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# Serbia Reinvents Itself

**Elizabeth Pond**

Back in the 1990s, Ivica Dacic, known as ‘Little Slobo’, was the spokesman who justified strongman Slobodan Milosevic’s conquests of neighbouring non-Serbs in the Balkan wars. Aleksandar Vucic, as the information minister of Yugoslav President Milosevic, was the hatchet man for the media who defended the vast ethnic cleansing by paramilitary police of more than 60% of the 90%-majority Albanians living in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Tomislav Nikolic was the deputy leader of the Serbian Radical Party that berated Milosevic for being too soft and not seizing much more contiguous territory for a Greater Serbia; the party’s founder, Vojislav Seselj, would shortly report to The Hague for trial on war-crimes charges.

That was a generation ago. Today Dacic, 47 years old, is prime minister of Serbia. Vucic, 43, is first deputy prime minister. Nikolic, 61, is president. Seselj, 58, is still in a remand cell at The Hague, awaiting his verdict in the autumn. Together, they have wrought a political metamorphosis – Seselj by removing himself from Belgrade politics, his three compatriots by remoulding their country’s self-identity from ‘bandit Serbia’ to ‘decent Serbia’, as Vucic sees it.<sup>1</sup>

But no, the foxes are not now ruling the chicken coop, despite all the fears in the EU after Milosevic’s old Socialists and the successors to Seselj’s Radicals won Serbia’s elections last year – and, for the first time, assumed full government responsibility. Instead, within nine months of taking office,

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the foxy ultranationalists decided to cut their losses by admitting that the Kosovo that seceded from Serbia in 2008 is no longer theirs. Their reward at first glance seems small: a target date for starting EU accession talks and thereby rescuing their stressed economy.<sup>2</sup>

The public proof of this sudden new pragmatism is the brief 15-point EU-brokered deal that Prime Minister Dacic initialled with his Kosovo counterpart, Hashim Thaci, on 19 April 2013. In it Belgrade accepts for the first time that the local Serb majority in the northern tip of Kosovo will live under Kosovo's laws. This augurs a halt to the mass smuggling that has deprived both Pristina and Belgrade of tariffs in this no man's land, and a halt as well to the operation of clandestine security 'parallel structures' that Belgrade has maintained in the locality, at an annual cost greater than the pre-accession aid it already receives from the EU.

Even more convincing proof of the Serbian government's new pragmatism is provided by the death threats to both Dacic and Vucic from remaining hardcore Serb ultranationalists, the frowns of Church officials who cherish Kosovo as the sacred birthplace of Serbian Orthodoxy – and the howls of pain from north Kosovo Serbs. Fourteen years after NATO bombs forced Milosevic to pull his military forces out of Kosovo and turned the province into a de facto United Nations protectorate – and five years after Pristina finally declared independence from its Serbian overlord – the rural and small-town Serbs in the north must now concede that they no longer reside in Serbia. They must follow the example of the other half of Kosovo's Serbs, who live south of the Ibar River, and utilise the ample minority guarantees in the Kosovo constitution. Serbia is no longer willing to sacrifice the interests of its seven million to maintain the lifestyle of 60,000 north Kosovo Serbs.

This adjustment comes hard. In mid-May, some 3,000 Serbs from north Kosovo chanted 'treason' as they marched in Belgrade to protest their severance from Serbia – and from their sinecure of its subsidies of double salaries for some and no taxes except protection money for all. At their rally retired Serbian Orthodox Bishop Atanasije hinted broadly that God might welcome the murder of Dacic in a re-enactment of the 2003 assassination of reformist Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. And Metropolitan Amfilohije pointedly

offered a premature requiem prayer for the repose of the dead Serbian government, parliament and Serbs killed in Kosovo.<sup>3</sup>

Any previous centrist government would have had to back down in the face of such resistance from north Kosovo Serbs, the Church hierarchy and the ultranationalists who would have rallied to their cause. But this time, it was the ex-ultranationalist parties themselves that were making peace with the West, and these ex-chauvinists could not be blackmailed.

With the 19 April pact, the nightmare 1990s wars of Yugoslav succession, characterised on all sides less by firefights between uniformed soldiers than by militia terror against defenceless civilians, have truly ended. The ex-ultranationalists have made an extraordinary leap – without prior incremental steps of repentance or confrontation of past demons – to the goal that post-war transitional justice aspires to: transmuting a bellicose mindset. Remarkably, it is Milosevic's Socialists and the Radicals' heirs who are now transforming Serbs' poisonous old sense of mingled entitlement and victimhood into a pragmatic and (Vucic's word) 'normal' mentality.<sup>4</sup>

### **Subterranean evolution**

Nothing had prepared Western observers to intuit the subterranean evolution of the Serbian ultranationalists that was revealed in 2013. In the two decades since the 1990s wars began, they had become inured to watching Balkan extremists – and none more than the Serbs – block efforts at regional reconciliation. Only in retrospect is it possible to trace the retreat by the Socialists and Progressives from nineteenth-century ideological nationalism and special Serb *inat*, or 'malevolent, vengeful and obstinate defiance', as writer Aleksa Djilas defines it.<sup>5</sup>

The dynamic began in 2000, with what were intended to be only pro forma elections. Yugoslav President Milosevic suffered a surprise defeat, in large part because he had just lost his four local wars, following NATO intervention. He was forced to yield to the mandate of the ballot as Belgrade's robust civil society mobilised a million-strong street protest and segments of his security apparatus, reading the omens, refused to shoot demonstrators. In June 2001, old-regime judges on the Yugoslav Constitutional Court banned any extradition of Serbs to the UN tribunal set up to adjudicate Balkan war

crimes, but within hours of this ruling new Serbian Prime Minister Djindjic packed Milosevic off to The Hague before hardliners could muster crowds to block the transfer.

