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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

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VISIT BY ANGELA MERKEL SUBJECTS THE PRO-EUROPEAN OPTION TO A TEST

The visit of German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the region was to Balkan politicians an unexpectedly straightforward demonstration of Europe's – and Germany's of course – approach to regional Europeanization. The manner in which KFOR responded to latest incidents in Kosovo hinted at a new stage: the one in which all political actors, Serbian in particular, will have to lower their sights, Serbia in particular. Chancellor Merkel's visit was preceded by one by Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, fresh German troops within KFOR and its "new" resoluteness for coping with tensions in Kosovo's north heralded by (German) commander Erhard Bueller. One must bear in mind here that Germany is a main economic partner to all countries in the region.

Chancellor Merkel paid a visit to Belgrade at the time crucial for Serbia's EU prospects: the time when Serbia is expected to fulfill its obligations for obtaining EU candidacy. These obligations primarily refer to its relations with Pristina. Ms. Merkel was quite clear about European – and German – intentions: stabilization of borders in the Balkans that rules out any partition, i.e. change of borders, and pacification of Balkan nationalisms through strict observance of the criteria for EU candidacy

(like in the case of Croatia). It is along these lines that EU wants to speed up the process of Kosovo's sovereignty on its entire territory. Ms. Merkel's clear-cut messages – about abolishment of parallel structures in Kosovo's north, continuation of Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and unimpeded functioning of EULEX "in the entire territory of Kosovo" – testified of EU's strategic approach to the region of the Western Balkans.

The official Belgrade was rather taken aback by Angela Merkel's straightforwardness. She made no bones about anything. Her precise views – firstly explained to President Tadic and then to the press – lifted a taboo from a most delicate topic of Serbia's domestic policy and crashed Belgrade's longstanding hopes about recomposition of the Balkans being just a matter of time and a choice of the right moment. Ms. Merkel's visit pulled the plug on the "both Europe and Kosovo" policy and practically made Serbia choose either of the two.

The preciseness of Germany's "first lady" ruffled Serbia's political scene. It pushed Belgrade onto dry land, cut things down to size and released the incumbent government from a false dilemma. Serbia's political elite, including the ruling coalition, is now split over the

issue. Kosovo has once again become a crucial topic at domestic agenda with its anyway restricted maneuvering space. Now that its status is the main argument for all the players in the election campaign one can hardly expect any fundamental change in the policy for Pristina. Tadic backs off from nationalists and flirts with cheap populism.

Against Belgrade's hopes, any decision on Serbia's EU candidacy will be an open question till the end of this year. In other words, should Belgrade opt to the European course it would have to meet all the conditions in full seriousness. Ms. Merkel's "Kosovo before Europe" formula implies that Serbia must do everything to normalize its relations with Kosovo, except for formal recognition.

Unlike their political elite, citizens of Serbia are more down to earth about Kosovo. Even in the last elections (2008) they did not vote for Kosovo but to a European Serbia. No public opinion poll in the past years has showed that citizens believed that Kosovo could be restored, says Svetlana Logar, surveyor of the IPSOS Strategic.¹

BELGRADE DISSATISFIED WITH SERBS' POSITION IN THE REGION

The shock with Angela Merkel's clear-cut messages about unchangeability of borders in the Balkans was evident in the reactions by the nationalistic bloc, which holds that the Serb question in the region has not been adequately solved yet. It still nourishes the illusion about a possible recomposition of the Balkans (partition of Kosovo and Bosnia). This is evident in the State Strategy for Serbs in Neighboring Countries (publicized in early 2011).

1 Danas, August 25, 2011.

The Strategy clearly delineates the plan for belittlement of Serb's minority status in neighboring countries and securing special status for them. Consequently, relations with all the neighboring countries – with Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia in the first place - are inadequate and tense. Not long ago, the Progressive Club (historian Cedomir Antic) publicized a report on political rights invested on the Serbs in the region.² These rights are inadequate, quotes the report, stressing that the state of Serbia cares little for Serbs in the region.

As soon as Ms. Merkel left Belgrade, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić went to Banjaluka to brief Milorad Dodik about her stands. As he put it, she put across important messages that would strategically affect the situation in the Western Balkans.³

Kosovo is at present a crucial issue in the region and, in this context, Republika Srpska will follow Serbia's position, said Milorad Dodik on the occasion. "Srpska" will veto any recognition of Kosovo by Bosnia-Herzegovina, he also said adding that cooperation between Serbia and "Srpska" is getting better and better "as days go by." He announced continuation of joint projects, notably when it came to adjustments in educational programs.⁴

TADIĆ-MERKEL TÊTE-À-TÊTE

The visit by the German Chancellor has been planned and prepared for months (since February). However, the crisis in Kosovo's north placed Kosovo on the priority agenda. The UN Security Council session scheduled for August 23 was postponed till August 29 – after Merkel's visit to Belgrade.

2 http://www.napredniklub.org/index.php?subaction=show_full&id=1312425277&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&.

