



## NATO AND SERBIA

The interview of Serbia's Minister of Defence Dragan Šutanovac to the Belgrade daily (Press 09. January 2010), which linked the adoption of the European value system in Serbia to the Euro-Atlantic security system, was perceived in public as a prelude to Serbia's pursuit of membership into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In an attempt to prevent the current political elite "to push for NATO membership behind the citizens' backs" the "200 Serbian intellectuals" called for a referendum on this matter and opened discussion about NATO in Serbia. This initiative opened the public debate about NATO in Serbia. The most often used arguments during the debate were: (1) necessity of a democratic debate for undertaking such an important step followed by a public referendum; (2) the issue of self-proclaimed "neutrality" of Serbia; (3) endangering of our relations with Russia.

### DEMOCRATIC DEBATE, REFERENDUM AND NEUTRALITY OF SERBIA

The bombing of 1999 made NATO by far the most unpopular brand in Serbia. Negative perception of NATO is not in line with the excellent relations that Serbia has with its member states such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Germany, Czech Republic, the UK, (NATO and EU members) but also Norway, Canada and the US (only NATO members). All of them strongly support and help Serbia both politically and financially.

As a direct consequence of the emotional reaction to the bombing campaign, as well as the too cautious PR of both Serbian elites and NATO members, an ordinary citizen has not been exposed to the fact that EU and NATO security go hand in hand and that separating NATO from its member states is both inaccurate and impossible. Since the democratic changes in 2000, Western governments have focused on the process of European integrations of Serbia, encouraging Serbian elites to undertake necessary reforms.

Lack of information seriously affects the popularity of the "NATO brand" in Serbia. Having that in mind, it is necessary to consider the following:

First, Serbia's accession to NATO could not be done secretly. The example of Montenegro illustrates the process of NATO accession. Montenegro became a PfP member in December 2006. Its IPP was submitted in January 2008, while IPAP and the Intensified Dialogue started almost simultaneously in mid 2008. Recently, in December 2009 Montenegro received its MAP. Although one can assume that the process of Montenegro's accession is fast in comparison to some other states, it is clear that the process is relatively long and gradual. Therefore, hints that NATO accession process can be kept secret from the citizens have no merit. A simple calculation testifies that the accession of Serbia to NATO would be difficult before 2013. Hence, there is enough time for democratic and fruitful public discussion about this important issue.

Also, states do not transfer their sovereignty to NATO. Unlike the EU, NATO does not have its own “will” embodied in the supranational competences independent from the policies of its member states. For instance, although none of the member states opposed bombing of Serbia in 1999, some of them are still against NATO’s recognition of Kosovo (as an international organization). From this standpoint, it is hard to legally justify the call for referendum in Serbia. Referendum, according to the Serbian Constitution, is one of the ways of exercising *peoples’ sovereignty*, alongside, the *representative body* and *peoples’ initiative*. At the same time, it is the only form of exercising *peoples’ sovereignty* which is limited, because Art. 108 of the Constitution envisages that obligations arising from the international treaties cannot be the subject to a referendum. Considering that member states’ sovereignty is not transferred onto NATO, a referendum on membership would be at odds with previous practice of the Republic of Serbia, which did not put on a referendum membership in other international organizations, which, unlike NATO, have a supranational role and to which Serbia transferred a part of sovereignty: for instance Council of Europe (in human rights matters) or United Nations.

Since 1990, all except three countries (Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) which accessed NATO put up a question of accession to a referendum. Others opted for open and rational public debate which analyzed cost and benefits of integration against staying out. The experience of countries which accessed NATO and their strong desire to stay in it somehow transfer the burden of proof to anti-NATO thinkers who should prove that what works so good for the rest of Eastern Europe is bad for Serbia.

Furthermore, in December 2007, Serbian Parliament passed a Resolution “...on Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia, which, in Article 6, declared *military neutrality of Serbia*, pending the referendum on the matter. This resolution is the most widely used argument against NATO. However, military neutrality presupposes recognition of that same neutrality by the state’s neighbours and great powers. Besides, Serbia’s Defence Strategy and National Security Strategy do not define the concept of neutrality. Instead, the issue of Kosovo status is emphasized as the biggest threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Nevertheless, neither of the two documents offers a way to solving this problem, which makes the recognition of the threat – purely declarative. More realistic threats for Serbia are those of asymmetric nature (also listed in these documents): terrorism, proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, corruption etc. Those threats surpassed both national and regional borders long time ago. Neutral Serbia, without intensive cooperation with NATO would be too weak and poor to cope with these challenges alone.

Austria, Ireland, Sweden and Finland have often been put forward as examples of EU but not NATO member states. It is rarely mentioned that these five countries are considered as advanced PfP participants, which are contributing to NATO current missions even more than some member states. Serbia joined the PfP in December 2006. The current state of affairs shows that Serbia did not use its entire potential in the PfP process. It was few months late in making its Presentation Document, and one of the basic treaties of the partnership, the *PfP security treaty* was signed only on 1 October 2009. Due to the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo, Serbia made its IPP only in the beginning of 2009.

