

Helsinki *bulletin*



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ANOTHER CIRCLE OF SERBIA'S DECLINE



TANIUG

PROGRESSISTS: AVOIDING EUROPEAN COURSE

The outcome of the May 2012 elections technically changed Serbia's political scene. The election victory of the Progressists and their coalition partners was a comeback of the political bloc of 1990s known for its nationalism, populism, destruction of institutions, political revanchism and radicalism. The "old regime"

has been restored producing devastating effects on domestic, regional and international level.

The Progressists and the newly formed government do not know how to cope with burning economic and social issues. The public has applauded their anti-corruption campaign in the first months of their rule. However, it is more than obvious that they are both impotent and unwilling to fight corruption through institutions and prosecution offices – they rather fight

it in the media. The campaign itself that mostly targets the Democrats (who well deserved it, to tell the truth) is after annulling Serbia's orientation towards EU.

A social consensus on political system has not been reached yet. Twelve years after the October 5 change of the regime, Serbia's political, institutional and administrative architecture is still among the most controversial issues. Changes in composition of the elected local self-governments could easily lead to anarchy. The Constitutional Court's decision on unconstitutionality of many provisions of Vojvodina's Statute coincided with the beginning of the new government's term of office. Not only has the new regime ousted local governments in Novi Sad and other places in Vojvodina but is also after annulment of the province's autonomy.

Numbers of professionals have been deposed, regardless of the offices they had occupied. A kind of "cultural revolution" has taken place – both vertically and horizontally. Its longstanding effects will be devastating. One of the deposed officials was the Governor of the Central Bank. "Old" cadres have occupied institutions, especially those in the security sector. Reappointment of judges and prosecutors that had not been reelected in the process of the judiciary reform (some 500 persons) created the atmosphere of revanchism and annihilated the anyway deficient judiciary reform.

As for foreign policy, the new government has gone public only with arguments against membership of NATO and Serbia's neutrality. Little is known about the course of army reforms that used to be most successful (with assistance from NATO).

The new regime has questioned all the achievements made by its predecessors, especially the agreements with Kosovo. For President Nikolic,

these agreements are "harmful." And yet and regardless of the fact that it has not joined the ruling coalition, Democratic Party of Serbia is a major player when it comes to Kosovo and Serbia's political system.

In almost no time the new regime demonstrated affinity for Russia. Declaratively, it has opted for EU. But its actions and controversial statements about Serbia's European course generate not only confusion but also fundamental uncertainties. Attitudes of the new government and the President of the Republic indicate lack of readiness and capacity to come to grips with pressing problems and challenges that face Serbia at this point.

Catastrophic economic situation that badly needs financial injections to prevent the country's bankruptcy only fuels the inconsequent foreign policy. As the two major parties of the ruling coalition – Serb Progressive Party /SNS/ and Socialist Party of Serbia /SPS/ - have always been politically close to Moscow, the new government relies on Russia's and China's assistance. Russia had openly supported Tomislav Nikolic in the election campaign.

PRESIDENT NIKOLIĆ ADDRESSES THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Addressing the UN General Assembly in New York on September 25 has been President Nikolic's most important foreign policy performance up to now. His speech was a combination of ambivalent and blurred statements about Serbia's future course, especially when it comes to Kosovo.¹

¹ In the election campaign (or before it began) neither Tomislav Nikolic nor his party fellows spoke about a solution to the Kosovo problem. They promised to broach the issue once they came to power. Even since they have been announcing to present a unified national-state

In his address he accused the former government of taking Serbia to “the edge of an abyss” (“the edge from which Serbia could fall into Kosovo independence”)² and was even more critical about some “big powers” that had “brutally” pushed Serbia toward this edge.³

At the same time he assured the global audience that Serbia would implement all its obligations, including Belgrade-Prishina agreements. He also spoke about Serbia’s “earnest desire to continue the talks (with Prishtina) in good will. What Serbia offers are “direct negotiations at the highest political level,” he said.⁴

The fact is that Serbia cannot officially appropriate Kosovo North – its strategic goal – through the dialogue on “technical issues.” This is why it has been insisting – since the Kostunica cabinet – on Serb-Albanian political dialogue or an international conference on Kosovo.⁵

Tomislav Nikolic also insists on a political dialogue on the highest level. Serbia wants no more to negotiate “the implementation of Kosovo’s independence,” he says, adding, “This is how things really stand though they keep us telling that Kosovo status is not negotiable and we are not to be asked about it. So what else could be on the negotiating table?”⁶

platform of all key political players. The platform has been presented up to now.

