



Serbia and Croatia Face Chance to Warm Ties And Lead Western Balkans Closer to the EU

Stefan Ralchev

February 2010

Balkan neighbours Serbia and Croatia, whose relations have been historically tense and deteriorated to war in the 1990s, may be on their way after recent domestic developments to warming up ties and becoming the locomotive of a reinvigorated integration of the Western Balkans into the European mainstream. Traditionally suspicious of each other after sharing the same Yugoslav roof for decades and Yugoslavia's collapse in bloody warfare in 1991-95, Serbia and Croatia now share the same foreign policy priority which unwittingly brings them together – EU membership. The election by clear margin of the moderate technocrat Ivo Josipovic as president in EU candidate Croatia in January 2010, as well as the advent of the pro-European coalition in Serbia in 2008, led by President Boris Tadic, and the country's official application for candidate status in late 2009, signal an opportunity for normalisation of bilateral relations aimed at faster EU track for both countries. The two republics are the largest of rump Yugoslavia and, naturally, the most powerful players in the Western Balkans. A commitment on their part to reconcile old memories in the name of new pragmatic, European-style partnership could work also to position their neighbours Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and especially Bosnia, more firmly on the EU accession path.

Lasting controversies

Despite signals of the last couple of months which can be interpreted as positive for improving ties on the path to EU, relations between Serbia and Croatia have been far from idyllic ever since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The two countries were at war from 1991 to 1995, when the former Yugoslav republic Croatia fought for its independence and territorial integrity against the Serb-led Yugoslav Army. Diplomatic ties were established in September 1996, but relations have naturally been uneasy due to the historical burden and marked by border disputes and international lawsuits pertaining to the war. Hostility between both the political leaderships and the publics themselves was high during the rule of nationalist leaders Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia. Since the death of Tudjman in 1999 and the overturn of Milosevic's authoritarian regime in 2000, more democratic governments have been in place in the two countries, and European integration has become one of their major foreign policy goals.

Yet controversies persist. Serbia and Croatia have not yet settled a border issue along the river Danube in Eastern Slavonia, particularly about jurisdiction over two islands, the Vukovar and Sarengrad islands.¹ The problem had not been attributed much significance during ex-Yugoslavia, as it was an internal Yugoslav issue between two republics, but gained significance following the break-up of the federation. The two border municipalities, Vukovar in Croatia and Bac in Serbia, have been working to resolve the issue, and some developments included the opening of Vukovar Island for bathers from both sides of the boundary.²

Another issue of contention between Serbia and Croatia has been the responsibility for war crimes committed during the 1991-95 war between the two neighbours. Croatia filed a lawsuit against the then-FR Yugoslavia for war crimes perpetrated by the Yugoslav army at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague back in 1999.³ Serbia responded no earlier than ten years later, already as an independent state, by filing a counter suit in January 2010. Serbia's claim encompasses crimes committed by the army of the Independent State of Croatia in the 1940s, apart from ones committed in the 1990s wars.⁴ Lawsuits related to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide against both Serb and Croat individuals are also proceed at the United Nations tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Whereas these hearings do not directly pertain to bilateral relations between the two countries, they have much to do with each one's aspirations for EU membership, the foreign policy priority which can serve as a unifying agent in Croat-Serbian ties. Cooperation with The Hague means faster progress in closing negotiation chapters for Croatia and granting of a candidate status for Serbia.

Apart from disagreements on the level of government relations, Serbia and Croatia have to cope with another important factor when dealing with each other, and that is public opinion. While governments tend to engage more or less pragmatically in international affairs in the globalised world, and historical record is rarely the key determinant, public pressure in the Balkans for the sake of historical or romantic ends has always been a powerful factor. And Balkan politicians tend to comply with this pressure, especially when elections are looming ahead. In Croatia, sentiments about Serbia and Serbs have been strongly negative ever since Yugoslavia's collapse, to the brink of sporadic attacks taking place on Serbian returnees or tourists or cars with Serbian registration plates. In Serbia, anti-Croatian feelings are less potent but there politicians have to cope with other nationalistic moods which hinder above all the country's EU bid and also relations with neighbours. These include inalienability of Kosovo, about which there is a broad consensus in Serbian society that it is the cradle of Serbian culture and identity; the wide public support for Ratko Mladic, the military commander of Bosnian Serbs during the 1992-95 war in Bosnia, currently on the run from ICTY; and a still tangible dislike for the West, above all for NATO and predominantly in rural areas, following the Alliance's 1999

¹ Klemenčić, Mladen and Clive Schofield. "War and Peace on the Danube: The Evolution of the Croatia-Serbia Boundary". *Boundary & Territory Briefing*, Vol. 3, Nr. 3, p.16. Available at <http://books.google.com>.