The moderate, German-educated Djindjic, however, was not granted the time to stanch the growing popular conviction that Serbs were being specially persecuted by the EU, by Kosovo-friendly America and by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The zeitgeist shaped by the Serb intelligentsia in its revolt against the perceived encroachment on Orthodox Serbdom by the two Western ideologies of Marxism and political liberalism still prevailed. The ideas voiced by Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts intellectuals in a famous 1980s screed against the de-ethnicised, anti-Serb doctrine of Yugoslavia's Marshal Tito had justified Milosevic's opportunistic shift in 1989 away from Communist Party control to nationalism to legitimise his regime.<sup>6</sup> In the post-Milosevic era the academy's ideas justified in turn rejection of the de-ethnicised politics the West was now urging on Serbia.

In a cruder form, these ideas found popular resonance in scapegoating of the West as the cause of Serbia's latter-day military losses and post-war economic misery. To the man on the street, The Hague was clearly biased against Serbia, since two-thirds of those being prosecuted for atrocities were Serbs and since the first defendant to be convicted of genocide, in 2001, was Radislav Krstic, the Bosnian Serb deputy commander at the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of some 8,000 unarmed Bosniak (Muslim) boys and men.

On 12 March 2003, the eve of Djindjic's planned purge to rid the Yugoslav army and secret police of the intertwined networks of criminals and extreme nationalists that had grown stronger and richer under Milosevic, the prime minister was assassinated on the back doorstep of his office by a sharpshooter linked to Serbia's elite Red Berets.<sup>7</sup>

The murder achieved its apparent aim. For the next eight years, the ultra-nationalists set the political agenda. At the time, the International Crisis Group commented that

In politics and policies, Serbia increasingly resembles the Milosevic-era without Milosevic ... [the] strong showing by ultra-nationalists in the 28

December 2003 parliamentary elections and the subsequent two-months of squabbling before democratic parties could form a minority government that depends for survival on the support of Milosevic's old [Socialist] party all are signs that more trouble lies ahead. In 2004 Serbia can anticipate continued political instability, increasingly strained relations with the West and further economic decline ... such stability as there may be will come through lowest common denominator politics, which in Belgrade today is anti-Western populism.<sup>8</sup>

Serbia remained a 'criminalised state' in which the media peddled 'inflammatory rhetoric', the commentary continued. And 'Serbia's media and judiciary are less independent today than two years ago. The myriad intelligence services still appear out of control and engage primarily in spying on domestic political opponents.'<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the Croats, the Serbs scorned the basic requirement of cooperation with the ICTY as a precondition for advancing towards EU membership. By 2005 Zagreb reluctantly shared security files with the tribunal that enabled Spanish police to track down and arrest fugitive Croat General Ante Gotovina for extradition to The Hague. In contrast, Belgrade's army and secret services, with a wink and a nod, protested over 16 and 13 years respectively that in South Dakota-sized Serbia they could never find either Ratko Mladic, the commander of Serb troops at the Srebrenica slaughter, or his political counterpart Radovan Karadzic. As a consequence, by summer of 2013 Serbia would still be waiting even to open EU membership talks as neighbouring Croatia entered the club.

Even many of the activists who had toppled Milosevic in 2000 supported the Socialists and Radicals in resisting EU demands and seeing themselves as victims of an anti-Serb West. The most conspicuous example was Vojislav Kostunica, the constitutional law professor and translator of America's *Federalist Papers* into Serbian who issued from the nationalist intellectual milieu but shunned Milosevic, and was therefore nominated by the democratic opposition to run for president in 2000 in order to draw nationalist votes away from Milosevic. In an increasingly acrimonious split with Djindjic, Kostunica vehemently opposed sending Milosevic and other

indictees to The Hague. By March 2004, he quit altogether his alliance with the Democratic Party of the murdered prime minister to become Serbian prime minister himself, at the head of a coalition with the Radicals. His government lasted four years in unhappy cohabitation with Boris Tadic, the new Serbian president and Djindjic's successor as Democratic Party leader.