3 www.b92.net, August 25, 2011.

4 www.b92.net, August 25, 2011.



The Tadic-Merkel tête-à-tête lasted two times longer than planned. The two addressed the press immediately after the meeting. According to *Blic* sources the talk was “embarrassing and tense.” “The days of hard decisions are now upon Serbia,” said Merkel adding that “the situation was rather bad.”⁵ The daily’s sources also say that the two leaders did not discuss either a partition scenario or a special status for the North (of Kosovo). Namely, the Chancellor kept insisting that Kosovo was an independent state, despite administrative borders with Central Serbia. After the lunch in her honor Merkel said that more “creative” and “innovative” solutions should be searched for, all of which was understood as “a message to Serbian authorities that it should look for a right formulation about Kosovo’s independence to come public with when the time is ripe.”⁶

That Merkel and Tadic were at odds was quite manifest in their addresses to the press. Speaking about the conditions Serbia has to fulfill on its road to Europe, the Chancellor put an emphasis on reform and normalization of relations with neighboring countries. She was quite precise about what normalization implies. EU

5 *Blic*, August 24, 2011.

6 *Ibid.*

wants no problems or situations when “some leave a room when others come in,” she said. What is expected from Serbia are continuation of and progress in the dialogue with Pristina, EULEX enabled to function in the entire territory of Kosovo and first reduction and then dismissal of parallel structures in the north, rather than establishment of new ones,” she detailed.⁷

Tadic agreed with Merkel that “Serbia does not delude itself that it can import a conflict into EU...and, therefore, wants all the conflicts in the Western Balkans solved.”⁸ He stressed, however, that making it to choose between EU and Kosovo would be wrong. “I think that the ‘EU or Kosovo’ is a wrong policy of ultimatum, which is contrary to European values and should be avoided. What we need is a flexible, creative solution possible under present circumstances, which stands not in the way of people’s normal life, undermines not dignity of Albanian and Serb people alike and encourages European course rather than generates threats to neighboring countries,” he said.⁹

7 *Vecernje Novosti*, August 24, 2011.

8 *Politika*, August 24, 2011.

9 *Politika*, August 24, 2011.

In subsequent statements the President's tone remained the same. "If either Serbia's or Europe's political public wants Serbia to make such a choice, my answer will be the same – Serbia will give up not a one of its legitimate interests," he said.¹⁰ But Tadic also insisted on Serbia's "natural right to EU membership" and tried to mitigate the effect of Merkel's messages by saying they had arranged continuation of "the dialogue on disputable questions."

DOMESTIC REACTIONS

Initially, the media, politicians and analysts responded unanimously – they were all surprised. Merkel's precise and clear-cut messages – mostly the one that any partition scenario was out of question – caught everyone by surprise. The kind of shock they suffered actually reflected their denial to acknowledge the realities in Kosovo.

Ms. Merkel's request that Belgrade relinquishes the parallel structures in Kosovo's north was interpreted as "a new condition" for EU accession. So, for instance, Sonja Licht, president of the Fund for Political Excellence and chairwoman of the Foreign Ministry's Foreign Policy Council, said, "Until today we believed there would be no new preconditions imposed in us."¹¹ According to her, the official Belgrade had expected only Merkel's insistence on the continuation of Belgrade–Pristina dialogue.

Serbia's Ambassador to Germany Ivo Viskovic was also caught by surprise. Commenting the issue of parallel structures Viskovic was comparing the situation with Albanians' former parallel structures in Kosovo, which "even dictator Milosevic had not touched."¹² "Should

I myself had to choose between Europe and Kosovo, I would say 'no, thanks' to Europe," he said as a guest of the RTS talk-show "Oko 11."¹³

The global economic crisis built up Germany's political power, which gave "made if feel capable of acting independently on behalf of EU in the matter of Kosovo," said Director of the Center of New Politics Vladimir Todoric. According to him, the requests for normalization of relations with Kosovo are "nothing but a nicely put euphemism for a change of the realities in Kosovo's north."¹⁴

Ognjen Pribicevic, Serbia's former ambassador to Germany, says that that there must be "some space for diplomatic solutions" in the gap between the request of abolishment of parallel structures and the "red lines" Belgrade could not cross. "But what is certain is that hard times await Serbia," he adds.¹⁵

Predrag Simic, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences and former ambassador to France, reminded that Washington had been demanding the same for a longer period. In his view, Kosovo's north will eventually be given the status Ahtisaari envisaged few years ago – "a kind of autonomy."¹⁶

REACTIONS BY POLITICAL PARTIES

The strongest reactions to Angela Merkel's messages came from the Democratic Party of Serbia. Its leader, Vojislav Kostunica, said that the "price" Serbia has to pay for the membership of EU became obvious after Angela Merkel's visit. "As of now no politician in Serbia can possibly play innocence about the request

10 www.b92.net, August 25, 2011.