² "Vukovarska ada za opuštanje" [Vukovar Island to be open]. *B92*, July 29, 2006. Available at <http://www.b92.net>.

³ International Court of Justice. <http://www.icj-cij.org>.

⁴ "Podneta tužba protiv Hrvatske" [Lawsuit filed against Croatia]. *B92*, January 4, 2010. Available at <http://www.b92.net>.

bombing of the country over Milosevic's ferocities in Kosovo. These attitudes are often in the way of Serbia's Europe policy, as incumbent leaders have to balance between them and Serbia's stated priority to become a full-fledged member of the European mainstream and to have good relations with its neighbours. Indeed, Serbian President Boris Tadic was the only regional leader who did not attend the inauguration of his new Croatian counterpart, Ivo Josipovic, because of the presence at the ceremony of Kosovo's President Fatmir Sejdiu.⁵

Serbia's opening to Europe

The fall of Milosevic was a turning point in Serbia's political development, but what has kept the country on the track to real democratisation are the governments led by the Democratic Party (DS) – first the cabinet headed by Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, assassinated in 2003 by organised crime groups for his decisive crackdown on criminality, and then by the current president and party leader Boris Tadic. Djindjic and Tadic faced the difficult task of leading Serbia to Europe amidst a deep nationalist wave and a harsh economic situation. But the Serbian voters have shown at the latest series of elections that they are clearly for a European future for their country and would not opt for a regress to the pre-2000 isolation. After several presidential and parliamentary votes which produced nationalist or quasi-nationalist majorities in 2002 and 2003, Tadic won the presidential polls in 2004 and 2008, and his Democratic Party was able to form a pro-European ruling coalition and government after the May 2008 general election.⁶ Upon the approval of his government in parliament, Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic said that Serbia's priorities for the following four years were preparation for European Union membership, inalienability of Kosovo from the territorial integrity of the country, economic growth, fight against corruption and organised crime and respect for international law.⁷ Of course, here a mention of the EU's own activities in support of the democratic, pro-European option in Serbia is due. The bloc signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Serbia, the first rung on the way up to membership, just ahead of the key poll in May 2008, and has been active in cooperating with Tadic and his DS party ever since he came to power in 2004.

Serbia has since the DS-led coalition came to power in 2008 proved that its European aspirations are serious. In July 2008, weeks after the new government came into office, it tracked down, captured and surrendered to the ICTY in The Hague one of the most sought-after war crimes suspects after the 1990s wars – the Bosnian Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadzic. Karadzic's capture played a crucial role in raising the country's international profile and had been one of the conditions (and causes) for progress along the EU membership track. More recently, in December 2009 the Serbian parliament granted the

⁵ Matejcic, Barbara. "Josipovic Inaugurated as Croatia's New President". *BalkanInsight*, February 18, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/25937/>.

⁶ See Republican Election Commission, <http://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs>; "Vlada za evropsku buducnost Srbije" [A government for the European future of Serbia]. *Politika*, July 8, 2008. Available at <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Politika/Vlada-za-evropsku-buducnost-Srbije.sr.html>.

⁷ "Vlada za evropsku buducnost Srbije" [A government for the European future of Serbia]. *Politika*, July 8, 2008. Available at <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Politika/Vlada-za-evropsku-buducnost-Srbije.sr.html>.

northern province of Vojvodina, home to many minorities, the status of autonomy it had lost back in 1990. The new status will present Vojvodina with the possibility to apply for EU regional funding in the future. This is seen as a move by President Tadic to accelerate Serbia's EU integration process⁸ and took place days before the country officially deposited its application for membership of the bloc. On its part, the EU sent a positive signal to the country by removing travel visa requirements for Serbian citizens on December 19. Moreover, in a spirit of reconciliation and regional cooperation on the path to Europe, in January 2010 Tadic urged the Serbian parliament to adopt a resolution condemning the July 1995 massacre of some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men in Srebrenica by the Bosnian Serb forces.