In this atmosphere, the Radicals, distancing themselves somewhat from the more extravagant claims of their imprisoned founder but still preserving their role as the most extreme of the ultranationalists in Serbia, won a plurality in the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections. However, the party's acting head in Belgrade, Nikolic, who demanded only that Serbia's police and army reoccupy Kosovo, and not also Bosnia, as his boss Seselj demanded, lost narrowly to Tadic in the presidential elections of 2004 and 2008. Tadic eked out a victory both times by agreeing that, of course, Kosovo must belong to Serbia, but adding, disingenuously, that gaining EU membership was compatible with retaking Kosovo. To the contrary, the Radicals and Prime Minister Kostunica's DSS party, which together held 46% of parliamentary seats throughout most of the decade, demonised the EU and argued that bowing to its diktat would mean the surrender of Serbia's putative rule over Kosovo.<sup>10</sup>

In spring 2006 Milosevic died of a heart attack before the completion of his trial at The Hague. In his place, Dacic was elected to lead the weakened Socialist Party as the young moderniser who might revive its fortunes. By then the party had sunk to an 8% share of the votes, as its anti-Western Slavophile supporters deserted to the Radicals and the DSS en masse. It became no more than a me-too appendage to these parties in passing the slapdash post-Tito constitution that aimed primarily at declaring Kosovo an inalienable part of Serbia, thereby branding as treason any negotiations or compromise on Kosovo's status.

### **Secession of Kosovo**

The gravest crisis in the post-war Balkans erupted with the long-postponed secession of Kosovo from Serbia in February 2008. After 18 months of dead-end negotiations, a troika of the EU, the United States and Russia broke up without having agreed on a final status to end the interim UN administra-

tion of Kosovo established in 1999. For the EU and the United States, any return of Kosovo to Serbian sovereignty was unthinkable after Milosevic's juggernaut had killed 10,000 ethnic Albanians in the province, forcibly expelled more than half of the Albanian population from their homes and poisoned wells by throwing dead livestock into them. For the Russians, any formalisation of Kosovo's de facto severance from Serbian sovereignty was equally unthinkable.

Yet spasms of Albanian-Serb violence in Kosovo and Serbia in the previous decade convinced the West that continued limbo in Kosovo would risk reigniting the 1999 conflagration. It therefore chose a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo as the last resort, the least worst of all the bad options. But it qualified the new independence as supervised by a new EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) and still protected for an indefinite period by the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeepers; the future army of Kosovo was told by its Western mentors to follow the practice of the Kosovo Police in recruiting ethnic Serbs, as well as Albanians, and was kept in embryo for the foreseeable future.

The infant country's constitution, as drafted by Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, ensured the most generous minority rights in the Balkans. It guaranteed the Serbs political representation above their percentage of the population, along with special protection of Serbian Orthodox monasteries and holy sites, and a very un-Balkan devolution of extensive self-rule to Serb, as well as Albanian, municipalities. The West hardly expected that Belgrade politicians would soon admit that, morally, Milosevic's brutality had forfeited Serb rule over Kosovo. But they might, the West hoped, gradually claim part-ownership of the minority rights offered in the Kosovo constitution and find a role in championing those rights without turning every issue into a zero-sum contest of sovereignty.

Once this broad strategy was agreed on, the EU had to divine what might be the least disruptive moment to execute it. Just weeks before Serbia's presidential vote on 3 February 2008, Brussels took the precaution of granting Belgrade its longed-for visa facilitation for Serbs travelling in EU countries; this favour may well have tipped the close race between Tadic and the Radical Nikolic in Tadic's favour. Shortly after the moderate flag-bearer



was re-elected, Kosovo made its unilateral declaration of independence, on 17 February.

Shockwaves hit Belgrade. Kostunica's government resigned. A new general election was called for 11 May, only 16 months after the previous one, and was widely expected to produce an angry ultranationalist surge. In three nights of violence in the week after Kosovo's secession, rioters attacked nine foreign embassies in Belgrade, setting the US and German Embassies ablaze as police looked on or vacated the scene altogether. For

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## Shockwaves hit Belgrade

good measure, thugs also beat up independent journalists, broke windows at the headquarters of the pro-Western opposition Liberal Democratic Party, looted local shops, trashed McDonald's and other foreign businesses, left one person dead and more than 200 injured, and caused €1 million worth of damage. Serbs in north Kosovo torched two border and customs posts and clashed with UN police and the NATO-led international peacekeeping forces.

Infrastructure Minister Velimir Ilic, from Kostunica's DSS, blamed Western powers for all the violence, proclaiming that they 'have broken our state, and we only broke a few of their windows. They should expect that, to learn what democracy is. Breaking some windows is also democracy.' The nationalist daily *Vecernje Novosti* agreed. The US Embassy was not 'set on fire by Serbian nationalists', it asserted. 'It was set on fire by US policy and contemporary fascism.' Tabloids accused the CIA and other foreign intelligence agencies of having organised the riots. The International Crisis Group remarked drily that 'mass rallies have been a tactic of Serbia's nationalist politicians since Milosevic. He used them sporadically, bringing hooligans from the regions to frighten the capital's more liberal urban elite into silence.'<sup>11</sup> More bluntly, the US Embassy directly blamed Kostunica's office for the violence.<sup>12</sup>

At the second rally that segued into violence on 21 February, Radical Deputy Chairman Nikolic told the estimated 250,000 demonstrators that 'if there isn't Kosovo, then there isn't Serbia.' Kostunica declared that 'Serbia's youth has sent a message that Serbia is for law, justice and freedom and that it rejects the bullying policy of Western countries'.<sup>13</sup> Socialist Party

Chairman Dacic called for a crackdown on civil-rights activists and the Liberal Democratic Party, and stated that the Socialists would not enter any government with Tadic's Democratic Party. In March 2008 Serbs in the northern tip of Kosovo protested the declaration of independence by occupying a UN courthouse in Mitrovica, killing one UN policeman and leaving more than 100 wounded as international forces intervened. The expectation grew that an extreme nationalist coalition of the Radicals, the DSS and the Socialists would soon take the reins of government unfettered.

