

Helsinki *bulletin*



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RUSSIA: A MYTHICAL ALLY



Russian Premier Vladimir Putin's brief visit to Belgrade (March 23, 2011) brutally exposed the irrationality and disorientation of Serbia's foreign policy. Though the visit itself was unofficial, the manifestations of "worship" for Putin – in public and in the media – came as a surprise even to Russian reporters is his suite. Servility and humbleness showered on the practically "self-invited" guest, as some sources

claimed, and meant to neutralize Moscow's month-long grudge, bordered on kitsch and bad taste. Occasionally everything was even self-humiliating – as in the case of football fans at the Red Star stadium, hurraing the Russian Premier while throwing insults at their own President by the end of the visit and in the face of Serbian Premier Mirko Cvetkovic.

In Serbia, the Russian Premier is the most popular foreign statesman. For more than five years the image built for him has been the one of the staunchest defender of “Serb national interests” at the international arena and, notably, when it comes to Kosovo. His popularity in Serbia rests on the premises about him having “raised Russia to its feet” and restored its international repute, and his “iron-willed” governance. Serbia’s influential, conservative elite skillfully manipulates traditionally popular feelings for “the big brother in the East” to strengthen the myth about Serbia’s natural place in the “east” rather than in the European Union. Historian Latinka Perovic says, “We are unaware of Russia, historically and actually.” The delusion about a special relationship with Russia derives from the fact that Serbia has “turned its back to the time” and “role-plays Cold War,” says Ms. Perovic, adding, “Serbia does not understand that Russia is a big country, which hardly changes its strategic interests (surely not focused on Serbia) with the change of regime.¹ On the occasion of Putin’s visit to Belgrade the media in Britain publicized some diplomatic messages from US Embassy in Belgrade (from the Wikileaks sources): one of them (from 2009) quotes, “Serbia’s persistent belief that its role is the one of a bridge between Russia and EU is being ridiculed in European circles.”²

However, the actual effect of the Russian Premier’s brief stay in Belgrade is pretty limited. The two countries signed three agreements only – on cooperation in the domains of tourism, science and technology and international road traffic. In addition, the city of Belgrade signed an agreement with the Russian “Inter-ao” Company. The agreement on strategic partnership, announced way back and over and over again, will only be signed months from

1 Keynote address at the launch of the Helsinki Charter magazine in Sabac, March 28, 2011.

2 Danas. March 21, 2011.

now in Moscow, during President Boris Tadic’s visit. Of all the promises Putin made the most important is the one about the realization of the South Stream pipeline. In the attempt to neutralize the ongoing dispute with Turkey over the pipeline across its territory Putin promised the startup of the construction for 2013 and finalization for 2015.

Most political analysts in Serbia saw Putin’s brief visit as putting an end to somewhat chilly bilateral relations after UN Resolution on Kosovo in the autumn of 2010. Namely, without Moscow’s knowledge President Tadic changed his mind about “Kosovo resolution” at the eleventh hour and accepted the European Union’s draft. For such a move he received the cold shoulder from Moscow that had always “sided with” Serbia in the case of Kosovo. Referring to the startup of Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, Putin said “the Serbian people have the sovereign right to decide on its affairs.” “Any negotiations are better than conflicts. If anyone asks us to we shall give our support to the process,” he added.³ The Serbian government’s decision not to send an envoy to the American-Balkan Western Balkans Economic Summit in Baltimore (coinciding with Putin’s visit) was interpreted as “making it up to” Moscow.

