

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Guideposts to Europe

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Entire Eastern Europe expected that the collapse of socialism will somehow be a quick path to the desired freedoms, democracy, market economy and welfare. Many hopes were awakened, and many disappointments experienced. With its internal dynamics and tensions, the eastern part of the continent found itself in the position of a poor cousin at the doors of the rich family which, on its part, was following rather restlessly this "march from the East". Although the European optimists keep telling us that the future of Europe is in the community of nations in which the peoples of Europe will no longer be divided to those on the sidelines and the privileged ones, there are many of those, the so-called Euro-skeptics, who do not share these broad visions regarding Europe's future.

How do Serbia's citizens see European integration, and how should we interpret the results of a recent poll in which 70 percent of the citizens opted for Serbia's membership in the EU – this is what we talked about with Milica Djilas, associate professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences.

- The number of people in Serbia who support approaching the European Union generally fluctuates ten percents up and down, depending on the period in which the poll was made. I would say that at this point expectations of a European future for Serbia are again somewhat accentuated, but really important is the fact that in Serbia there is a stable support of the majority of citizens for this orientation towards European integration. This does not necessarily mean – and a recent research has proven to this effect – that the people do know exactly what the European Union is, or that they know all the technical aspects. They vote for the European Union in general terms, comparing the quality of life in EU member-countries and those beyond. If you would break this down to separate issues, you would see that the citizens do not demonstrate equal level of support for each of these individual items. Around 70 percent of her citizens opted for Serbia's association with the EU, but at the same time they were not ready to change their lifestyle or work habits. The process of European integration is a highly specialized technical process which implies high professional expertise. On the other hand, readiness to change something in your lifestyle or work habits today in order to have benefits tomorrow – this is also problematic for our people. Many people here think in this way, probably also because of the general insecurity of the ambience in which we live. What is maybe most indicative for the state of our society, is the fact that out of 43 percent of interviewed citizens who declared to feel European – only 38 percent are women. When you compare the way in which the Europeans live with our painstaking everyday life, and see how demanding the position of employed women in Serbia is – this fact should be of no surprise. This is probably also connected with the fact that as much as 80 percent of our citizens did not travel anywhere during the last year, and those who did were mainly going to neighboring countries which after the disintegration of Yugoslavia have become foreign countries.

Prior to joining the European Union, in Slovenia's parliament there was no discussion on this issue. It was presumed that this orientation had no alternative path. Perhaps Serbia has some alternative path?

- This extensive debate which we started here is more a result of the fact that this story about Serbia's accession to the EU has been lasting for six years now, and yet we did not sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement. Countries which in 2004 have joined the EU had concluded this agreement in a shorter period of time. We started the association process in 2000, we began with a consultative working group in 2001 and since then we have got only the Feasibility study. Everybody was praising the reforms we introduced, but there was no Stabilization and Association Agreement. Much talk, and no results – so, it is normal to have these debates on conditioning on part of the EU, and on why we should take this path when it turns out that we are constantly just spinning our wheels. We did implement certain economic and political reforms which were assessed positively, but their broader context made it impossible to get a mark sufficiently positive to lead us to the next association phase – the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement. First there was the burden of relations with Montenegro, now there is the problem with Kosovo. As regards alternatives to European integration, there are different opinions, so there is mention of orienting towards Russia with which we have a trade agreement, there is also China. However, it is important to understand that at this point Serbia is actually awaiting to sign

her first treaty with the EU, and even after that we do not join automatically the European Union. What we are talking about is the harmonization with European standards, which will enable us to have normal relations with the EU and with the countries which want to become its members. Switzerland and Norway, for instance, are not EU members, and they have completely harmonized its legislature with EU legislature in order to have undisturbed economic and other relations with the EU countries. Obviously we, too, do not have some other choice apart from taking the path of harmonization with these standards, and when one day this reform path will naturally bring us to the doors of the EU the citizens will be consulted in a referendum to have them say what they think about our EU membership. But then, by the very adoption of these reforms, the membership issue will not be as dramatic. What matters more than the very accession are this European road and process themselves. For instance, even if some magic wand would place Serbia in the EU, this would not essentially change the quality of our life – this very process of adopting standards which change the way in which a society is functioning will change it. Let me paraphrase a known saying: the U.S.A. could have conquered Afghanistan, but only the European Union could change the way in which the society functions in, say, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic – from how the society functions, to what is offered on the dinner table every day, is their violence in the family; this is a gradual change of the society whose natural link is in the European Union.