As it turned out, this was the political apogee of violent nationalism. In Belgrade, there was no further anti-Western paroxysm comparable to the mob rampage in February. In the May election campaign, the Radicals and the DSS focused exclusively, and the Socialists primarily, on preserving Kosovo as part of Serbia and on blaming Tadic for its secession. Tadic's alliance of parties won 38% of the vote. The Radicals won 29% and the DSS alliance 12%, for a combined 41%. The Socialists, with 8%, became the kingmakers.

As the coalition building dragged on, the first crack in the ultranationalist front appeared. The sole public prophet to contest the gloomy European consensus that moderate Serbs had finally lost to the extremists was Ivan Vejvoda, the veteran liberal Serb political activist and analyst who, at that point, headed the German Marshall Fund's Balkan Trust for Democracy. In Berlin and Brussels, he assured disbelieving audiences that the horse-trading would produce a Democratic-Socialist Party government that would not paralyse moderates, but instead pull the Socialists towards the centre.

After Dacic successfully lobbied old-guard party stalwarts, he indeed gambled on throwing the Socialists' crucial 8% of the vote not to fellow hardliners, but to their erstwhile Democratic Party foes. Dacic was rewarded with the senior posts of deputy prime minister and interior minister in the new government. The move was widely dismissed in Europe as pure opportunism aimed at winning some respectability for the Socialists, the usual financial perks that state enterprises shower on election victors and, for Dacic, higher positions than he could have wrested as a junior partner of the Radicals. Yet the split broke the Radical-DSS chokehold on the political agenda. The goal of eventual EU membership began to creep back into

the political mainstream as the Socialists refrained from trashing their new partners' pro-Europe policy.

Two weeks after the Democratic-Socialist pact and 13 years after his ICTY indictment, Karadzic was finally snatched in stealth by a Serbian police unit of untouchables. This time, there was no advance leak to the target in time for him to evade capture. Vucic, the as yet unreformed secretary-general of the Radical Party, told *Balkan Insight* that Karadzic's arrest was 'horrible news for Serbia', and added that 'we will continue our resistance against the treacherous regime of Tadic.' In contrast, as a novice member of this 'treacherous regime', Interior Minister-designate Dacic confined his comments to noting that his ministry's 'servicemen did not take part' in the operation.<sup>14</sup>

Then-US Ambassador to Serbia Cameron Munter recently described sensing a turning point in 2008. 'It became clear to me that the post-Milosevic Socialists (i.e. Dacic) and the post-Seselj Radicals (i.e. Nikolic and Vucic) sensed that their constituencies wanted "Europe", or the kind of prosperity and ease that the prospect of EU membership seemed to offer', he recollected in 2013. He continued:

In 2008 and 2009 they told me so; and I recall thinking that the 2008 vote was a choice for forward-to-Europe Boris [Tadic] vs. back-to-Old-Serbia Toma [Nikolic], while the next vote would be Europe vs. Europe. And so it turned out in 2012. Both sides used the EU-*and*-Kosovo mantra [that Tadic first articulated] in the years 2008–2012. Dacic, but also Nikolic and Vucic were solidly pro-EU (essentially, pro-future) by 2009, and that helped them leave their pasts behind.<sup>15</sup>

With such novel movement on the 2008 political scene, even the Radicals began to shift a few months later. In autumn 2008 Deputy Leader Nikolic and Secretary-General Vucic tired of being the messenger boys for orders from Seselj's remand cell, defied the customary autocracy of party leaders in Serbia and quit the Radicals, taking 19 other parliamentary colleagues with them, to found the Progressive Party. Seselj branded the Progressives as traitors and the puppets of foreign intelligence agencies. At this stage,

policy differences between the Radicals and their deserters were negligible, although Nikolic did tone down his appeals for Serbia to become part of Russia rather than a colony of the EU.

As for the re-elected President Tadic, he gained some new room for manoeuvre through his alliance with the Socialists. He continued the gradual purge of the ultranationalist-criminal nexuses in the army and security services that he had begun as defence minister after Djindjic's assassination. He also resumed the rapprochement with Croatia that Djindjic had initiated.

In January 2010 he launched a three-month campaign to get the first parliamentary statement condemning the 'crime' at Srebrenica. (The word 'genocide' was still taboo in Serbia, despite prior ICTY and International Court of Justice designation of this massacre as genocide. So was any explicit mention that the perpetrators who shot the 8,000 victims were Serb troops.) Tadic's stated rationale was not moral compulsion, but rather the instrumental need for Serbia to acknowledge the massacre in order to advance Belgrade's stalled march to EU membership and show goodwill in advance of the International Court of Justice's imminent ruling on an appeal from Belgrade about the legality of Kosovo's secession.<sup>16</sup> His efforts to claim some patriotic credit domestically for serving Serbia's future foundered, however. They were still trumped by the Radical, Progressive and DSS objections that singling out Srebrenica for a memorial would discriminate against the far greater victimisation of Serbs in the 1990s wars and in the Second World War.

