merely reformulated them into new initiatives (refugees, the so-called diaspora and the war crimes trials), which places the region into a very unfavorable position with regards to Euro-Atlantic integrations.

In spite of international efforts to settle the Balkan architecture by Kosovo's independence, Serbia still aspires to a recomposition of the Balkans, and this is demonstrated by its policy towards its neighbors.

Serbia is a fragile and non-consolidated country, which means that, on its own, it does not have the capacities to accomplish its aspirations, because they necessarily lead to new conflicts. Serbia's tendencies enjoy Russia's support, without which it could not hold this course.

Serbia is subsisting on defeated policy, because the EU has never defined its attitude towards the region entirely. There is an illusion that all countries are welcome in the EU, however, in reality, due to the EU's internal problems and an increasingly turbulent international situation, it is increasingly evident that EU membership of the Western Balkans countries has been postponed for the time being.

This stance towards the region creates a favorable atmosphere for maintaining illusions about greater-state projects. In order to prevent the further deterioration of the region and its regression, it is necessary for the EU to reach a political decision about granting candidate status to all Western Balkans countries. This would create a new political context for the region, whereas the issue of greater-state creation would lose its significance.

16 Rajko Gnjato, Geopolitical Reality of the Serbs, Institute for Geopolitical Studies, Belgrade, 1997.