How far did Serbia get with the implementation of these European standards, and what is the pace of this process?

- The criteria for joining the European Union, three relatively general criteria established at the Copenhagen summit in 1993, imply: first, respect of human and minority rights and democratic principles; second, a functioning market economy and the possibility to endure competition pressures implied in EU membership; and, third, harmonization of legislature with EU standards. Hence, in order to follow this process you must also harmonize with these criteria. Since Serbia has not yet signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement, she also does not have the obligation to adopt European legislature and to harmonize with it. However, by adopting plans on harmonization of the legislature we do accommodate this obligation, but it is only when this agreement will be adopted that the EU will point the priority areas in the harmonization of the legislature. On the other hand, the criteria regarding rule of law, respect of human and minority rights and democratic standards are equally important. This shows whether or not you are attached to values upon which the EU has been developed, and on the other side these criteria are of a functional nature, so that if you, for instance, do not cooperate with The Hague Tribunal, you not only overlook these values which are the essence of the EU, but this also opens the question on how, then, are you going to respect the other obligations that stem from membership and the associate status to the EU.

In regard to the pace at which laws are adopted, this Government can be assessed as a pro-reform and productive one. A big number of laws were passed, but for the EU it is important not only how many laws were passed, but rather how much they were implemented.

In this context, how can Serbia's new constitution be assessed? Is it a step further towards European integration?

- Both those who supported the adoption of the new Constitution and those who were against it found their terms of reference in what the European Union was saying. Here the EU does not prescribe any concrete constitutional provisions, and when you take a look at the constitutions of member states, you can see that they differ among themselves to a great extent. For the EU it is first of all important that now there is a Constitution which defines clearly who is responsible for what in this country. We must remind that this Constitution was adopted after we had, first, the Constitution of FRY which did not function due to relations between Serbia and Montenegro, after that we had the Constitutional Charter which we interpreted in different ways; moreover, we did not respect it either. After all that – and the EU defined this as constitutional weakness or instability – comes this Constitution which does actually in a certain way define who is responsible for what. What is important for the EU is that this new Constitution does not contain some provisions which would contradict the criteria we were talking about. Remarks regarding the new Constitution were pertaining first of all to the level of decentralization which could be higher, to the position of the judiciary in regard to the executive branch of power, as well as to the way in which the Constitution was adopted. However, compared to the previous situation when you had to either disregard the Constitution or to pretend it did not exist, this is a step forward. But it is not important only that the Constitution was adopted, important is also to implement it in a way which will demonstrate that it is harmonized not only with the letter of European laws and values, but also with their spirit. In this sense, we must wait and see whether the new Constitution will introduce some improvements in the political process which has been stagnating for some time now due to a lack of cooperation with The Hague Tribunal, or will his fate be similar to that of the Action Plan – much talk when it was adopted, but no results.

In your opinion, how will the negotiations on the status of Kosovo end?

- Here we have long-lasting unfavorable trends. The new Constitution and the Platform upon which the Serbian team is negotiating reflect a prevailing opinion on what Serbia sees as an acceptable solution for Kosovo, and I think there is no dispute in this regard. What, in my view, is not sufficiently clear, at least for us who are not included in the negotiating process, is whether or not there is some plan B, namely, what will Serbia do in case the decision would not be favorable for her. It is important that the citizens know what are the alternatives and whether there are any. We should remember that this Government did not have a plan what to do if Montenegro separates. So they were first speaking that the EU will not support the referendum, later they said that the Council of Europe would not accept the Montenegrin law on the referendum, then they vested their hopes in Lajcak – everything, except to accept a plan on what to do if Montenegro becomes independent. Now the situation is similar, but it seems to me that it is better for all of us to start wanting and doing things which are realistic and feasible.

