



## Is the post-2000 improvement of relations between Serbia and Croatia irreversible?

*Stefan Ralchev*

February 2013

An unusual graffito could be seen in central Belgrade after the working visit of Zoran Milanović, the Croatian prime minister, to Serbia on January 16<sup>th</sup>. It appeared on the wall of University of Belgrade's Rectorate and [said](#), "Serbs and Croats [are] brothers!" It is arguably the first time since the end of the deadly conflicts in the Western Balkans that such a reconciliatory, though anonymous, public effusion takes place in one of the region's capitals.

The prime ministerial visit, and the graffito for that matter, was hardly conceivable just a few months ago. Relations between the two neighboring Balkan countries have never been perfect after the conflicts of the 1990's, but improved notably due to the joint reconciliation efforts of then-Serbian president Boris Tadić and his Croatian counterpart Ivo Josipović. This 'love affair' ended with the election of Tomislav Nikolić as president of Serbia last year; his blunt, undiplomatic statements angered both Croatians and Bosnians, while the November ICTY acquittal of two war-time Croatian generals accused of crimes against Serb civilians generated ill-will in Serbia.

Yet a careful look at recent developments indicates that these controversies are properly viewed as temporary drawbacks on a generally consistent path to improved Croatia-Serbia relations.

First, the vehement improvement between ties during the Tadić-Josipović era was in itself extraordinary, and possibly even a bit ahead of its time. Tadić's Democratic Party (DS) played a crucial role in setting Serbia firmly on the path to democracy, rule of law and European integration – and also, significantly, in opening the country to its neighbors and trying to heal old wounds. Ivo Josipović, for his part, is a center-left, forward-looking politician who established an unprecedented personal friendship with Tadić. So it was only logical that Tadić's replacement by Nikolić in the late spring of 2012 would cool relations between the two countries, much facilitated by Nikolić's subsequent media statements.

Second, it was high time the responsibility in bilateral relations shifted to where it belongs – the heads of government, or the executive. Both Serbia and Croatia are parliamentary republics, with strong executive power belonging in the prime minister's office and the cabinet. Milanović's Belgrade visit indicates a shift in bilateral ties to the natural centers of power among each country's official leadership. This shift has more than institutional implications, too. On a personal level, it will be much [easier](#) for Milanović to deal with Dačić than it would be for Josipović to have to handle Nikolić. Nikolić has proved to be a brusque, awkward diplomat who

acts and speaks out of personal conviction but is sometimes unaware that tact is more effective in relations among nations. Dačić, on the other hand is the most down-to-earth, efficient and truly working politician in Serbia at the present moment. His controversial past as the speaker for Slobodan Milošević has been overshadowed by his willingness to get the job done, especially as concerns Belgrade's talks with Pristina, and good neighborly relations in general, vis-à-vis Serbia's bid to start accession talks with the European Union this year. Unlike the star of the day, Aleksandar Vučić, the deputy prime minister, who has conquered public opinion polls with his massive, and loud, campaign of anti-corruption investigations and arrests, Dačić gives the impression of the reformed pragmatic who quietly moves forward in pursuing Serbia's most important goals, progress on the EU path and normalization of relations with Kosovo, for that purpose. He may have also a personal ambition – to become the EU's new favorite in Belgrade and thus remain a relevant political factor in view of the danger posed by Vučić's growing popularity at home and the uncertain outcome of a possible early parliamentary election which could see Dačić's Socialists thrown out of the ruling coalition.

Finally, but perhaps most important, the constant, benign impact of the EU's soft power on both Serbia and Croatia, whoever is in power, will guarantee that bilateral relations will be improving rather than deteriorating. This soft power should not be explicitly understood as face-to-face meetings and direct Commission or Member State pressure on the leaders of the two countries. The real soft power of the EU lies in the accession perspective, which continues to be a strong magnet and leverage tool all across the Western Balkans, despite the continued crisis in Europe. The Serbian and Croatian foreign ministers have commented that Milanović's visit was made through the initiative of the two countries rather than at the behest of the EU, and took place early in the timeframe initially envisioned. Croatia is eager to formally join the bloc in July of this year, and Serbia is working to remove every possible obstacle before the Council's decision in the first half of 2013 on setting a date for the start of accession talks. The visit indicates the commitment of the countries to their good-neighborly relations, as befits EU member states.

*This text was originally published in the blog section of the website of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (blog.gmfus.org).*