2 Nikolic’s interpretation of his own speech in an interview with TV Prva, September 25, 2012.

3 Ibid.

4 Politika, September 26, 2012.

5 Almost all political parties’ stands on Kosovo are more or less the same. Belgrade’s “attractive” offer of a “historical agreement with Albanians” has always been after partition of Kosovo and, as a compensation for the “loss,” partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina (integration of Republika Srpska into Serbia).

6 Politika, September 26, 2012.

Vuk Jeremic, former foreign minister and present chairman of the UN General Assembly, also hopes that “status negotiations” could be renewed. “Prishtina must understand that a solution to the province’s status could only be found together with Serbia at a negotiating table,” he said.⁷

On the very same day the newly appointed head of the negotiating team for Kosovo, Dejan Pavicevic, presented a protocol to Brussels – Serbia’s approval for the beginning of integrated border management with Kosovo.

Most domestic commentators agreed that Nikolic’s address in New York demonstrated political continuity and persistence on the “both Europe and Kosovo” formula.⁸

FALSE HOPES

The new parliamentary majority – emerging from the coalition agreement on the government – Serb Progressive Party /SNS/, Socialist Party of Serbia /SPS/ and United Regions of Serbia /URS/ declared Serbia’s membership of EU a strategic priority. This was the main reason why officials from EU and US believed the new government would pursue the course – along with all deviations and wavering - of their predecessors lead by Democratic Party /DS/.

7 Politika, October 1, 2012.

8 „The bottom line of President Nikolic’s speech in New York is: persistence on the ‘both EU and Kosovo’ policy, that we shall never recognize Kosovo and that everything else is possible if agreed on,” says Ognjen Pribicevic, former Ambassador to Germany. Politika, September 27, 2012; „Nikolic’s speech is music to one’s ears but not a U-turn in the defense of Kosovo. It follows in the footsteps of Boris Tadic’s policy,” says Vladimir Jovanovic, foreign minister in the Milosevic era. Danas, September 27, 2012.

However, in late September and early October it became obvious that new policymakers were stalling negotiations with Prishtina. Tomislav Nikolic was the first to say this in public. Addressing his party's electoral assembly he announced that Serbia would be posing preconditions in the process of European integration – “something it has never done before.” “There is no reason whatsoever to run after some date or paper,” he said. Such practice, he said, “has made a charity case of Serbia,” he said.⁹

Suzana Grubjesic, vice-premier for European integration, backed him by saying, “Movement towards EU is neither easy nor simple. It's not a 100-meter track but a marathon. Therefore, one should not rush headlong.”¹⁰ As for Premier Dacic, Serbia should “speed up its movement towards EU but not run for a date for accession negotiations at all costs.”¹¹

Only Liberal Democratic Party /LDP/ makes no bones about the significance of EU membership and criticizes the attitude of the ruling coalition. Its leader, Cedomir Jovanovic, says that statements by governmental officials indicate a plan for keeping the society comatose. “As they pass the hat all over the world, ready to accept anything just to fill in the budget – a result of an inefficient policy – they use Europe as a perfect excuse or a scarecrow whenever someone in Serbia poses them a logical question.”¹²

Some commentators pinpoint that Serbia, though “needing a deeper integration into Europe, must also have a national policy of its own – “hence, a variant of the ‘both EU and

Kosovo’ policy will always be in play.”¹³ Others take that this policy is a reaction to “the pretty improper pressure from Ashton” and a result of fresh self-confidence of the regime that managed to “borrow moneys to keep it going till the end of the year.”¹⁴