Credibility

You mentioned the inefficiency of the Action Plan, although in the public it was presented as the final solution of our problems regarding cooperation with The Hague Tribunal. Do you think that the Government of Serbia has a genuine, not only declarative will to extradite Mladic to The Hague?

- I believe that a part of the Government would really want to see Ratko Mladic in The Hague, but what I cannot say is whether they would be ready to also arrest him. As well as in regard to some other issues, this Government does not have an active attitude to problems: for instance, we have ended the problem of relations with Montenegro when Montenegro decided this issue in a referendum; we are negotiating the status of Kosovo, but more important than our negotiations with the Kosovo party are the negotiations within the Contact Group, so that automatically we are again waiting for someone to solve this issue for us. In this sense our cooperation with The Hague Tribunal up to now, at least when we talk about this Government, was performed by having the indictees go voluntarily to The Hague (how much induced, how much voluntarily, is a question which we will not dwell upon). However, it is obvious that Ratko Mladic and those who are at large now will not go to The Hague voluntarily. Here the Government is in a position that it must actively do something. And this is now unclear – is there political will to do something actively, i.e. to arrest Mladic and to thus finalize the cooperation with The Hague Tribunal. The credibility of the Government is at stake: either the Government really does not know where Mladic is, and hence cannot arrest him, or it does not want to arrest him; both situations are not good for European integration – if it does not know, how can you then say that you rule over your entire territory, and if it does not want, then again it does not demonstrate readiness to fulfill the obligation. There are not many modalities: either Mladic must be arrested, or there must be credible proof that he is beyond our authority.

All this is happening in a context which for Serbia is not a simple one: this context implies negotiations on the future status of Kosovo; the State Community whose survival enjoyed majority support in Serbia fell apart; suspension of negotiations with the EU due to lack of cooperation with The Hague Tribunal. This is a difficult situation for Serbia. I think that the EU understands this and that it is ready to support Serbia.

In which direction will the future European system develop and what will be its foundations?

- The fact is that the EU with 12 or 15 members, which have a similar economic, cultural and historical heritage, was much more monolithic than it is now with 25 members of which ten became members in 2004. Never before in the history of European integration was there such a big enlargement and it takes some time to absorb this last enlargement. To be able to further enlarge, as well as to continue to function smoothly, the EU must deal with its future. This issue was also posed by the failure of the European constitution in referenda held in France and The Netherlands. Until now, enlargement was always going hand in hand with the deepening of integration in the EU. One is the catalyst for the other. But the fact is that the EU has reached the point when it must think – how much enlargement, and at what pace, and how much deepening and at what pace, are possible. However, it is not enlargement itself which is the problem. Only three percent of the citizens who voted against the European constitution in the French referendum say that they did so out of fear of enlargement. Like our citizens who voted against the new Constitution not because they had been interpreting the Constitution and making relevant conclusions about it; they were actually saying something on the way in which politics in Serbia is being conducted and on the way in which politicians behave – so also the French citizens have certainly not read the 200-300 pages of the European constitution, but have rather said something about the way in which the policies in the EU and their own concrete country is being conducted. I think this is a message which the EU will have to study carefully. However, this is not the first enlargement crisis. When you look at the process of European integration – it is a process of constantly overcoming some crisis. This is an end of an uninterrupted enlargement period which was going on since approximately the mid-eighties, up to the failure of the project of the European constitution. I do believe, however, that very soon ways and initiatives will be found to overcome this crisis, and that European integration will

continue in some way. It brings so much benefits to its members, so it is only a question of modalities of how to go further.

What can Germany's EU Presidency potentially mean for Serbia?

- Each time when a big country, founding country, with significant political and economic resources, is presiding over the European Union, it is expected it will make initiatives for the solution of some significant question. Germany has already stressed that the Western Balkans are going to be a region to which she will pay attention. In this context, since the next six months are going to be very important, in order to somehow remove the blockade of the integration process, it is good that the Presidency is held by a country with such a political and economic significance to be able to initiate some important moves. Fields in which Serbia does have problems are neither economic nor political reforms, but the non-fulfillment of political criteria and the creation of a climate that we are making progress with reforms only because someone is constantly pushing us.