After an emotional 13 hours of final legislative debate, which was carried out live on TV, the Srebrenica statement passed on 31 March 2008 with the votes of the government majority. The still-nationalist Progressives joined the Radicals in abstaining. Progressive Chairman Nikolic joined other opposition politicians in accusing the government and the few Bosniak parliamentarians of selling out Serbia to European blackmail, igniting new conflicts and insulting Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church.<sup>17</sup>

In early July 2010, on the fifteenth anniversary of the 1995 massacre, Tadic laid a wreath at the Srebrenica memorial as he had done on the tenth anniversary. The following November he became the first Serbian leader to pay his respects to the 260 Croat victims who, after a three-month siege

of Vukovar by Serb militias, were hauled out of the city hospital, shot and buried in mass graves on a nearby pig farm in 1991.

On 22 July 2010, to the disappointment of Belgrade, the International Court of Justice announced its non-binding judgement that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence violated neither general international law nor UN Security Council resolutions. Two months after this, the Belgrade government endorsed a UN resolution calling for a bilateral Serbia–Kosovo dialogue to resolve practical issues of everyday life in north Kosovo. The aim was 'normalisation', which the EU defined as reaching bottom-up bilateral 'technical' agreements to improve such mundane conditions as settling electricity and phone spats between Serbia and Kosovo and achieving some cooperation on the crossing points between the two.

### **Progressive consolidation**

As they consolidated their new party and their new role as the largest opposition group in parliament in 2009 and 2010, the Progressives eventually decided that what distinguished them from their parent Radicals was their attitude towards the EU. The Radicals still vilified it and castigated the Serbian government for having filed an official application for membership in December 2009. The Progressives paid lip service to joining the club, even if their friendlier view did not yet lead to policy consequences and hardly curbed their nationalist rhetoric. To European ears, the Progressives' adoption of the formula that joining the EU was compatible with preserving Kosovo as a province of Serbia did not sound like Tadic's apparent ploy of preventing the EU option from drowning in the tsunami of patriotic fervour. It sounded instead like a presumption that Serbia could successfully repossess its old province and still win admittance to the club by banking on an irresolute EU to waive its ban on admitting any new member with border conflicts.

Under Dutch and German pressure, however, the EU gradually became tougher in its insistence that Belgrade first deliver Mladic to The Hague – and normalise relations with Kosovo – before it could acquire its desired status as a candidate for membership. This status was one of several rungs at the bottom of the ladder to accession that the EU had added successively to

give ill-prepared Balkan states an early sense of progress. Almost imperceptibly, the Progressives tilted towards the EU side of the political spectrum and began positioning themselves as a potential coalition partner for either Dacic's Socialists or Tadic's Democrats in the next election.

In March 2011 the first high-level Serbia–Kosovo contacts opened in the EU-sponsored technical dialogue. In May 2011, the untouchables finally captured the most-wanted Mladic after his 16 years on the run, at the house of a cousin 50 miles north of Belgrade. Days before his arrest, a reputable opinion poll found that 40% of Serbia's citizens still deemed Mladic a Serb hero, while 78%, scorning the €10m reward on offer, declared they would not report Mladic's whereabouts to authorities if they knew them.<sup>18</sup> Tadic told reporters that the arrest should clinch Serbia's entry into the EU. Yet opinion polls of the Serbian Office for European Integration showed a sharp drop in popular support for EU membership, from 73% in November 2009 to 56% in November 2010 to 49% in November 2011.<sup>19</sup>

Mladic's capture was followed by the July 2011 arrest of Goran Hadzic, the former president of the breakaway Republic of Serbian Krajina in Croatia and the last remaining fugitive of any nationality on The Hague's list. The double coup might indeed have clinched Serbia's rise to the next rung up the ladder to EU membership, had it not been for violence by Serbs in north Kosovo that erupted within days of Hadzic's detention. This violence both revealed and magnified a new split in the chauvinist ranks. Even some Progressive politicians in Belgrade came to fear that the north Kosovo Serbs could veto Serbia–Kosovo rapprochement and thwart efforts to modernise Belgrade's economy and lift it out of stagnation. Politicians in north Kosovo increasingly feared that they might be abandoned even by the Progressives. At the same time, Pristina, frustrated by its continuing inability to exercise any sovereignty in Kosovo's northern tip and by the failure of the International Court of Justice ruling to change anything on the ground, feared that the passive West might abandon it and yield to Belgrade's increasing calls for the partition of Kosovo, with northern Kosovo reverting to Serbia.

On 25 July 2011, the Kosovo government tried to break out of the stalemate, with no advance notice to its Western protectors. It dispatched

rapid-reaction police in a lightning raid to take physical control, for the first time, of two customs checkpoints on the northern dividing line, which Kosovo and the EU regarded as an international border between Kosovo and Serbia but Belgrade regarded as a mere administrative line in its own territory. Local Serbs deployed a well-prepared instant posse, killed one of the Kosovo policemen, forced the others to retreat, burned one of the customs posts and barricaded all roads leading to the posts against Kosovo and international officials. The West condemned Pristina's unilateral action, but KFOR rescued the remaining Kosovo police and took control of the border area for the next month, declaring it a closed military zone.

