

Serbia Turns Back on Virulent Nationalism

Пише: Dan Bilefsky

понедељак, 04 октобар 2010 18:59



BELGRADE — Only two years ago Aleksandar Vucic, deputy leader of [Serbia](#)’s main opposition Progressive Party, was a leading voice of a party that hosted tens of thousands at nationalist rallies where indicted war criminals spoke and participants sang rousing songs vowing to fight to the last drop of blood for [Kosovo](#).

Now, a chastened Mr. Vucic flies to Brussels and Washington for meetings with European and American diplomats and talks on Serbia’s inevitable path toward the [European Union](#) and the West.

“We can’t prosper without the E.U. and the E.U. integration process,” said Mr. Vucic, newly retooled as a moderate. In his political youth, as information minister under the Serbian former strongman [Slobodan Milosevic](#), he imposed punishing fines on independent journalists who opposed the regime.

Mr. Vucic acknowledges what veteran opposition leaders dared to voice as long ago as the late 1980s, when Mr. Milosevic was ascendant and the destruction of Yugoslavia loomed.

“The biggest problem in Serbia is not Kosovo,” Mr. Vucic said in an interview. “It is the Serbian economy, unemployment, corruption, and low living standards.”

Twenty-five years after Serbian intellectuals and politicians began brewing the Serbs’ deep historical attachment to Kosovo into a toxic chauvinism that stoked years of war, Serbia is shedding virulent nationalism. It is a fundamental shift in the political landscape of a poor but still worldly Balkan country newly determined to integrate with Europe.

Serbia Turns Back on Virulent Nationalism

Пише: Dan Bilefsky

понедељак, 04 октобар 2010 18:59

With the global [financial crisis](#) roiling economies across the western Balkans, the impulse to end isolation and join the European Union is felt across the region. From Macedonia to Montenegro to Kosovo, governments look to Brussels in hope that stronger integration with the world's biggest trading bloc will help deliver economic salvation.

Across the border in [Bosnia](#), the prospect of joining the European Union could help bind the fragile multiethnic country together after the economy shrank 3.4 percent last year. Yet analysts fear that parliamentary and presidential elections on Sunday may accentuate ethnic divisions, making European integration even more elusive.

Indeed, Bosnia could even break apart, with the Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, making ever louder noises about tearing down the ineffectual, byzantine institutional arrangement that diplomats cobbled together in 1995 to halt three and a half years of war in the heart of Europe.

Other remnants of the old Yugoslavia, however, are doing better. Slovenia is a prospering member of the E.U. and [NATO](#); Croatia, its southern neighbor, hopes to follow it into the Union. Montenegro, small and mired by organized crime, is still on an upward trajectory. Even fledgling Kosovo, desperately poor and struggling to overcome corruption, is finally gaining greater international legitimacy.

In Serbia, cautious optimism is growing. In October, Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton](#) is expected to visit Belgrade and to reaffirm Washington's support for a Serbia firmly ensconced in European structures. That support has particular resonance given America's role, when Mrs. Clinton's husband was president, in leading the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, which aimed to stop Mr. Milosevic's repression of Kosovo's ethnic Albanians.

The hope that Serbia has entered a new era in relations with the West was fanned on Sept. 9 when Belgrade supported a compromise [United Nations](#) resolution on Kosovo that dropped its earlier demand to reopen talks on the status of its former territory.

Instead, senior Serbian officials have backed the idea of E.U.-mediated talks with Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in February 2008 with the firm backing of the United States and a majority of E.U. nations.

Serbia Turns Back on Virulent Nationalism

Пише: Dan Bilefsky

понедељак, 04 октобар 2010 18:59

The compromise marked a significant climb-down for the government in Belgrade, which has made joining the E.U. its overriding goal, even as it has remained unequivocal that it considers Kosovo its medieval heartland and has fought an unsuccessful campaign to have Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence deemed illegal. (In July the international Court of Justice in The Hague said it did not breach international law).

Days later, Serbia announced that it had indicted nine Serbian former paramilitaries known as the Jackals over the killing of 43 ethnic Albanians during the 1998-99 Kosovo war.

Many Western observers here interpreted the indictments as the latest sign that the determination of Belgrade to join the E.U. was finally coaxing Serbia into a reckoning about its role in the bloody Balkan wars of the 1990s.

While Serbia has yet to seize [Ratko Mladic](#), the Bosnian Serb general whose arrest is a condition for Serbia to join the E.U., the Serbian Parliament in April passed a resolution condemning Mr. Mladic's most heinous crime: the mass murder of more than 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica in 1995. In a country where Mr. Mladic is still seen by many as a hero, the resolution was bold.

Natasa Kandic, a leading Serbian human rights activist, said a conjunction of political, economic and social circumstances had made Mr. Mladic's arrest possible, while easing the country's path toward the west.

"Politicians across the spectrum have given a clear message related to Mladic that says cooperation with The Hague is a priority," she said, referring to the international war crimes court. "This has not been met with the resistance or demonstrations of the past because ordinary people are fed up with Serbia's isolation. This is a fundamental change."

Underlying the about-face in Serbian politics, analysts say, is the country's pragmatic President Boris Tadic, a bland but telegenic former psychology teacher who has become a favorite in Brussels and Washington.

Serbia Turns Back on Virulent Nationalism

Пише: Dan Bilefsky

понедељак, 04 октобар 2010 18:59

While Mr. Tadic has long supported the European Union, analysts noted that the more surprising development is the transformation of former arch-nationalists like Mr. Vucic.

Mr. Vucic explained that cold-headed economic pragmatism was trumping the nationalism of the past. He noted that about 60 percent of Serbs supported E.U. accession and were willing to compromise in return for economic prosperity.

Last year, Serbia, with foreign investment drying up and tax revenue waning, turned to the [International Monetary Fund](#) for a €3 billion bailout.

As other ex-communist countries now in the E.U. and NATO have prospered, the average monthly wage in Serbia is about 320 euros, one of the lowest in Europe. Unemployment in April was officially 19.2 percent.

While economic pain may have produced a more conciliatory stance, Serbian observers and western diplomats stressed that key challenges remained, particularly Kosovo and handing Mr. Mladic over to the international court.

Tellingly, the recent U.N. [General Assembly](#) session on Kosovo was delayed for three hours after Serbian officials balked at even being in the same room as their ethnic Albanian counterparts.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/02/world/europe/02iht-serbia.html>