Which conditions must be fulfilled in order to change the visa regime with Serbia?

- For us the visa issue is important because of free flow of citizens, but also as a symbolic issue, because from the beginning of the transition process promises are made to citizens of Serbia that they will be able to travel easier to the EU. However, we are simultaneously behaving like the man from Pirot in the joke who is waiting to win the lottery but does not pay the ticket. Namely, we have done very little to fulfill conditions for the change of the visa regime. These conditions are known and relate to more reliable travel documents (we are further on traveling with the FRY passport, although this country does not exist since 2003), and these travel documents can also be easier forged. The next condition is that the borders are fully controlled by the police, and not the army, which is a process in which we move slowly. It is only recently that the police have overtaken from the army the control of borders with Croatia. Here is also the signing of the agreement on readmission with EU member countries, which presupposes that illegal immigrants will be returned to Serbia, and a number of other conditions among which also some that we did harmonize with. Besides, it is important that there is also a consciousness that Serbia is economically and politically a stable country from which there will be no big immigrant pressure. It is also true that the EU visa policies are not flexible and that they are rigid, but these are the conditions and it would be good that Serbia starts fulfilling them. What we are soon starting to negotiate about are certain relaxations of conditions for acquiring visas, which will mean an easier and quicker issuing of visas for certain groups of citizens – scientists, students, artists, the business community etc.

In the Balkans there are parallel processes of national homogenization of the newly emerged states, with their simultaneous option for European integration. How can these two be accommodated?

- On the one hand, you cannot even join the European Union if you do not have a defined state, hence, national integration precedes European integration. So, these two processes are not necessarily incompatible. Certainly, this does not mean that you should have pronounced nationalistic and traditional features. However, it is visible that also within the EU there is a certain turn towards conservative political options: Le Pen in France gets a big number of votes, in Poland you have a right-wing government etc. – this is not something that is typical only of Southeast European countries. A number of them emerged as a result of the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, in these territories wars were waged, and their integration into the EU is seen as a way to avoid also some economic, but first of all security challenges. Therefore, one of the criteria the EU has defined is exactly the establishment of regional links with countries in the neighborhood, because this is seen as a good example for European integration. Seeking to make this process of regional networking compatible with European integration, the EU is in this regard demanding these countries to have their mutual relations as if they were EU members. For us it is important that we have come out of the period of conflicts and that we all have this smallest common denominator, that we all want to go to the European Union, and the EU uses this also in order to guard itself of some security risks and also to simultaneously stabilize this region and to direct it towards economic development and integration.

At the summit in Riga a political decision was made to invite Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro to become members of the Partnership for Peace. What does this decision mean for Serbia?

- This decision demonstrates the understanding of how important it is that all countries of the Western Balkans be included in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, because this is the best guarantee for the continuation of democratic and political reforms, but also of regional stability in the Balkans. Active membership of all countries in the Partnership for Peace is the best way to guarantee that military forces of all countries in the region cooperate and that the reforms which were initiated in the security sector, to which this invitation pays tribute, be continued and be even more dynamic.

On the other hand, Serbia and Bosnia are invited to the Partnership for Peace although they did not fulfill all obligations in regard to The Hague Tribunal. Although exactly this was the reason why the Partnership

for Peace's doors were closed up to now, the fact that they are now open does not mean that lesser significance is attached to the issue of war crimes, or that the obligation to extradite the indictees will further on be something that will not be insisted upon. On the contrary, in case that perhaps obligations in regard to the Tribunal will not be fulfilled, Serbia will not be in the position to make full use of the possibilities which this membership is opening. Simply, the situation was comprehended in its context, a political decision was made, a specific political signal was sent to the countries in the region, and first of all to Serbia which is awaiting elections and the solution for the status of Kosovo – that they do have a certain European and Euro-Atlantic future. Including Serbia and intensifying political cooperation open a choice of multiple possibilities to influence also developments within her borders, to support the path of reforms and to extend assistance for the fulfillment of conditions.

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