Despite the fact that Serbia increased its participation in peacekeeping missions, both with military and civilian police (involvement in peacekeeping mission in Chad, within the Norwegian contingent, with prospects of deployment to Lebanon (within Spanish contingent) and to Cyprus UNFICYP mission), Serbia still does not have sufficient parliamentary support for deepening of Euro Atlantic integration. Although Serbian Ministry of Defence made a substantial progress since the forming of the new government in 2008, there is still lack of inner political support to elevate Serbia to the next level of cooperation – to become the advanced PfP member, as it was foreseen by the Presentation Document.

Finally, it is true that the Serbian path to NATO would probably shake its relations with Russia. Russia’s fervent opposition to NATO enlargement is already proverbial. Serbia, which builds “strategic partnership” (in energy sphere) with Russia, would be expected to refrain from undertaking steps which could be negatively perceived in Russia. Russian officials have voiced their opposition to Serbia’s NATO accession on more than one occasion, which caused both Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić and President Boris Tadić to voice an opinion different than the one of their Minister of Defence.

The level and intensity of cooperation which Russia has with NATO countries such as Germany, Greece, and more recently France, which is visible even in growing military cooperation, promises this slowdown in relations to be rather short. Realistic interest of both countries would dictate re-energizing those relations, after a cold period – during negotiations and immediately after Serbia's accession to NATO.

## **COSTS AND BENEFITS OF JOINING NATO – INCREASING SERBIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD**

Accession to NATO is not an obligation of a state. In the cases of other East European countries it was recognition that the state passed transition test. Armed forces and cooperation in the military sphere are very useful tools of efficient foreign policy. Dialogue and cooperation with NATO help increasing its influence among the strongest decision making community in the world. Furthermore, since NATO member states practically surround Serbia proper, Serbia has to cooperate with it even if it does remain neutral.

There is widespread notion that joining NATO is more expensive than remaining neutral country. In fact, it is not easy to calculate the costs or benefits of joining NATO because there are different types of costs and different types of benefits in such areas as security, economy and foreign policy. First, remaining strictly neutral (with low participation in PfP and other regional initiatives) would mean that Serbia would have to increase its expenditures for both conventional and asymmetric defence. One cannot be neutral and rely on Alliance's common structures to address these threats.

NATO recommendation is that its members should spend at least 2% of their GDP on defence, but this varies in reality. Some (mostly older) members of the Alliance spend even more than 3%, while new members predominantly spend less than 2%. Regarding the costs of army transformation and adaptation to NATO standards there is a general assumption in the army that transformation is necessary with or without joining NATO, since the NATO standards are the highest in the world. Serbia already started the *process of interoperability* with NATO, what means that these costs are inevitable. One should not forget that the process of Euro Atlantic integration improves Serbia's military industry perspective. In 2009 alone, Serbia signed many new contracts for export of military equipment.

Finally, being under NATO umbrella sends a powerful signal for potential foreign investors, as a proof that climate for investments is stable and secure. All of the member states from Eastern Europe experienced the largest inflow of FDI in years prior to and after joining NATO.

## **GENUINE POLICY ORIENTATION OR SIMPLIFICATION OF THE ENEMY PICTURE: WAY FORWARD?**

The opposition to Serbia's NATO membership looks like a conscious attempt to play the anti-NATO card in order to halt Serbia's western integration. Therefore, opposing both the membership and any other step forward towards NATO is not very original or rational policy. Portraying NATO as opponent or even enemy simplifies the relations and strengthens the negative approach towards this organisation. The rather poor debate suffers from chronic lack of information about NATO and is fuelled with emotions. Anti-Western political option uses this situation to rush referendum and halt integration – which is both legally and politically questionable approach. Referendum should be called only in an atmosphere of vibrant discussion, availability of rational policy choices if a responsible long – term political decision is to be made. Premature call for referendum would rush the important matter while emotions connected with bombing and Kosovo declaration of independence are still fresh and would guarantee its failure. Therefore, it would not really afford citizens an option to choose, hence questions its constitutionality.

Political benefits of advanced PfP status or NATO membership are more than obvious. First, they would mean final allying with our biggest economic and political partners, thus making it a proof of our foreign policy priorities. In other words, it would help Serbia to determine its long-term foreign policy orientation. Also, it would be a token of Serbia's allegiance to liberal democracy, rule of law and market economy. Both aspects would contribute to the process of European integration, which is the paramount priority of Serbia's foreign policy. By pursuing NATO – oriented course, Serbia would be included into the decision-making process in wider Euro-Atlantic area and beyond, as formally equal among the military and economic strongest states in the world. That would certainly increase its influence in international affairs. The membership in NATO is indispensable for the favourite foreign policy slogan among Serbian politicians – *Serbia leader in the Balkans*. Without participation in the supreme political and military forum in the region and Europe, which will soon include all Western Balkans states, Serbia would risk losing all of the benefits that it derives from its size and geopolitical position.

Serbia should start cooperation in all segments proposed in its own Presentation Document. An interest in eventual drafting of IPAP should be expressed, which would deepen current cooperation. Furthermore, there is enough space for further strengthening of regional cooperation. Finally, Serbia-NATO Defence Reform Group should continue its work

Serbia should follow the example of other countries in the region and consider engagement in the UN peacekeeping missions that are NATO-led, such as the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Serbia should not treat the PfP as a "buffet" handpicking what it wishes and dismissing the rest. It is a process out of which Serbia can get much more, even without joining NATO. Due to its geopolitical position, Serbia does not have the luxury or time to remain slave of Kosovo status deadlock.