

Ban Ki-moon's visit to ex-Yugoslavia. Is there a light at the end of the tunnel for the region?

In July, the General Secretary of United Nations Ban Ki-moon paid a first visit to the countries of former Yugoslavia after its dissolution. His agenda covered Ljubljana, Zagreb, Podgorica, Belgrade, Pristina, Skopje and finally Sarajevo and Srebrenica. Besides the fact that Serbia's former Minister of foreign Affairs, Vuk Jeremić became the President of UN's General Assembly, Ban Ki-moon came in a time very significant for the region. Croatia is waiting for ratification of its EU membership by member states' parliaments; Montenegro is starting its association negotiations, while Macedonia is looking for a name dispute solution that it's blocking its EU negotiations. In BIH, the constitutional grudge threatens with eventual country's dissolution. Kosovo's status continues to be an issue, whose solution largely depends on Serbian pressures and diplomatic skills, balancing between its lost territory and the EU perspective. Recent Serbia's presidential and parliament elections brought significant changes in the country's political life, with precarious consequences for stability in the region. Former president Boris Tadić and his Democratic party (in coalition with Socialist party headed by present Prime Minister Ivica Dačić), were aiming to transform Serbia's society towards European integration. Regardless of the severe criticism on Tadić's account lately, the May's election of Tomislav Nikolić, close associate and former member of Radical Party led by Vojislav Šešelj, on the position of the new Serbian president came as a surprise and raised doubts that Serbia is again reviving its nationalistic rhetoric. Only few days after the elections, carefully reestablished relations between Croatia and Serbia were put on stake by Nikolić's unadvised statement that Vukovar, Croatian town on the east border, under siege and destroyed by the Yugoslav National Army and the Serbian paramilitary forces during the war in the 90's, is in fact Serbian. Since the EU considers relations between Croatia and Serbia one of the key factors for stability in the Western Balkan region, such tremors, although cautiously taken as beginners' mistakes, are seen as very dangerous for future developments. Possible tensions are for now put on hold by the decision of Croatian president, Josipović not to be present on Nikolić's inauguration, as a message that deterioration of neighboring accomplishments cannot be accepted.

Only few days later the new Serbian president denied for a Montenegrin TV station the genocide in Srebrenica,

thus rejecting the ruling of the International Criminal Court regarding the worst crime on European soil since the Second World War and underestimating Ban Ki-moon's qualification that this crime will continue to hunt the entire international community for many years. Consequently, the inauguration of President Nikolić after this incident was avoided by Slovenia, BIH and Macedonia as well. Denying Srebrenica's genocide is significant in two ways. First, although ICC ruled that Serbia is not directly responsible for what happened in Srebrenica in the summer of 1995, the reluctance to accept the size of this crime committed by Serbian paramilitary troops and army of Republic of Srpska is a sign that Serbia is still not willing and able to affront the consequences of its politics in last two decades, leaving little space for reconciliation. Moreover, Nikolić's statement that the genocide in Srebrenica is "only" a crime is in fact deterioration of Serbian's official standpoint that what happened in Srebrenica was indeed a crime against humanity. Second, and perhaps more immanent for short and middle term regional turmoil, such statements are in line with statements of the president of Republic of Srpska Milorad Dodik, who continues to provoke the fragile peace in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina.

With the Dayton agreement, envisaged only as temporary solution to stop the war, Republic of Srpska gained 49% of BIH territory (how it was before 1990's), including Srebrenica. Since 2005 Dodik is continuously pressing for RS independence, bypassing Sarajevo as capital city and, ironically, blocking the functioning of BIH as a sovereign state following prescribed constitutional provision. Official Serbia does not support Republic of Srpska's independence, especially due to its denial of Kosovo's independence. However continuous flirting between the two shrinks the space for BIH's functioning as a stable democratic country. Furthermore, Dodik's welcoming presence in Serbian political life after the elections influenced the creation of the ruling coalition.

What was expected to be a government of Boris Tadić in coalition with Čedomir Jovanović's Liberal party and Ivica Dačić's Socialist party, ended up as a populist government of Ivica Dačić's SP, together with the Serbian Progressive Party of Tomislav Nikolić and the United Regions of Serbia, led by Mladjan Dinkić. Thus Dačić, the right hand of former Yugoslav president Milošević, not only changed political camps, but left no alternative for questionably reformed former radical to be checked and balanced.

While Kosovo is approaching its full independence and the end of the International Civilian Office overseeing in September, it is unclear what position will Serbia take towards these future developments. Messages coming

from officials are ambiguous, from president Nikolić's statement that he will never again be a president in Pristina, just like North Mitrovica cannot be under Kosovo's jurisdiction, to Vuk Jeremić's statement that Kosovo will enter UN „over his dead body“. Although it seemed that territorial changes and even recognition of Kosovo as independent state would happen soon rather than later, the President's office clarified that no such developments are possible. Nevertheless, Nikolić is now obviously under huge pressure from the international community, especially the EU to tune down his position. This pressure is significantly influenced by Serbian candidacy status for EU membership, which now became „the best solution for Serbia“, even for Nikolić. However, according to commissioner Barroso, the main precondition for opening the negotiations is developing „better relations between Belgrade and Pristina“, however ambiguous this statement might be.

In light of Ban Ki-moon's visit to Kosovo, Serbia reasonably raised the question whether this visit was paid to UN representatives or to Kosovo as an independent state. Significantly, the General Secretary emphasized that Vuk Jeremić's responsibility as a new GA President is to work for the best of all member states, not only Serbia. It is yet to be seen what this autumn will bring; however it is important to consider the developments in the region as highly interconnected. Kosovo's independence might raise questions of the future status of Republic of Srpska, which will continue with its obstructive behavior when it comes to BIH. At the same time, BIH is preparing for its first census since 1991, which should take place in 2013. No matter what the results would be, whether they will provide evidence that ethnic cleansing of members of particular ethnicity did occur, whether it will give support for the third entity tendencies or whether it will serve as justification that unitary state is no longer a reality, it will clearly reshape the political arrangements in this country. That development would not be negative as such, since BIH has been kept in its own deadlock for far too long. However, having in mind the complicated regional relations and possible nationalistic inclinations, it is sure that times of changes are ahead of us.

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