Within weeks German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Belgrade and publicly read the riot act to a stunned Tadic, demanding that he end Serbian support of the parallel security structures in north Kosovo. For Merkel, the subsequent wounding by Kosovo Serbs of two German KFOR soldiers who were dismantling barricades was the last straw. Belgrade lost what had looked like a good chance to attain EU candidate status.

On 2 September 2011, the sixth meeting of the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue reached a minimal agreement on customs stamps and cadastral records. EU foreign-policy chief Catherine Ashton ordered EULEX officers – who carried no weapons and had generally been barred from entering north Kosovo by well-armed local Serbs – to accompany Kosovo customs officers to the border posts. The northern Serbs responded by expanding their barricades against the 'occupiers' and bringing in bulldozers to construct half-a-dozen heavy-duty bypass roads so all the trailer trucks shuttling cigarettes and other lucrative contraband could skirt the customs posts, and evade both Serbian and Kosovo VAT. On 26 September, KFOR removed a barricade near gate one. In the subsequent skirmish 1,000 Serbs threw rocks, a grenade and pipe bombs at KFOR. Both sides fired live ammunition. Thereafter, KFOR helicoptered EU and Kosovo officials past the barricades to the customs gates to monitor traffic symbolically, if not yet to actually inspect cargoes or levy taxes.

In Belgrade, the parties differed in their response. Tadic, who had initially backed the north Serbs' barricades, now called for them to be dismantled to allow freedom of movement for EULEX and KFOR, and even

stopped demanding Kosovo's partition. Kostunica's DSS and the Radicals, in contrast, repeatedly visited the barricades in solidarity and demanded an end to the bilateral dialogue. Nikolic supported the DSS, while other Progressives leaned towards Tadic's more conciliatory position. The government, too, was split. Deputy Prime Minister Dacic dropped his by then customary discretion to say publicly that a military solution could not be ruled out and 'Thaci must know that an attack on Mitrovica [the city straddling the Ibar River] is an attack on Belgrade.'<sup>20</sup> A few lives were lost in the clashes – surprisingly few, given the passions involved.

### **Endgame**

The Progressives won the May 2012 elections – or rather, President Tadic lost them. The EU's usual pre-vote favour to him as the centrist – this time the grant to Serbia of candidate status for membership – failed to boost him over the top, either in the parliamentary or presidential polls.<sup>21</sup>

During the campaign, for the first time in the post-Djindjic era, Kosovo was not the all-consuming issue. It had fallen well below unemployment and standard of living on the scale of public concerns, and all political parties except the DSS agreed that Serbia should now head for Europe, even if they did not yet concur on the political price they would pay for doing so. The Progressives presented a fresh face, while Tadic's Democratic Party was tarred by cronyism, scandals and longevity in office in a period of economic stagnation. The Progressives (who, at that point, still went by an interim name) won a plurality, with 24% of the parliamentary vote. The Democrats reached only 22% and fell into factional infighting. Dacic won his bid to make the Socialists respectable again and almost doubled his party's votes to 15%, to play the kingmaker once more.

In the May 2012 presidential vote, Progressive Nikolic edged out Democrat Tadic, as a portion of the incumbent president's disappointed voters stayed away from the polls. Only months before, Nikolic was still calling the Srebrenica massacre an invention of the French secret service and upbraiding the Tadic government for its 'treasonous' extradition of Serb 'heroes' to The Hague for trial. And in an interview with a German newspaper just before the presidential run-off, he asserted that he regretted



nothing about his service with Serb militias in eastern Croatia in the 1990s and still held a Greater Serbia as his dream. The one modification he made was that he no longer expected to see his dream fulfilled.<sup>22</sup>

In the usual two-month coalition negotiations, Dacic flirted with the Democratic Party but finally teamed up with the Progressives, and with his improved constituency and government experience claimed the position of prime minister. Nikolic resigned his chairmanship of the Progressives to assume the constitutional non-partisan role of president. His (and Seselj's)

protégé Vucic took over leadership of the party as well as the government posts of first deputy prime minister, defence minister and coordinator of the secret services and quickly became the recognised power holder within the government.

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*Western  
diplomats were  
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by the  
outcome*

As in 2008, Western diplomats were disheartened by the outcome. After failing to persuade the new coalition to allow the Democratic Party into the tent, they laboured on in facilitating the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, but entertained few hopes. They were frustrated by

the failure of pro-Europe advocate Tadic to implement the one significant agreement reached in the bottom-up technical talks: setting up Integrated Border Management on the boundary line between Kosovo and Serbia. They expected little from the new Serbian government, except even worse foot-dragging and sabotage of the bilateral dialogue. They had come to regard Dacic, in his earlier coalition with Tadic, as a non-ideological, pragmatic politician. They detected little sign, however, that time and circumstance had similarly reshaped the previously rigid Nikolic or the ambitious Vucic, whom they barely knew but remembered for his zealous suppression of independent journalists in the Milosevic era.

