

V.I.P. Daily News Report

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COMMENTARY

Playing Old Card: New Campaign for Winning EU Candidate Status Kicks off

In the New Year 2012, there is nothing new in this old Serbia. The authorities are continuing their battle for winning EU candidate status, while doing nothing in the meantime to solve the problem of Kosovo or reform the country. The authorities' one and only goal is to stay in their present positions, hang on to power until the next election (probably to be held on May 6), and somehow win that election.

The country, dangerously quiet and somnolent in the wake of the New Year and Christmas holidays, was only awakened by the (media hyped) story about an arms cache found in Banja Luka at the time of a visit by Serbian President Boris Tadic and the dreary case of suicide of the former CEO of Belgrade's Oncology Clinic, suspected of involvement in a medicaments procurement scandal. Over the past few days, media have been devoting extensive coverage to both topics.

What happened in Banja Luka was in all probability a case of smuggling and trafficking in weaponry, but the authorities are once again using the media to play on the sentiments of the people, who since the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003 have been extremely sensitive to reports about conspiracies and potential assassinations.

The late doctor, who was found hanged in a Belgrade park, is at the center of a lot of rumor and suspicion. However, nobody has raised the question yet as to whether the judicial system may somehow have contributed to this tragic outcome. Under the domestic criminal law, a suspect may be held in custody indefinitely pending an investigation. In this case, the late doctor had spent over a year in investigative custody, although the investigation is yet to unearth any evidence of his guilt and, according to the incumbent CEO of the clinic, the investigation has found no irregularities in the medicaments trade, either.

And so, despite statements about the country's having made big strides in reforming the judiciary, it is clear that there is a lot that has not been put in order, especially where it concerns the influence of the political authorities on the judiciary and, particularly, on the appointment of judges, who then have blindly to obey the executive government. After all, press in Germany has recently published two parallel and yet diametrically opposed documents on the state of affairs in the Serbian judiciary.

Meanwhile, the northern Kosovo municipalities are making preparations for a referendum on their status, over which the authorities in Belgrade have no influence, so that the media are no longer even reporting on it. This is another case illustrative of how the authorities control the key media -- to such an extent that this is becoming a threat to the mental health of the populace.

The economic situation is deteriorating, there are no signs of recovery, poverty is spreading, and popular dissatisfaction has come dangerously close to breaking point. The dwindling purchasing power of the people is evident from the fact that retail trade dropped in 2011 by nearly 17% as against 2010.

However, Serbs have learned not to take their grievances out into the streets as they used to do in the past, but to bide their time until the election and then take their vengeance on the bad government. This worked for them once with the late President Slobodan Milosevic and they are probably hoping that they can do the same again with Tadic and his Democratic Party (DS).

The authorities' only ace in the hole at the moment is the old one of trying to win EU candidate status; as well, government officials are again talking about the possibility of Serbia being given a date in March for opening EU accession talks. This would be perfect timing for the lot in government, coming as it would just ahead of the next election, penciled in for May. Controlled media would try to turn this into a key argument in the election campaign that would keep Tadic's party in power.

Neither reform, nor a solution for the Kosovo situation, nor yet a crackdown on corruption of dramatic proportions in the country but candidate status -- this has long become an end unto itself. The public opinion does not associate EU candidacy with an improvement in the domestic situation or the implementation of reforms. For the authorities and for most Serbs, the candidacy decision, one way or another, will be a sign whether the European Union and the United States still support Tadic and the DS or are prepared to accept another offer.

And so, instead of working on an internal organization of the country and society, the authorities will pursue a diplomatic campaign with a view to trying to hide all the shortcomings of the Serbian state and society and, by frightening the European Union with the prospect of the nationalists' election victory, cheat their way into the next step on the EU integration path, which suits them fine ahead of an election.

The European Commission and the European Union as a whole may perhaps swallow this, too, and grant Serbia candidate status, but in that case, the Europeans will once again have interfered in a Serbian election and influenced its outcome. And it would not be the first time, either. EU candidate status does not mean much in the practical sense and it costs nothing (just look at Macedonia and Turkey).

However, it would be a gesture of support from the European Union to Tadic, who is not particularly popular at home at the moment. Tadic and his administration, on the other hand, would get what they want without carrying out any further reforms, resolving the Kosovo issue, or coming to grips with corruption.

The Serbian authorities have barely recovered from statements made in August by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who opened the local people's eyes to the conditions that the country has to meet in order to get any closer to the European Union. And these conditions do not only have to do with Kosovo, which is a priority – they have to do also with a crackdown on corruption, a judiciary reform, freedom of the media, etc.

Now Tadic and those around him have launched another frontal attack on the European Union in an effort to win another trump card for the forthcoming election without carrying out a reform or resolving the Kosovo situation. To them, Kosovo has value as an opportunity for procrastinating a solution and so ensuring a longer survival in government for themselves.

The EU administration may let things slide and accept all this, forgetting all the mistakes it made in the EU enlargement process in the past and which are costing is dearly today. However, the Brussels administration has to go through the motions of doing something and Serbia has shown itself to be a good experimental laboratory.

The main argument of Tadic's group in power is that there is no other political force except themselves to lead Serbia into the European Union and that all the opposition forces are in fact nationalistic and a threat to the region. However, every analyst knows that at this moment, Serbia does not have the capacity to make bigger problems than those made by the incumbent authorities; knows, too, that most political parties have realized that Serbia cannot prosper without the European Union and that, if nothing else, EU membership for Serbia means membership in an orderly system without which there can be no prosperity.

With his complete control of the media and the entire state apparatus, Tadic has put the opposition in a passive position in the matter of EU integration, so that, for tactical reasons, opposition leaders cannot put their plans before the public in their entirety. They can neither be less nationalistic than Tadic nor more pro-EU than he is. It is hard to imagine, for example, that SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) leader Tomislav Nikolic should have a more cooperative approach to Kosovo than Tadic during the election campaign – and how far Tadic's approach is cooperative is best known to those that are concerned with it.

Therefore, Tadic is still sending messages to the international community and the domestic public in his pseudo-intellectual interviews, as he did in his interview to the *Press* newspaper earlier this week, in which he said that “nobody knows when the SNS political machinery will blow up” and that it is only when it is given a date for EU accession talks that Serbia “will be irreversibly on its way to the European Union.” This is meant to suggest to the readership that the only one that can lead the country to EU membership is Tadic himself and this in a country steeped in corruption and with the media and the judiciary under the authorities' total control.

One must say, too, that the opposition, for its part, is showing little enterprise or political or intellectual ability in the given circumstances. However, such as it is, limp, with no initiative or clear positions, it will nevertheless probably defeat Tadic at the next election. Serbs know very well what their government is doing and will probably not tolerate this any more. As matters stand now, in the eyes of the electorate, anybody else is better than the incumbent government, which they consider to be responsible for corruption and the country's economic collapse, as well as being arrogant and overbearing.