

Serbia and NATO: Cosmic Justice and Consequences

Cynics claim that there was a symbolic value to the fact that on March 18, just six days before the 16th anniversary of the bombing of FR Yugoslavia, Ivica Dačić and Bratislav Gašić, Serbian Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, respectively, during a visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels, have signed the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) on Serbia's further cooperation with the NATO alliance. Those who are not prone to symbolism say that IPAP was adopted by the Serbian Government on December 20 2014; that the cooperation has been long in motion and that IPAP is merely one of its forms (albeit, the highest one), namely within the framework of the Partnership for Peace programme, which Serbia has been a member of since 2006, and that even without March 24 Serbia has numerous painful anniversaries as it is.

On the occasion of the agreement's signing, Minister Dačić stated: "No one can change what took place 16 years ago when NATO bombed Serbia but it should not be an obstacle for building partner relations in the future. We maintain military neutrality and we have no intention of becoming a NATO member; however, it is in our interest to maintain good relations for the sake of peace and good relations in the region." He also added that by IPAP's entry into force, Serbia has opened a new phase of relations with NATO; that IPAP was opening the possibility of cooperation between Serbia and the Alliance in many areas, including the fields of science, public diplomacy, rescuing people in cases of natural disasters, participation in international peacekeeping missions ("Of course, these are not combat missions").

Dačić's government colleague Gašić told that further cooperation with the Alliance would contribute, inter alia, to the creation of military capacities towards international peace and stability, reforms of Serbian armed forces and create new possibilities for the Serbian defense industry.

SPECTACLE OR ROUTINE: Dačić added that there was no need to turn the agreement into "some kind of spectacle" and that it should not be viewed as approximation to membership status, "however, as development of our good relations – yes".

The problem, however, lies in the fact that most of the Serbian public does perceive any kind of approximation of Serbia and the Alliance as a spectacle, namely a negative one. Dačić and his partners in the current government, of all people, should understand that – was it not the Socialists and Radicals who until recently proclaimed any contact with NATO high treason? Besides, according to public opinion polls, close to a two-third majority of the population still oppose Serbia's joining NATO, mostly due to the memories of the 1999 bombardment or NATO's previous involvement in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia against the Serb side; hence, even issues smaller in comparison with the aforementioned agreement cause for stir.

Still, one is under the impression that the reactions to this event are not as fierce as one would expect. It is not probable that this is due to the fact that the regime is trying to keep this news under the public radar – from 2000 to this day, every regime in Serbia made such attempts, presenting the contacts and cooperation with NATO as routine. It is more likely that both the

voters of the current coalition and the regime itself are embarrassed of the present situation and remain silent, waiting for time to pass and new events to suppress the current ones.

That does not mean that there have been no reactions; certain media have brought comments which essentially boiled down to the question what the agreement actually means – what is “cooperation in the field of public diplomacy”; does this agreement imply that in the future NATO soldiers will have unobstructed transit through Serbia and be "protected" by special status; will NATO be granted usage of military infrastructure in the country (access to military structures)...

A text published on March 24 by the "Politika" daily states, inter alia, that the action plan NATO maintains with membership candidates enables the Alliance to make explicit demands, whereas IPAP reduces this role to an advisory one. Besides, it is stressed that the movement of NATO soldiers in Serbia is defined by the *Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)* which stipulates NATO soldiers' privileges and immunity, as well as that this agreement was signed in January 2014 with NATO in Washington by the then Minister of Defense Nebojša Rodić, but has yet not been ratified by the Assembly. Former FRY Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Drašković who is often mentioned as the signatory of SOFA has, in fact, signed the 2005 Agreement on Transit Arrangements which guarantees NATO soldiers' immunity and privileges during their transit through Serbia (but not their stay) in order to facilitate their transport en route to the KFOR mission in Kosovo; however, this agreement, too, has not entered into force and has not been implemented due to a lack of accord pertaining to technical annexes.