Vice-Premier Aleksandar Vucic, who has visited Germany twice since appointed, warns that the government's future actions will not exactly be citizens' cup of tea. This indicates that only fulfillment of conditions could help solve the serious crisis.¹⁵

TOWARD EU UNDER OUR OWN CONDITIONS

The fact that EU progress report on Serbia is “negatively neutral” meaning that the date for the beginning of accession negotiations has been postponed till some indefinite period next year does not suit the new regime. Judging by reactions (to this report) by President Nikolic, Premier Dacic and Vice-premier Suzana Grubjesic, movement towards EU is on the priority agenda no more. “Serbia will be posing its own preconditions in the process of EU integration,” said Nikolic.

In the meantime, Euro-enthusiasm among citizens of Serbia – that oscillated in 2001- further declined in 2012. A survey the governmental Office for European Integration conducted in the summer of 2012 showed that less than 50 percent (actually 49) of Serbia's population supports membership of EU.¹⁶

9 On the same occasion Nikolic messaged European officials, „They are well aware of what we could do and what we could not. Without Kosovo and Metohija we would be like a man on his deathbed in a stately mansion.” Politika, October 2, 2012.

10 Danas, October 1, 2012.

11 RTV B92, October 1, 2012.

12 Danas, October 2, 2012.

13 Nikola Jovanovic, Politika, October 2, 2012.

14 Predrag Simic, ibid.

15 In an interview with TV Prva on September 30, Vucic said, “I do not want to make patriotic statements – neither I could nor it's time for such statements. There will not be good news. We must tell people that hardship and problems await them.”

16 Danas, August 20, 2012.

Another survey conducted by CESID on September 18-25, 2012 indicates that support for EU fell by 2 percent when compared with findings in June 2011. Some 35 percent of Serbia's citizens opposes EU membership (10 percent more than in June), while 18 percent of them are undecided.¹⁷ Young people make the biggest percentage among Euro-skeptics.

Speaking of Euro-integration, EU (through Germany as its mouthpiece and the most influential member-state) and US take normalization of relations with Prishtina a key test of the new regime's good will. At the same time, stands about Kosovo make up the most evident "point of discord" between ruling officials. Their contradictory statements only fuel the general confusion.

On the one hand new officials strongly criticize their predecessors for the dialogue with Prishtina and the agreements made, and, on the other, claim that Belgrade will meet all the obligations deriving from negotiations. Moreover, two allegedly most disputable obligations – on regional representation (Kosovo with an asterisk and without a footnote alongside it) and integrated border management – are about to be implemented.

At the same time, the new regime announces a higher level of political representation in the dialogue with Prishtina. Premiers Ivica Dacic and Hashim Thaci met for the first time in Brussels on October 19. The two also had separate meetings with Catherine Ashton.

Belgrade has been announcing adoption of a strategy for Kosovo for some time now. It obviously tries to buy time. According to official sources, the strategy will be based on a consensus of all relevant political players. Interviewed

¹⁷ http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2012&mm=10&dd=17&nav_category=1262&nav_id=652528

in the "Impression of the Week" show, President Nikolic said he was not pleased with the agreements the former government had signed but would keep his promise and implement these agreements.¹⁸

EUROPE'S STANCE

All relevant international actors – from EU to US – expect Serbia to begin a high-level political dialogue with Prishtina as soon as possible, the more so since supervised independence of Kosovo ended in early September. However, their expectations of the dialogue are basically opposite to what Belgrade tries to impose under the same name. International players expect normalization of Belgrade-Prishtina relations. High Representative of EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton was quite clear about it. She reminded Belgrade that it will have "to make hard decisions."¹⁹

During their visit to Belgrade in mid-September German parliamentarians from the ruling CDU, Andreas Schoenhoff and Hans Joachim Falenski were even more straightforward. Apart from well-known demands, they requested Belgrade and Prishtina to sign a binding document on not stalling each other's movement towards EU.