Referring to Serbia’s movement towards EU, Putin said that Russia would “carefully observe” the process.⁴ However, his visit did not crystallize Russia’s attitude towards Serbia’s Euro-Atlantic integration. In other words, it remained unclear whether this Serbia-Russia high-level dialogue contributed to or blocked Serbia’s anyway slow movement in that direction. On the eve of Putin’s visit some Western diplomats in Belgrade predicted that the visit itself would “boil down to a media spectacle as the authorities will be genuinely trying to present it to the domestic public as a bigger event

3 Politika, March 24, 2011.

4 TV B92, March 23, 2011.

than it actually was, while endeavoring to present it to their international partners as a side story.”⁵

THE RIGHT-WING AND PUTIN’S VISIT

The collective euphoria marking Putin’s half day stay was unprecedented in Belgrade’s welcome to any foreign statesman, including the Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, two years ago. The right-wing “Nasi /Ours/ 1389” organization outdid itself by covering downtown streets and squares with posters with Putin’s portrait and a phrase “Serb IN.” His entourage, his planes, his special vehicle capable of sustaining a smaller atomic bomb (and in which he generously gave a ride to Premier Mirko Cvetkovic, who met him at the airport) – in brief, “an unfaltering mythomania in action”⁶ – only fanned the flames of Putinism. “Delirium” (a term used by a sports reporter for the *Politika* daily) culminated at the Marakana stadium when Putin shortly turned up at the match between the domestic Red Star and Zenith from St. Petersburg (allegedly, his favorite team). Neither Putin nor Mirko Cvetkovic seemed bothered by football fans’ Tchetnik insignia and cries. The fans were cheering Putin as “a Serb” and “a Tchetnik.” “We love you, we love you, Putin!” they cried, sang Russian songs and spread huge posters saying “Help us God, help us Putin,” “Serbia, Russia,” “Kosovo is Serbia’s heart” and “Big brother, kiss our mother and tell her she can be proud of us, that we are fighting and that we love her.” Serbian officials accompanying him were met with “Down with the government,” “We want changes,” “Resign, Boris,” etc. Putin also met with bikers from Nis called “Night Wolves.” Their leader, as he

5 NIN, March 17, 2011.

6 Danas, March 22, 2011.

claimed himself, was a veteran from the Vukovar battlefield.

A Belgrade commentator observed that having returned to Moscow members of the Russian delegation must have asked themselves “should Russia be happy for being loved so much by scum.”⁷ However, other, more influential commentators differently interpreted the visit. For them, it only confirmed the thesis that Serbia, exposed to constant pressure and assigned “ever harder and less and less popular tasks” from the West, should have an alternative to the European Union. The editor-in-chief of the *New Serbian Political Thought* magazine, Djordje Vukadinovic, says, “Though almost completely pro-Western and Euro-philous, the incumbent regime is being exposed to terrible pressure whenever it tries to or at least slightly indicates that it might turn aside from ‘European’ course as it happened, say, last September in the UN General Assembly. New pressures will probably follow Putin’s visit.”⁸

ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Though Serbia and Russia have signed a free trade agreement, the trade between the two countries is rather modest (smaller than the trade with other economic partners from the “four foreign policy pillars” circle, including EU, Russia, US and China). Serbia’s trade deficit with Russia exceeds 1.6 billion dollars. This piece of information sounds the more so dramatic since 21 years ago, in 1990, Serbia’s trade with Russia registered a modest 100-odd-million dollars surplus despite huge imports of oil and gas from Russia at the time.

Two years ago, when Russian President Medvedev was in visit, there was much talk about

7 Radivoj Cvetićanin, *Danas*, March 26-27, 2011.

8 Đorđe Vukadinović, *Politika*, March 29, 2011.

one-billion-Euro/dollar credit from Russia. However, some 800 million dollars were left unspent from the “package” because Serbia failed to develop adequate projects for investment. In the meantime, Russian Gasprom bought out NIS (at astonishingly low price according to many) and now has a monopoly on oil products supplies at Serbia’s market.

Commentators for the *Pecat* magazine hold that Russians would want Serbia to change its attitude towards their capital and to take over some Serb bank, which is in the line with the Russian “energy power geopolitics.” “Russians want to be included in Serbia’s electric power supply industry so as to encourage Serbia to get more integrated into Russian energy-economic-political sphere...Wherever they identify business profit Russians would like to have closer economic ties with Serbia and get involved in all major infrastructural projects (such as railroad reconstruction).”⁹

Before and during Putin’s stay “economy and energetics” were mostly referred to as major topics of bilateral talks. But aside from the phrases such as “huge possibilities” and “bright prospects” the actual effect was rather modest. Vladimir Putin and his associates pledged their word that there were “no problems” with Turkey (with regards to the South Stream pipeline), that the pipeline would be constructed for sure and that the initial supplies of gas were to be expected in Serbia in December 2015.

