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Human Rights and Democracy Violation Early Warning *Weekly Newsletter* No. 45

Serbia and NATO - "Patriots" urge referendum -

A group of over 200 "distinguished intellectuals"¹ signed a petition calling for a referendum on whether Serbia should join the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO). The petition was presented to the public at a Jan. 11, 2010 press conference in Belgrade. The event featured a "troika" of distinguished public figures who put their literary, journalistic and scientific skills and *oeuvre* in the service of defending Serbia from any modernization attempts: **Matija Bećković**, one of the most ardent advocates of Serb nationalist stance; **Ljiljana Smajlović**, Chairperson of the Association of Journalists of Serbia (UNS) and former Chief Editor of the *Politika* daily, widely known as the regime's mouthpiece; and **Prof. Svetozar Stojanović**, once a leading dissident in the *Praxis* group of critical social scientists, today a critic of the West's conspiracy against the Serbs.

Although the three have shouldered most of the effort to engineer the action, it is widely believed that it was masterminded by those who would like to see former Prime Minister **Vojislav Koštunica** and his *Democratic Party of Serbia* (DSS) play a key role in Serbian politics again.

The action is being carried out against the background of a dawning shift in **Tadić's** foreign policy: Serbia's rapprochement with the European Union (abolishment of visa requirement for Serbian citizens for travel in the Schengen zone; unfreezing of the *Interim Trade Agreement* pending ratification of the SAA; submission of Serbia's EU candidacy bid; and, last but not least, Belgrade's acceptance of EULEX deployment in Kosovo and, albeit limited, cooperation with it) and the apparent cooling of relations with Russia². There are strong signals – substantiated by some officials' and analysts' timid confirmations –

¹ Along with numerous academicians (both from Serbia and Republika Srpska), renowned scientists, artists, members of the clergy, writers and other prominent personalities, the list includes soccer players, writers without detectable recognition (let alone acclaim), self-appointed "defenders of Serbdom" in politics, culture, media and arts. What they do have in common is a high degree of bigotry and "patriotism" that often borders on to ethnic intolerance and indeed chauvinist xenophobia. Most of them can boast a rich record of active support to the war policies pursued from Belgrade, Pale and Knin during the 1990s wars in the Balkans.

² All of a sudden, enthusiastic announcements of Russian loans to subsidize Serbian budget deficit and finance major infrastructure projects disappeared from the public several weeks ago.



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that a change of Serbia's policy towards her immediate neighbors is a result of „suggestions rather than demands“ of the West. **Tadić's** recent initiative to pass a resolution on the Srebrenica³ genocide in Parliament, and his clear message that Serbia opposes a Bosnian Serb referendum on seceding from B&H, as well as his reluctant, but not declining response to Croatian President-elect **Ivo Josipović's** initiative to renew the dialogue and settle the numerous disputes between Belgrade and Zagreb without „help“ of the *International Court of Justice*, testify to a changed approach to regional stability, hitherto jeopardized by Belgrade's paternal attitude toward neighboring ex-YU member-Republics, personified in the zealous Foreign Minister **Vuk Jeremić**.

Notwithstanding the motives of **Tadić's** recent moves, one can ascertain that the climate in Serbia's public⁴ is changing. This can also be seen in the media, abounding in favorable reports on Europe – the fact that media which only weeks ago championed „patriotic“ rhetoric finding not a single nice word for Europe and the West in general, are now in the forefront of pro-Europe propaganda, testifies that much of the media offensive is orchestrated from a single center.

Speculations about an early parliamentary election are also seen as fuel to this initiative: a government faced with a chaos in the economy and society, and weakened by frequent blackmails from the ruling *Democratic Party's* (DS) smaller coalition parties, could use the current wave of Euro-enthusiasm and attempt to capitalize on it in a snap election.