CONTENT AND DILEMMAS: In regard to the agreement itself, at first glance the majority of its contents represent a sum of known facts and commonplace matters. For instance, in the chapter dedicated to political and security frameworks, foreign and security policies, it is stated that Serbia, "in the framework of the Partnership for Peace programme intends to develop long-term, essential and concrete cooperation with NATO... This partnership will contribute to the realization of strategic goals of ensuring security and lasting stabilization of the Western Balkans region and the process of its Euro-integration", along with the addition that since joining the "Partnership for Peace" programme in 2006, Serbia and NATO have been continuously advancing mutual cooperation and dialogue, that Serbia views IPAP as a framework for this cooperation's further strengthening, while having no inclination towards membership.

As far as concrete, "earthly" matters are concerned, this chapter states that the cooperation between the Serbian Army and KFOR is very good and continues to develop, as well as that "Serbia has pointed out, and the Alliance has duly noted, the Republic of Serbia's concern regarding NATO decisions to reduce the size of the KFOR footprint and to continue with the 'unfixing' process for historical, cultural and religious sites". The dry definition obscures one of the Serbian hardships – whereas it fought against NATO entering Kosovo in 1999, now it has to beg NATO to stay there, in order to protect Serbs in enclaves, churches and monasteries, and is forced to pinpoint, as a success, the fact that NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had made a promise to Vučić that no Kosovar armed forces would have access to Northern Kosovo.

This is only one of the troubles concerning Kosovo, the other being the fact that Russia, which stands as the largest obstacle against complete international recognition of Kosovo, is carefully observing Serbian relations with NATO and reacts to every telling sign of Serbia's approximation to the Alliance, not always in a diplomatic manner. For instance, during a ceremonious reception held at the Russian Embassy in Belgrade in 2011, on the occasion of June 12th, Russia Day, guests, along with the highest representatives of the Serbian state's top, included Svetlana Ražnatović who was convicted for embezzlement of funds from FC "Obilić" players' transfers. Her presence in the company of Serbian officials was publically perceived as a fierce blow against the Serbian political elite. Unofficially, the reason behind this was a three-day military conference held in Belgrade a few days prior, whose participants included chiefs of general staffs and representatives of members countries of NATO, Partnership for Peace, Mediterranean Dialogue, as well as high-level military representatives of EU and NATO, organized by the Allied Command Transformation. Dragan Šutanovac, the then Minister of Defense of Serbia, attempted to explain that the conference was security-, rather than politics- and strategy-related, that it was not strictly a NATO conference, but in vain – it seems that the Russians understood it differently.

BROAD PALETTE: Along with the definition of defense- and military-related issues, the IPAP agreement also includes the description of numerous non-military activities. Some of them are undoubtedly useful, such as cooperation in "current security challenges, combating terrorism, arms control and protection against cyber crime", or the further advancement of agencies and strengthening of capacities for decreasing natural disaster risks, and efficient recovery from natural disasters' consequences. There are many phrases, such as that, in the process of EU integrations the important issues for Serbia include democracy, social awareness, open market economy, efficient state administration, peaceful resolution of conflicts and observance of other peoples and cultures, regional cooperation, neighbor relations, as well as the mention of measures aimed to strengthen independence, transparency, accountability and efficiency of the judiciary, increased combating of corruption and organized crime.

The layman may certainly find unusual the fact that an agreement between a predominantly military organization and the Government of Serbia contains such multitude of "non-military" issues. In the section of the agreement on internal policies, as part of the chapter dedicated to human rights, there is mention of "advancement of gender equality, strengthening of multicultural dialogue, measures to combat discrimination and advancement of vulnerable groups members (particularly children, women, disabled persons, LGBT persons, the elderly), protection of national minorities and communities, increased inclusion of Roma, as well as decrease of poverty". It also targets economic reforms, as it is stated that Serbia's priorities include "maintaining macroeconomic stability, advancing the dynamics of economic growth, maintaining price stability and increasing employment rate and standard of living by means of accelerated economic reforms and attracting foreign investment", and that the "privatization process should be completed", as well as the part on contribution to security through scientific cooperation, stating that the Republic of Serbia shall direct its activities towards the advancement of the cooperation with the NATO "Science for Peace and Security" programme...