NATO AND MPS

During his visit to Serbia in 2009 President Dmitry Medvedev promoted the Russian initiative about European collective security. This time, however, neither Putin nor Tadic gave a

⁹ Dragomir Anđelković, *Pecat*, March 25, 2011.

mention to the issues of security and NATO in their public addresses. The question was actually raised by Serbian MPs. The answer to it was that at some point Russian missiles could be turned towards Serbia.

After separate talks with President Tadic and the Serbian governmental delegation the Russian Premier was welcomed at the Serbian Parliament where he met with the leaders of all caucuses. NATO was the main topic on the agenda. Russia supports Serbia’s movement towards EU membership but surely not towards membership of NATO, concluded the meeting.¹⁰ The leaders of parliamentary caucuses interpreted the meeting with Putin, each in his own way. According to Tomislav Nikolic /SNS/, Putin said that Serbia’s membership of EU would be most important given that Serbia would be a tie between Russia and EU, but Serbia’s membership of NATO would be seen as a security threat to Russia.¹¹

The interpretation of Putin and Serbia’s EU integration by the leader of the Serb Radical Party caucus, Dragan Todorovic, emanated a mild threat – as if to say, Serbia may cooperate with whoever it chooses to but Russia will be minding its own interests. According to him, Putin said, “If Serbia joins NATO...and if NATO installs its rocket shield in Serbia, Russia will be forced to direct its nuclear potential towards Serbia.”¹² The leader of Democratic Party of Serbia caucus, Milos Aligrudic (who was the first to raise the question about NATO) confirmed Todorovic’s interpretation except for the term ‘nuclear potential.’¹³ Aligrudic did not explain which term Putin had used instead.

Conservative commentators made no bones about their expectations from Russia to provide

¹⁰ *Politika*, March 24, 2011.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

support to the safeguard of Serbia's territorial integrity /Kosovo/ and for Republika Srpska.¹⁴ "Russia does not help us much. But – without any glorifying its role – it plays into the hands of our many interests and never harms us unlike US harming us whenever it can."¹⁵

When Putin left Russian Ambassador to Serbia Konuzin clarified everything that remained

unsaid. In an extensive interview with the *Danas* daily, he said Serbia would have to decide by itself on its attitude towards NATO, adding, "A possible decision on missiles in the territory of Serbia would be a threat to Russia's security and Russia would be forced to remove such military threat through military measures. These measures would not be directed against Serbia but against these missiles."¹⁶

SUMMARY

Putin's visit testified once more of Serbia's strategic disorientation. For almost two centuries Serbia has been split up into "Slav-philiacs" and "Westerners." Though most of its citizens are looking towards Europe Serbia with much difficulty takes off its shoulders "Oriental" patterns in social relations and political life. The same refers to Russia.

Though the Balkans as a whole is in EU's sphere of interest, Russia uses Serbia as "a yard" in which it tests EU unity and US interest in NATO enlargement, and advocates for its geo-energetic strategy.

Serbia's conservative bloc sees Russia as a pillar of its aspirations towards partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. For its part, Russia plays on "protection of Serb national interests" but never speaks its mind about the issue.

The right-wing's rise at the political scene threatens Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration and leads it toward a vacuum that Russian can neither fill nor meet Serbia's needs. Serb elite's disorientation will historically affect the country's long-term interests.

As EU itself needs to "open up" to East Mediterranean – notably in the context of the turmoil in North Africa and Middle East – Brussels should as soon as possible manifest more sensibility for all potential candidates for EU membership in the Western Balkans.

¹⁴ Dragomir Anđelković, *Pecat*, March 25, 2011.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Danas*, March 29, 2011.