

## *Vukovar Regained*

The joint visit of Serbian President **Boris Tadic** and Croatian President **Ivo Josipovic** to Vukovar and Paulin Dvor in Croatia, where they bowed to the Croatian and Serbian victims of the war in former Yugoslavia during the nineties, strongly echoed in the Western Balkans and throughout Europe. General assessment of both the public and the media is that the visit is "historic" and that it is a very important symbolic step toward reconciliation between Serbia and Croatia.

During the nineties, Vukovar became the symbol of the war in former Yugoslavia. Scenes of devastation of the city inhabited by 45 thousand people, located on the banks of the Danube, on the border between Serbia and Croatia, were broadcast all over the world. According to official data, in 1991 Vukovar was inhabited by mixed population - 47 percent Croatian and 32 percent Serbian. Conflicts in the vicinity of Vukovar began in May 1991, when in the village Borovo selo (a place in the outskirts of Vukovar predominantly populated by Serbs) were killed 14 Croatian police officers. The situation was getting more complicated every day during the summer in numerous ethnic conflicts in the villages around Vukovar. In the Vukovar there was a garrison of JNA (Army of socialist Yugoslavia - Yugoslav National Army) and exactly fighting over it determined the sad fate of this city. JNA was accusing the Croatian police to have kept a garrison in the siege, without electricity and water since August 1991, while Croatia was accusing the Yugoslav Army to have protected the Serbian paramilitary units and that it had entered into open conflict with the Croatian police. JNA sent elite army units in Vukovar to release the barracks and so began a three-month siege of the city. The city was covered with tens of thousands of shells, and not a single house was left undamaged in street battles. After three-month fighting, on November 18, 1991 the JNA occupied Vukovar. The world was shocked by pictures of the destroyed city at they were reminiscent of the destruction of Hiroshima.

After capturing Vukovar, Serbian paramilitary forces shot 264 Croatian prisoners in Ovcara farm. Today, Vukovar is restored, having both Croats and Serbs living together. Presently the city has about 31 thousand people of which 57 per cent are Croats and 32 per cent Serbs. For crimes committed at Ovcara, the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague sentenced former JNA generals **Mile Mrksic**, **Veselin Sljivavcanin** and Captain **Miroslav Radic**. The war crimes court in Belgrade has sentenced 13 members of Serbian paramilitary units for the execution of prisoners of war at Ovcara for 200 years in prison. Paulin Dvor is a village where eight women and ten men, from 41 to 85 years of age were killed on December 11 and 12, 1991. The same night, victims were buried ten kilometers away from the crime scene, to be moved after several years about 500 kilometers away to another part of Croatia. The bodies were accidentally discovered in 2002, and Croatia sentenced one former soldier for the crime to 15 years in prison.

That something special will happen in Vukovar could be foreseen from the fact that a joint visit of the two presidents was covered by 230 accredited journalists from Serbia, Croatia and the region. During the visit to Vukovar, Serbian President Tadic apologized to Croatian victims and laid flowers at the memorial site of the mass grave in Ovcara.

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**“I am here to once again offer an apology, express regret and create the possibility that Serbs and Croats, Serbia and Croatia, open a new page of history”**, said Tadic. During his stay in Vukovar, Serbian President met with the Prime Ministers of Croatia, **Jadranka Kosor**, representatives of Serbian and Croatian victims of war and political leaders of the Serbian minority in Croatia. The same day, the two presidents laid wreaths at the memorial site of the killed Serbs in Paulin Dvor. **“Here a crime took place. Every crime deserves condemnation, victims our piety, and those who were left behind victims our apology. Croatia will prosecute every crime, no matter who committed it”**, said Croatian President Josipovic.

Apologies by the Serbian and Croatian President are just the latest in a series of apologies in recent years, addressed since the war from the leaders of the former Yugoslavia. Croatian President Josipovic apologized in April this year in the parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), saying he **“deeply regrets that the Republic of Croatia and its policy during the 90’s of last century contributed to the suffering of people and divisions that still plague us today”**, is certainly not the last nor the first in the Balkans. Josipovic is the second Croatian president who apologized for the events during the war in former Yugoslavia. His predecessor, Stjepan Mesic, and the President of the former Serbia and Montenegro (SCG), Svetozar Marovic, on September 10, 2003, in Belgrade, on behalf of the citizens of their countries sent mutual apologies for **“any harm or damage that citizens of both countries committed to each other”**, adding that the guilt for the committed crimes must be individual. Later, on November 13, 2003, in Sarajevo, Marovic apologized **“for any evil or misfortune which anyone in Bosnia-Herzegovina suffered due to the SCG”**.

Serbian President Boris Tadic has done the same during a visit to Sarajevo, during his visit to Sarajevo on December 6, 2004, when he apologized to everyone against whom **“crimes have been committed by members of the Serbian people”**, but he also said he expected an apology from all the others who have committed crimes against the Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks. Next, in June 2007, Tadic apologized to the citizens of Croatia for war crimes in the past war. **“To all citizens of Croatia and all members of the Croatian people that have been made**

**unfortunate by members of my people, I make an apology and take responsibility for it”**, President Tadic said on a Croatian television show. For war losses apologized and Montenegrin President **Milo Djukanovic** during his visit to Croatia in June 2000. Serbian President Tadic visited twice Potocari memorial in Srebrenica, in 2005 and 2010, where more than eight thousand Bosnian Muslims were killed after the capture of the enclave by Bosnian Serb Army in 1995 and on that occasion, he apologized for the crime in Srebrenica on behalf of Serbia. On the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre this year Serbian Parliament adopted a declaration condemning the crime.