Another development in Serbian society, which may seem collateral but anyway signals the general openness trend, is the election of Patriarch Irinej as head of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) following the death of Patriarch Pavle in November 2009. Serbian society, with some 84% of the population Christian Orthodox, is quite traditional with respect to faith. The SPC has played an important role not only in social life but also in politics and has a lot of influence in contemporary Serbia. Observers point out that Irinej is "responsible, tolerant and having an ear for the spirit of the times" and that his taking over as patriarch may change the outlook of the SPC, particularly "its previously unfavourable view of the European Union and the West in general."⁹

Croatia: A normalisation

Croatia firmly moved towards democratisation and political 'normalisation' following the death of its autocrat president Franjo Tudjman in 1999. The country is currently negotiating EU membership and hopes to join the bloc in late 2012. The election of Stjepan Mesic as president in 2000 marked the beginning of a 10-year period of distancing of Croatian political elite from the memories of the war and steadily looking ahead towards a European future. However, the main alternating parties in power – the right-wing Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) and the Social Democrat Party of Croatia (SDP) – had to deal and comply with a public opinion which might have been supportive of EU membership but has also been strongly negative towards neighbour Serbia as a consequence of the recent war. Nevertheless, Croatian society managed to transform from a post-war autocracy defined by negation of everything non-Croatian to an acting European democracy. A clear sign of that trend was the capture in 2005 in Tenerife of Ante Gotovina, a Croatian wartime general in hiding sought by the ICTY for war crimes against Serbs in the Krajina region in 1995.

Stjepan Mesic undoubtedly played a pivotal role in Croatia's normalisation process. As pointed out in Serbian media, "Mesic has made some mistakes during his 10-year tenure, but often, with very limited constitutional powers, he has been the moral arbiter who

⁸ "Serbia: Autonomy for Vojvodina". *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, December 15, 2009. Available at http://www.stratfor.com/node/150590/analysis/20091214_serbia_autonomy_vojvodina.

⁹ Kosanovic, Zoran. "New Serbian Patriarch Signals Openness to Change". *BalkanInsight*, January 27, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/analysis/25257/>.

pushed the state and society back into the normal track. This has had its effect on Zagreb's relations with the neighbours, too."¹⁰

The latest expression of the transformation of Croatian society was the election of Ivo Josipovic as Mesic's successor in January 2010. A Social Democrat, university professor of law and classical music composer, Josipovic collected over 60% of the ballots at the run-off, beating his opponent, populist Zagreb mayor Milan Bandic. The poll was a demonstration of the people's will for 'normalisation' of politics. Although he had previously declared himself as an agnostic and despite open Croatian Catholic Church support for his rival in a country where 90% of the people identify themselves as believers, Josipovic managed to win the presidency.¹¹

An opportunity

Despite ongoing controversies in the relations between Serbia and Croatia and existing stereotypes in their societies, the moment is opportune for starting to work on a true, pragmatic partnership defined by the two Balkan neighbours' common goal – membership of the European Union. Signals keep coming. In January, President Ivo Josipovic made public statements that Croatia might consider dropping the ICJ lawsuit against Serbia if certain conditions were fulfilled; his Serbian colleague Boris Tadic welcomed the announcement and said he supported withdrawal of the mutual charges.¹² Croatian and Serbian analysts believe those suits are politically motivated and designed for domestic consumption.¹³ A strong partnership between Serbia and Croatia in their EU bids will not only be to the benefit of these two countries themselves; it will have a massive stabilising effect for the whole Western Balkans, especially for multiethnic Bosnia, currently bogged down in failed reform and nationalist bickering among Bosnian Muslims, Serbs and Croats. Such partnership will be a locomotive for Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia on their reform path towards the EU, as none of these countries would like to risk isolation and remain the last to join the European family.

The implications for Bosnia

Bosnia has been the West's stubborn child and political challenge over the last four years. After a decade of stabilisation following the devastating 1992-95 war and seemingly successful post-war transition, in 2006 the situation worsened as political relations among the three main ethnic groups aggravated ahead of the election that year, blocking reform, the work of the central state institutions and constitutional amendments – key tasks needed done if the country wanted to get closer to the EU. One of the factors for this delay has

¹⁰ Tagirov, Tatjana. "Vickasti Antifašista" [The Joker Antifascist]. *Vreme*, December 29, 2009. Available at <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=905096>.