The former government promised that all the preconditions – abolishment of parallel institutions and withdrawal of Serb police officers from Kosovo North, apart from the agreements reached and continuation of the dialogue – would be fulfilled and that in December 2012 Serbia would obtain the date for the beginning of accession negotiations. However, already in the summer of 2012 it was evident that Serbia would not meet the preconditions and that the

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¹⁹ Politika, October 2, 2012.

date for accession negotiations would be postponed till the next year at the very best.

Under various excuses Serbia has done nothing so far to implement the reached agreements and resume the dialogue with Prishtina. The first step toward integrated border management was made in late September. However, when integrated border management – including Jarinje and Brnik border crossing stations – is to become operational is still an uncertainty.

Premier Dacic paid a visit to Brussels to arrange continuation of the dialogue and met with his Kosovo counterpart, Hashim Thaci, on the occasion. Judging by his statements after the visit he sticks to his old rhetoric about Kosovo. Namely, while promising to implement the agreements reached so far, Belgrade obviously tries to renegotiate some provisions

RUSSIAN FACTOR

Russia's bigger influence on Serbia's foreign policy after the change of the regime is still not transparent enough. Though both Nikolic and Dacic do their best to present themselves as pro-European politicians, their affinity for the East is indisputable. "Only Serbia do I love more than Russia," said Nikolic in an interview for the Channel I of the Russian TV on the eve of his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on September 11.²⁰

Expectations that Moscow would help Serbia "to get to its feet" added to Nikolic's Russia-philosophy. According to newspaper sources, the two arranged a loan to Serbia that would fill a hole in its budget. However, the conditions of the loan have never been publicized.²¹ Speaking of financial arrangements with Moscow, one should recall the 800-million-dollar loan

²⁰ Tanjug, September 10, 2012.

²¹ Tanjug, September 11, 2012.

for modernization of Serbia's railways, which is still "on the waiting list." The arrangement has been made during President Medvedev's visit to Belgrade in October 2010. This was when the two countries signed an agreement on supply of Russian gas till 2021. According to this framework agreement Russian Gasprom was supposed to supply Serbia with 5 billion cubic meters of natural gas each year.

An annex to the agreement provides that supply of the Russian gas shall be conditioned by repayment of the 30-million-dollar debt for the gas exported in the period November 2000 – January 2001, plus 10 million dollars for the supplies in 1995-2000. The debt shall be repaid till 2014. Russia is Serbia's main supplier of natural gas. In 2011 Gasprom exported to Serbia 1.4 billion cubic meters. The agreement provides that Serbia shall pay 470 dollars per a cubic meter.²²

Besides, Nikolic asked Russia a loan for railroads and assistance for overcoming the economic crisis, and said he looked forward for Russian investors in the Smederevo Ironworks. Belgrade also expects that the so-called South Stream would be realized as soon as possible. Should all these plans realize Russia would take over main economic strategic positions in Serbia, which would be a warrant for a long-term influence on any government.

Alexander Konuzin, former Russian Ambassador to Serbia and active participant in its politics, did not even try to hide his sympathy for Serb Progressive Party. Before leaving Belgrade he said, "I am impressed by the energy the present government invests in the development of Serb-Russian cooperation."²³

As it seems, Russia looks forward to an agreement on "joint economic and political interests

²² RIA Novosti, October 13, 2012.

²³ Tanjug, September 13, 2012.

in post-EU future of the Balkans and Europe.”²⁴ This could greatly influence Serbia’s future orientation. Russia’s expectations rely on its support to Serbia “in the most critical budgetary point of its modern history, possible investment in arms industry and other branches of economy, but also on the strong support to Serbia’s territorial integrity – all of which opens up new, more complex but also more logical geopolitical prospects to Serbia.”²⁵

Domestic analysts are at odds when it comes to Serbia’s geostrategic movement towards the East. Bosko Jaksic, columnist for the *Politika* daily, writes, “Serbia has not displaced itself from (European) structure. The regime has just camouflaged everything.”²⁶ According to him, there is even a kind of silent agreement between Moscow and Washington, considering that Washington expects that it would be easier for “pro-Russian” president Nikolic to cut the Kosovo knot.²⁷