11 Blic, August 24, 2011.

12 Radio B92, August 24, 2011.

13 RTS, August 24, 2011.

14 Politika, August 24, 2011.

15 Politika, August 24, 2011.

16 Politika, August 24, 2011.

that Serbia should trade-off its territory for the membership of EU," he said.¹⁷

For New Serbia, Merkel's positions stand for "further conditioning" and for the Serb Radical Party /SRS/ for "new pressure on Serbia to make concessions leading towards independence of Kosovo and Metohija."¹⁸

Mladjan Dinkic's United Regions of Serbia /URS/ released that the main message Merkel had put across related to "Serbia's future in EU." Only the Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ commented that Merkel's positions entailed no further conditioning for Serbia's EU candidacy.¹⁹

Chairman of DS Political Council Dragoljub Mincunovic said that Merkel's messages surprised everyone, though not that much given that German officials had been hinting the same for some time now. "We should calmly continue the negotiations now and try to have the final status of Kosovo's north and Kosovo in general discussed within EU and UN," he said.²⁰

Tomislav Nikolic's Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ angrily reacted at President Tadic's statement that "Serbia may be denied EU candidacy this year." For SNS, by saying that Tadic "signed a surrender of his policy in the past period."²¹ Nikolic – whose pro-European orientation is anyway questionable – seized the opportunity of Chancellor Merkel's visit to demand the government to come public with all the conditions imposed on Serbia, recognize total failure of its policy and call early parliamentary elections.²²

17 Politika, August 25, 2011.

18 Politika, August 24, 2011.

19 Ibid.

20 Politika, August 25, 2011.

21 www.b92.net, August 26, 2011.

22 Ibid.

Only LDP leader Cedomir Jovanovic reacted unlike the rest – referring to adverse effects of the governmental policy he said, "This is not a time of choice between Kosovo and Europe, let alone another chance for the "both Kosovo and Europe" policy. We have no control whatsoever over Kosovo but only suffer great losses, among other things because Belgrade actually cannot control even many institutions and informal centers of power in the North, which it so stubbornly defends these days." "Further postponement of that decision /abolishment of parallel structures/, all these foolish attempts to buy time, dwindle Serbia's chances for modernization and Europeanization, and for leaving behind the decades of defeats and losses. We could be lagging behind the world and trying to keep ends meet forever otherwise. And that would mean that the past eleven years have been wasted and that the ouster of Milosevic was in vain," said Jovanovic.²³

REACTIONS BY KOSOVO SERBS

Officials "authorized for Kosovo" in the government and Kosovo Serb leaders from the North were taken by surprise the most by Angela Merkel's messages. Officials of the Ministry for Kosovo and Metohija claim that under present circumstances there is no alternative to "parallel" structures, which are "the only warrant of Serbs' survival in Kosovo." For Marko Jaksic and Milan Ivanovic, political leaders of Kosovo Serbs in the North, Merkel's requests are unacceptable to Serbs in the entire territory of Kosovo. Should the government cede under the pressure from the West they would stage "peaceful resistance and institutional political struggle not only by Serbs in the North but also by all national forces in the entire territory of Serbia."²⁴

23 www.b92.net, August 26, 2011.

24 Danas, August 24, 2011.

Kosovo Vice-Premier Slobodan Petrovic advocates a diametrically opposite stand. In his view the state of Serbia should look after its interests, the main of which is EU accession.

“I feel certain that the authorities in Serbia would recognize that abolishment of parallel structures in the north is a major task on that course,” he says.²⁵

SUMMARY

The visit by Chancellor Merkel testified of Serbia’s and the actual regime’s still fragile pro-European orientation. Reactions by politicians, the media and analysts indicate that Belgrade still holds the Serb question in the Balkans unsettled.

The visit also testified that EU and US are resolute about definite borders in the Balkans and expect each country in the region to fulfill the criteria for EU membership. As things stand at present, the case of Croatia is a standard for accession.

After Merkel’s visit Kosovo not only remained high on Serbia’s priority list but also became an even more controversial topic of its political scene. Bearing in mind the country’s harsh economic and financial circumstances – and another wave of global crisis – Serbia faces isolation or, as some Serb nationalists put it, the fate of “an isolated island in EU” unless it opts for the European course.

With its repeated claims that it will in no way recognize Kosovo Serbia has itself turned it into the biggest obstacle to normal integration into West European trends. The actual government failed to solve at least some problems (pinpointed by Merkel) over the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The continuation of the dialogue, scheduled for September 2 in Brussels, is a chance for Belgrade to demonstrate its readiness to treat Kosovo as an equal partner and thus unblock Serbia’s movement towards EU.

In this context, the civil society, the media, rational political elites and other progressive players should mobilize the society as a whole for reacting to the government’s negligent attitude and its monopoly on the issues crucial to Serbia’s future in Europe. For a constructive attitude not only towards Kosovo but also Europe, citizens must be made aware that Serbia can never again have Kosovo within its borders. Such a national consensus on Kosovo preconditions fulfillment of the set of the criteria for EU membership and Serbia’s democratic future.

²⁵ Politika, 24. avgust 2011.