¹¹ Hedl, Drago. "Agnostic Josipovic Wins Trust of Catholic Croatia". *BalkanInsight*, January 13, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/features/24962/>.

¹² Niksic, Sabina. "Duels over Bosnia Unlikely to Set Balkans Aflame". *BalkanInsight*, January 26, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/analysis/25242/>.

¹³ Barlovac, Bojana. "Serbia Hits Back with Genocide Suit against Croatia". *BalkanInsight*, January 6, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/analysis/24820/>.

been the advent to power of Milorad Dodik as prime minister of the Serb Republic (RS) – one of the two autonomous parts, together with the Muslim-Croat federation, forming Bosnia after the war. Dodik and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) consolidated their grip on central and local authorities in the RS, and Dodik’s rising nationalist rhetoric, including threats for secession referendum in the RS, has concerned Western observers. Apart from the talk, what Dodik has been doing is obstructing the work of central Bosnian institutions by frequent boycotts and thus preventing key EU-required reforms from happening. Of course, Dodik is the most visible yet not the sole hindrance in the reform process. Representatives of the Muslim and Croat parties also add up to the clog by occasional refusal to participate in meetings or sessions, etc.

A reinforced partnership between Serbia and Croatia on the EU track, and Serbia and Croatia taking full advantage of pre-membership benefits, may engender fears of isolation in Bosnia and have disciplining effect on Dodik. Serbia and Croatia are clearly no more the ‘concerned mother nations’ of the post-war years whose main foreign political concerns were connected with Serbs and Croats in Bosnia. They are increasingly looking towards the EU as the priority in their policies. Bosnian observers point out that the conciliatory moves by Serbia and Croatia of late show a resolve to leave behind their difficult past, back away from Bosnia and leave its future to its leaders and focus on their common European aspirations, as there is neither time nor energy to waste on arguments in the Balkans.¹⁴ As aptly put by a Banja Luka-based analyst, “Bosnia [is] now being left on its own to make the choice between ‘following in its neighbours’ footsteps or remaining in a state of painful stagnation for as long as it wants” – but without the power to hold back the rest of the region.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Niksic.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Barlovac, Bojana. "Serbia Hits Back with Genocide Suit against Croatia". *BalkanInsight*, January 6, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/analysis/24820/>.
- Hedl, Drago. "Agnostic Josipovic Wins Trust of Catholic Croatia". *BalkanInsight*, January 13, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/features/24962/>.
- International Court of Justice. <http://www.icj-cij.org>.
- Klemenčić, Mladen and Clive Schofield. "War and Peace on the Danube: The Evolution of the Croatia-Serbia Boundary". *Boundary & Territory Briefing*, Vol. 3, Nr. 3, p.16. Available at <http://books.google.com>.
- Kosanovic, Zoran. "New Serbian Patriarch Signals Openness to Change". *BalkanInsight*, January 27, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/analysis/25257/>.
- Matejčić, Barbara. "Josipovic Inaugurated as Croatia's New President". *BalkanInsight*, February 18, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/25937/>.
- Nikšić, Sabina. "Duels over Bosnia Unlikely to Set Balkans Aflame". *BalkanInsight*, January 26, 2010. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/analysis/25242/>.
- "Podneta tužba protiv Hrvatske" [Lawsuit filed against Croatia]. *B92*, January 4, 2010. Available at <http://www.b92.net>.
- Republican Election Commission. <http://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs>.
- "Serbia: Autonomy for Vojvodina". *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, December 15, 2009. Available at http://www.stratfor.com/node/150590/analysis/20091214_serbia_autonomy_vojvodina.
- Tagirov, Tatjana. "Vickasti Antifašista" [The Joker Antifascist]. *Vreme*, December 29, 2009. Available at <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=905096>.
- "Vlada za evropsku budućnost Srbije" [A government for the European future of Serbia]. *Politika*, July 8, 2008. Available at <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Politika/Vlada-za-evropsku-buducnost-Srbije.sr.html>
- "Vukovarska ada za opuštanje" [Vukovar Island to be open]. *B92*, July 29, 2006. Available at <http://www.b92.net>.