Dragomir Andjelkovic, expert in Serb-Russian relations, also expects not U-turns in strategic options. He agrees that Belgrade will not neglect Brussels for Moscow: what he expects is more stable balancing between the four proclaimed foreign policy “pillars” (Brussels, Washington, Moscow and Beijing).²⁸

Analyst Miodrag Radosavljevic holds that after the latest meeting between Nikolic and Putin “relations between Serbia and Russia have reached the highest level in the recent history.” Reminding of the economic package given to

24 Voice of Russia, September 12, 2012.

25 Ibid. „Citizens of Serbia expect Putnization of their state – democratically imposed law and order. For its part, Russia tries to identify and realize its extra interests in the Balkans,” says Zujovic, commentator for the Voice of Russia.

26 *Politika*, September 2, 2012.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

Nikolic in Sochi, he wonders what the price was for it. “Is this to be paid with a changed political course?” It is too early to answer this question, he concludes.²⁹

International players carefully observe Russia’s influence on developments in Serbia. EU representatives (such as, say, Stefan Lehne) message, “EU welcomes good relations between Serbia and Russia, which is EU’s most important partner.”³⁰

ATTITUDE TOWARD THE REGION

By many undiplomatic (though frank) statements the new aggravated the anyway fragile regional relations shortly after the elections. No doubt that these statements were telling of the prevalent mindset. Interpretation of the recent past remains the biggest stumbling block in the way of regional normalization, especially when it comes to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The attitude toward Bosnia – still considered a booty – is the most problematic of all. A special joint meeting of the governments of Serbia and Republika Srpska clearly manifested the nature of the relationship and mutual goals. Serbia accepted the Dayton Accords, said Nikolic, but the state (established by them) is dysfunctional and “slowly disappears before our eyes.”

For Serbian politicians Croatia remain a major rival. The issue of refugees is Belgrade’s strongest weapon against Croatia. “Croatia has not solved the problem of Serbs it had expelled, it has not returned them their property and has not made it possible for them to exercise minimal human rights. However, for some reasons unknown, Croatia is acceptable to EU,” said Nikolic.³¹

29 NIN, September 20, 2012.

30 *Politika*, September 23, 2012.

31 Blic, October 21, 2012.

Serbia's unchanged attitude toward Montenegro was manifest in electoral results. Namely, this time Montenegrins voted for independence. This indicates that Belgrade constantly undermines Montenegro's independence.

During his recent visit to Skopje Nikolic suggested that the state should mediate to resolve the dispute between Serb and Macedonian eastern orthodox churches. He also seized the

opportunity to warn Macedonians of Albanians. "Once they realize their rights in the territory of Serbia, they will invoke the same rights in other countries. Can anyone tell them then that they are entitled to a state of their own in Kosovo but not in Macedonia? Can anyone tell them then that they are entitled to a state of their own in Kosovo but to an autonomy in Greece or in Montenegro?" he said.³²

CONCLUSION

Apart from political regression at home and undefined position not only in the Balkans but also in Europe, the new government's policy leads Serbia to isolation and a new cycle of general decline. This policy mirrors patriarchalism and strong resistance to Europeanization and modernization of the country.

Populism is just another manifestation of Serb nationalism that persists as one and only ideology.

EU should not allow Serbia's isolation. It should be more creative in its approach not only to Serbia but also to all West Balkan countries. The stick and carrot approach has limits in societies such as Serbian.

Criteria and conditions Serbia should meet are not achievable in the foreseeable future: on the one hand Serbia is not sufficiently capacitated to achieve them and, on the other, the prevalent trend in it is anti-European. Only new policies, integrated sectors and developmental strategy could prevent further regressive tendencies.

Civil society should be backed as a relevant advocate of European values.

Regional cooperation should be raised at the highest level possible. Croatia could play a major role in interpreting EU and negotiating processes to Serbia.

³² Ibid.