However, as new bilateral talks resumed between the Serbian and Kosovo prime ministers – and as Vucic turned out to be a very fast learner in his troubleshooting between Berlin, Brussels and Washington – a few Western diplomats began to wonder if Vucic too was being remade. He was moody, according to Western officials who dealt with him, and he reacted viscerally to the intractable situations he encountered. One Western official

who worked with him thought he had something of a martyr complex, or at least an understandable sensitivity to the all-too-credible death threats he was receiving. But he increasingly became the go-to person whenever the bilateral negotiations stalled. Moreover, he turned out to be the one who could persuade his Progressive colleagues in Belgrade that although the Serbs were getting a bad deal, as he repeated incessantly, it was the best deal they could get, and they had to take it. Vucic also turned out to be the one who could confront the north Kosovo Serb politicians on their own turf and tell them bluntly that the old game was over and they would just have to adapt to living peacefully in Kosovo, under Kosovo's laws.

At first, the trio of President Nikolic, Prime Minister Dacic and First Deputy Prime Minister Vucic did not soften their criticism of what the Democrats had negotiated before then. However, they said that as the leaders of the successor government, they were bound by the inherited Integrated Border Management agreement, and would work to implement its provisions. Yet even as chief negotiator Dacic tackled the nitty-gritty of customs forms, rubber-stamp insignias and placement of toilets, he and Vucic began shifting the dominant Serb narrative away from the Serbs' founding myth of the 1389 battle against the Turks at Kosovo's Field of Blackbirds to pragmatic contemporary economics.

A generation after the first Balkan war of the 1990s, they stressed, Serbia's economy had not yet recovered its pre-war level. Unemployment stood at 28%. Worst of all, a brain drain among the country's youth had shrunk the population by 5% over the previous decade. In this context, even a Europe in the throes of the euro crisis and enlargement fatigue looked like the kind of financial saviour that their Slav brothers in Moscow could never be. There was no alternative to joining the EU and profiting from its technical and institutional as well as its financial aid. The example of neighbouring Croatia showed the advantages. To be sure, Croatia had started with higher per capita wealth than Serbia, but in the course of its membership negotiations it had increased the gap to a level 70% higher than Serbia's per capita GDP and would already join the EU in July 2013.

Dacic and Vucic similarly reconfigured their obligation to their Serb brothers in north Kosovo. Instead of pronouncing the inviolability of the

sovereignty Serbia once possessed in its ancestral land before the Ottoman Empire ruled it for half a millennium, they redefined Belgrade's duty to the north Kosovo Serbs as simply ensuring that they could lead better lives. This took the form of promoting Serb localities' self-government and forming an association of Serb municipalities, both of which were allowed under the Kosovo constitution.

This sounded like just the kind of constructive engagement Ahtisaari had hoped for from Belgrade when he designed the Kosovo constitution – so much so that Western diplomats dubbed this approach 'Ahtisaari plus'. These diplomats rejected attempts by Belgrade to stretch the notion of Kosovo's local self-government to anything approaching the autonomy of the spoiler Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They insisted that Belgrade dismantle the illegal parallel security structures Serbia had maintained in north Kosovo since the 1999 war – and that Serbs in the north now abide by Kosovo's laws. They welcomed Belgrade's funding of schools, hospitals and social services there, however, as long as it was transparent. They were further willing to help Dacic and Vucic sell the loosening of Belgrade's security grip on north Kosovo to their domestic constituency by letting them champion the right of Serb municipalities to nominate candidates for local police chiefs – an easy decision, since community policing was also part of the Ahtisaari political ethos.

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*Speed was crucial for the Serbs*

Serbian Prime Minister Dacic and Kosovo Prime Minister Thaci picked up the formal bilateral dialogue for the first time in October, in the office of Ashton, the hands-on facilitator of the talks. As the two probed and sparred with each other over the implementation of Integrated Border Management, they agreed by December on four cautious pilot projects for customs, involving EULEX officials as go-betweens so that Serbian and Kosovo officials would not have to face each other directly at their common dividing line.

That pace of problem-solving suggested that negotiations could last decades, however, and speed was crucial for the Serbs. The EU made it clear that Belgrade's window of opportunity for demonstrating progress in normalising relations with Kosovo and thereby gaining a fixed date for

opening membership talks would close by 22 April 2013, to fit the cycles of EU decision-making. Any time after that would be too late because no political deals could be struck during the campaign for the German election in September and the selection of new European Commission officials in 2014. That delay would set the Serbs back two precious years, squander the momentum of their new government and force them to start EU pre-negotiations all over again just as they faced a domestic campaign for their own re-election.

It was Ashton, according to one source familiar with the closely held talks, who assessed the dynamic she saw at work in the compromises over Integrated Border Management and proposed a revolutionary experiment in late 2012. She suggested leapfrogging the incremental bottom-up approach and trying instead to write a brief top-down statement of principles and then let these principles drive the subsequent implementation.

This approach would require precisely the quality most conspicuous in its absence: a provisional mutual trust among all of the suspicious stakeholders. The Belgrade Serbs who were desperate to join the EU world of prosperity and stability would first have to prove their willingness to cut their losses in Kosovo. The Kosovo officials would have to be reassured during the talks by the presence off-stage of US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Philip Reeker that a Washington fixated on half-a-dozen world crises was not abandoning them. The EU governments would have to be satisfied that the Serbs were not just telling them what they wanted to hear to gain concessions that Belgrade would pocket without delivering the ill-defined *quid pro quo*. The north Kosovo Serbs, whose rough lives would be upended, would, at a minimum, have to entrust their physical protection to the KFOR and EULEX 'occupiers' they had so recently fought.