The above depicted new tones noticeable on Serbia's political landscape could not be ignored by the camp embracing remnants of **Milošević's** old guard hardliners who did not go along with the reforms in the *Socialist Party of Serbia* (SPS) under Interior Minister **Ivica Dačić**, the right-wing populists around **Koštunica**, and xenophobic circles in the *Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* (SANU), *Association of Writers of Serbia* (UKS), *Serbian Orthodox Church*⁵ (SPC), universities atc. Prominent representatives of all these groups are among the signatories of the anti-NATO petition.

³ No illusion should be harbored as to yet another dimension of the background of **Tadić's** Srebrenica initiative: awaiting the *International Court of Justice's* advisory opinion on Kosovo's independence, Serbia can not afford to ignore the ICJ ruling on Serbia's role in the Bosnian war.

⁴ A recent opinion poll carried out by *Strategic Marketing* showed that 65% of Serbia's population is in favor of EU membership. However, most of the respondents identify EU membership merely with prospects of a better life. Asked what nation they think is Serbia's best friend, over 50% named Russia. On the other hand, the same percentage said that – if put before a choice - they would like to live in an EU country, whereas almost no one chose to live in Russia.

⁵ Following the death of Patriarch **Pavle**, the SPC is approaching the election of his successor on Jan. 22, 2010. Fierce internal battles between rivalling factions, as well as an outright defamating campaign in the media – featuring information on individual bishops that could originate only from secret police and/or other state-controlled sources – show that who will lead the Church in the years that could be marked by Serbia's accelerated modernization is too important an issue to be left only to the clergy. The „state of emergency“



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The initiators view the „danger“ of the Government deciding „in an undemocratic manner“ on Serbia’s membership in NATO, a „hostile organization which 1999 bombed Serbia and otherwise inflicted so much pain on Serbs in Serbia and in other Serb lands“ or „those who have robbed us of the most precious part of our identity“ and „created the artificial state of Kosovo“. Speaking at the Jan. 11 press conference, **Matija Bećković** said: "Serbia has on several occasions announced it 'will never recognize the independent state of Kosovo', meaning it will never join NATO. 'Independent Kosovo' is the work of NATO, which created that state and awarded itself supreme and absolute power in it" .

Ever since the fall of the **Djindjić** (2003) Government and throughout the two terms of **Vojislav Koštunica** as Prime Minister (until 2008), Serbia’s participation in Euro-Atlantic integrations has been off the agenda. Serbian Parliament adopted in December 2007 a resolution pledging military neutrality for Serbia – a step which effectively preempted any serious debate on Serbia’s security doctrine and options in a changing world. Anti-NATO propaganda – reduced to two key words: [1999] “bombing” and “Kosovo” - has been much more offensive than sporadic attempts to define Serbia’s security interests and priorities. It is therefore not surprising that opinion polls, carried out in such an atmosphere, suggest that majority of Serbian citizens oppose NATO membership. The *Centre for Free Elections and Democracy* (CeSID) published November 7, 2009 results of a poll showing that 51% of the population is against membership. Only 25% were found to be in favor.

While leading state dignitaries hesitate to express a clear-cut standpoint on Serbia’s national security future (within or without NATO), those opposing it decide to act. Although this initiative carries insignificant political weight in terms of mobilizing massive support – or, for that matter, initiating a serious and responsible debate on the issue – it is relevant as a reliable indicator of the climate in much of the influential intellectual *millieu*, parts of which having been and still being close to President **Tadić**.

which determines the pre-election climate in the SPC is understandable: the new SPC leadership will have to cater not only for their flock’s spiritual needs – it will have to deal with Serbia’s modernization and accession to the European Union, which has traditionally been looked upon by the SPC with much abhorrence and indeed hostility.



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Outlook:

Confronted with a range of strategic decisions to be made within the framework of an accelerated modernization in politics and economy, legislation and judiciary, education and media - absolutely indispensable if she genuinely aspires to join the family of free, democratic and prosperous nations - Serbia will have to embark on a process of defining her long term security and defense interests in an atmosphere void of ideological exclusivity, demagoguery and emotional charge. It is only in such a climate that her intellectual and political elites will live up to what is expected from them in a changing society.



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