There is also a section on energy management, specifying that the Republic of Serbia is "dedicated to ensuring stable and secure provision of energy, particularly involved with the EU as to provide a contribution to regional energy linkage, open for participation in projects and plans aimed at diversification of energy supply and strengthening of energy security".

Everything being taken into account, we are dealing with a broad palette which seemingly contains nothing controversial. However, it prompts the question why a media strategy is necessary in the first place – as it is also envisioned by the agreement (see box: "Strategy of Persuasion") – in which the authorities will explain the advantages of cooperating with NATO to the citizens, if the benefit for Serbia and its citizens is that obvious in everything that was stated in the agreement.

The answer is clear, both to NATO representatives and the Serbian authorities, as is the fact that much time will need to pass until the majority of the Serbian population believe that NATO wishes them well. All of this does not help the Serbian authorities to keep balance in an undesirable situation. Serbia is surrounded by Alliance members or membership candidates; Alliance membership is not officially on the list of conditions for European Union accession but it is implied. The official cause for the onset of the Ukrainian crisis which grew into civil war was the question whether Ukraine would join the European Union or rather turn to Russia, but it is clear to everyone that the crisis has been actuated by the mention of Ukraine's approximation to NATO. Serbia is not Ukraine, it does not share a border with Russia, nor has such a strategic significance, but it is a banal truth that the weak suffer and endure the most in the games of the powerful. Knut Fleckenstein, European Parliament MP, told in a statement for the "Danas" daily: "I don't want to hand out advice to the Government of Serbia, but if I were in Belgrade's shoes I would try to postpone the military drill with Russia, if not cancel it altogether", commenting on the drill announced for September. On the other hand, Army of Serbia has participated in numerous drills with NATO soldiers, which has certainly not passed unnoticed by the Russian side.

Be it as it may, an irony of fate handed a Government led by those who had screamed against NATO hired hands the task to decide on increased cooperation (or approximation) with NATO in an inconvenient moment, which could be interpreted as some sort of cosmic justice; however, one should not gloat over this, as the consequences of the authorities' decisions will be endured by all citizens of this country. It is difficult to predict the future steps of the Serbian Government concerning this issue. A position of cooperation both with NATO and Russia, respectively, would certainly be the best solution if possible to maintain, but that does not depend solely on the Serbian regime, whoever it consists of.

For the time being, Russia has reacted in a restrained manner to the signing of the IPAP agreement, which could be interpreted as estimate that the said agreement amounted to nothing spectacular. Future reactions from Russia will show whether Serbia is still keeping her balance or inevitably approaching NATO, as well as indicate the manner in which the contents of the agreement are exactly read and interpreted.

Strategy of Persuasion

“Serbia will pay special attention to the promotion and raising of public awareness on the importance of international and regional cooperation in meeting such challenges. Serbia intends to conduct an active and comprehensive information campaign concerning the most important issues in defense sector reforms and on the nature, scope and benefits of cooperation with NATO within the Partnership for Peace framework, including IPAP. The Public Information Strategy will ensure that information about Serbia – NATO relations and cooperation are presented objectively and in a timely manner. The Strategy will be drafted by representatives of relevant ministries and institutions, and will include activities ensuring the provision of information to the printed and electronic media; the organization of panel discussions and round tables; support to academic and research institutions; as well as cooperation with non-governmental organizations. The Strategy will encourage Serbian academic, research and scientific institutions to enter the process of cooperation with NATO and to undertake joint projects. Support from NATO Public Diplomacy Division will be of importance for the successful implementation of this Strategy, as well as the cooperation and support of NATO’s Contact Point Embassy, the NATO Military Liaison Office in Belgrade and NATO Allies and partners.”

Excerpt from the IPAP agreement

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