The proximate model was the controversial East-West German normalisation of relations as the Cold War thawed into *détente* in the 1970s. The Basic Treaty that sealed that rapprochement was a masterpiece of deliberate ambiguity that could have backfired at any time. Both German signatories clearly identified themselves by their names, positions and countries: Undersecretary of the Federal Chancellery Egon Bahr for the Federal Republic of Germany and State Secretary Michael Kohl for the German

Democratic Republic. Beyond that, however, any uninitiated reader of the treaty needed a decoder to figure out what exactly they had promised each other.

The Serbia–Kosovo document would have to be even more ambiguous. The Serbian and Kosovo prime ministers who eventually reached the agreement on 19 April 2013 did not even identify their names on their joint paper, let alone their positions or countries, since the Serbs’ red line, repeated many times daily, was that Serbia would not recognise Kosovo. The two interlocutors would simply initial the pact without ever saying who they were.

Both sides accepted the gamble. And as they accelerated their negotiations in 2013, Dacic and Vucic bent their grand narrative even more and expended ever more political capital to overcome the resistance of their party followers to the new course. Dacic proclaimed that heroism did not mean to ‘give one’s life for nothing, but to open new jobs and build new roads’.<sup>23</sup> He agreed in the bilateral dialogue to an arrangement by which customs could be collected at the north Kosovo crossing points and put into a fund to benefit north Kosovo.

Most dramatically, in March 2013, on the tenth anniversary of the assassination of Djindjic, Dacic rehabilitated this nemesis of extremists. He lauded his predecessor and dropped a bombshell. In the decade since Djindjic’s death, he said, Serbs had been lied to and told that Kosovo still belonged to Serbia. That is false, he declared, and we must now face the reality that Kosovo is no longer ours.<sup>24</sup> As late as a week before the 19 April deal President Nikolic remained at the rear of the new vanguard. At a special UN General Assembly he compared The Hague to the Spanish Inquisition and called it unjust, since it had sentenced Serbs to 1,150 years in prison while jailing those convicted of crimes against Serbs to only 55 years.

By 19 April, the gamble of trust and political courage paid off. Dacic and Thaci initialled a list of 15 short principles covering, mostly, the northern tip of Kosovo. Western diplomats described it as Serbian recognition of Kosovo’s independence in everything but name. Serbia’s illegal security cadres are to be removed under point seven, which never mentions them

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*The gamble  
of trust and  
courage  
paid off*

by name, but instead states blandly that ‘there shall be one police force in Kosovo called the Kosovo Police. All police in northern Kosovo shall be integrated in the Kosovo Police framework. Salaries will be only from the KP.’ And by the way, the laws governing northern Kosovo will be those of Kosovo. And both Serbia and Kosovo promise not to hinder the other’s path to the EU.

This was historic. Vejvoda, the original optimist who foresaw this turnaround five years earlier, called the deal ‘going through the sound barrier’.

Moreover, this breakthrough was achieved with a political consensus in Serbia that only ex-ultranationalists could have generated. The Socialist presidency backed Prime Minister Dacic unanimously. President Nikolic backed First Deputy Prime Minister Vucic, and the Progressive Party’s main board also supported Vucic with a landslide of 377 to 10. Parliament approved the terms of the deal by a vote of 173 to 24. Angry north Kosovo Serbs demanded a Serbia-wide referendum, but Vucic called their bluff by agreeing to it if both sides would pledge to respect the outcome of the plebiscite. Visiting the renegades in their own territory, he argued that while he too ‘could list many reasons to oppose the agreement, there is an important point in its favour. It is the only way for Serbia to survive, to exist and remain united in the search for a path to a better future.’<sup>25</sup>

On 25 April, Nikolic apologised for the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in an interview with Bosnian TV. He called it a crime rather than genocide, but it was still the first time he had apologised in any form. He said ‘I kneel and ask for forgiveness for Serbia for the crime committed in Srebrenica. I apologise for the crimes committed by any individual in the name of our state and our people.’<sup>26</sup>

On 28 June, the European Council, startled by the power of its mere naming a date for starting membership negotiations, granted Serbia a date – in January 2014 – on the German condition that the withdrawal of Serbia’s shadowy security networks from north Kosovo, which has already begun, is well advanced by then. Simultaneously, the European Council approved the start of talks with Kosovo on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the lowest rung on the ladder to EU membership.

Vucic wrote the epilogue to this extraordinary bilateral gamble in the form of a *mea culpa* and a tribute to European ideas in Belgrade's *Danas* newspaper in May. He was not telling Western audiences what they wanted to hear, but rather telling Serb listeners what they did not want to hear, writing:

We Serbs are the only ones who slept through the fall of the Berlin Wall and didn't in the least understand the political and economic dynamics in Europe and the world ... The writer of these words is one of the politicians who resisted the new ideas. [Now, however,] we can and must respect the laws of Europe, its order, its rules, its system of law and the obligations that issue from them.<sup>27</sup>

For him, this is Serbia's new normal.

## Notes

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  - 9 *Ibid.*
  - 10 The DSS is formally called the Democratic Party of Serbia, not to be confused with Tadic's Democratic Party.
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