Mutual apologies of former Yugoslavia heads of state will certainly contribute to the normalization of relations between the Western Balkan countries, but will not solve all problems. For instance, Serbia and Croatia are still suing each other before the International Court of Justice in The Hague for genocide. There are still many unresolved problems from the return of refugees, return of the seized property, search for missing persons, determining the borders ... Of course, all these problems will be solved more easily after symbolic gestures such as the visit to Vukovar, but one should have no illusion that all problems in the Western Balkans are resolved and that the people who fought in bloody war fifteen years ago are all of a sudden at peace. Either way, visit Vukovar was a strong message of peace welcomed by the entire world. Thus, **Stefan Fule**, European Commissioner for Enlargement, said this gesture was **“an important step towards reconciliation”**. Fule said that such places may become a symbol of reconciliation and an example for the entire Western Balkans. **“The future of Serbia and Croatia is in the European Union, where reconciliation is one of the basic functions”**, said Fule.

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Exactly the statement of the European Commissioner for Enlargement reveals where from comes such enthusiasm of Balkan politicians for reconciliation and good cooperation in the region. In short, all the countries of former Yugoslavia, except Slovenia (as it is already), want to become members of the European Union (EU). The European Union strongly insists on good regional cooperation and that pressure is most important when it comes to constructive political leaders of the former Yugoslavia.

It is in this instance exactly we see how the EU can have a positive influence on the Western Balkans and how adopting of clear EU policy standards, which are associated to the progress in EU accession process, provides the best results. This of course applies not only to the process of regional cooperation, but also to the adoption of other social standards such as the fight against corruption, rule of law, judicial independence, economic freedom e.t.c.

That regional cooperation is important to the EU is confirmed by the latest report of European Commission (EC) on Serbia's progress in European integration. The EC stated that the EU expects Serbia to **“demonstrate a more constructive attitude towards Kosovo's participation in regional trade and cooperation”**. A distinguished Serbian daily *Politika* reported, referring to an anonymous informer from the Commission, that **“despite serious shortcomings, Serbia has made significant progress in regional cooperation”**. *Politika's* source said that **“the visit of President Boris Tadic to Croatia, adoption of declaration condemning the crime in Srebrenica and constructive approach to the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina made a clear contribution to cooperation and reconciliation in the region”**.

Croatian media have recently published a report by the EC for Croatia where Croatia is asked to solve **“the minority question concerning the issue of Serbs in Croatia, whose rights, which include not only the right of return but also the right to a pension, must be guaranteed and intact”**. In the report the EU urged Croatia to **“implement measures aimed at increasing tolerance in society and reconciliation among ethnic groups, on which it will particularly insist”**. **“Croatia will have to encourage a spirit of tolerance towards the Serbs and take**

**measures to protect those who may still be subject to intimidation or discrimination, hatred or violence”**, it is further stated the report and that **“the EU asks for improvement of reconciliation in Croatia and the region, and encourages Croatia to continue to deal with the issue of missing persons from the 90's and put an end to impunity for many uninvestigated and unprocessed crimes of the 90's, as well as to break the resistance at the local level when it comes to investigation and criminal charges for certain crimes”**. As well as in the case of Serbia, the EU commended the meeting between Josipovic and Tadic in Vukovar, and as particularly positive gesture pointed to **“the Croatian president's apology in Sarajevo and his visit to execution sites of all nations in Bosnia”**. The message of the European Union to former Yugoslavian countries is therefore clear - if you want to be in the EU, solve your problems from the past and collaborate. Since all the countries of former Yugoslavia want to become EU members, it is obvious how such rapid progress has been made in the reconciliation process.

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This policy is obviously best understood by the Serbian President Tadic and Croatian President Josipovic, who, by establishing very good personal relations, managed to impose their countries as the leading countries from the region in this process. In short, in the Western Balkans, Serbia and Croatia are trying to play the role played by Germany and France in the process of the EU formation. Serbia and Croatia are the two most important countries in the region whose future is highly dependent on their relationship, especially of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Serbs and Croats are constitutive nations. We should not forget that Serbia and Croatia, as well as other countries of the former Yugoslavia, used to live in the same state, that their economies are complementary, that they have markets in all countries of the former common state, and that

economic cooperation between these countries is in their interest. In addition, with the exception of Kosovo, all the peoples of former Yugoslavia speak very similar languages and understand each other. Cultural and economic exchange is growing as the countries of former Yugoslavia are oriented to one another.

Serbia and Croatia have an additional motive to accelerate the process of reconciliation and mutual cooperation. Croatia, which is on the threshold of the European Union, simply has to solve the problem with the Serbian minority, and Serbia can help the most in that, while Serbia knows that the European Union expects from it to solve another regional issue - cooperation with Kosovo. In order to solve that problem, Serbia needs the help of Croatia, that is, Croatia, which has for decades of traditionally helped Kosovo Albanians, to now be on the side of Serbia. In addition, by successfully solving problems with Croatia, Serbia sends a message to the European Union that if there will be problems in agreement with Kosovo - Serbia will not be accountable because it is clear that it is able to find common ground with all the neighbors. Simply, after many years, Serbia has changed its policy and now plays the role of a good guy.

In Serbia, it is very well known that the next step on the European path is Kosovo. This problem is the most serious for Serbia. That is why Serbia improves relations with its neighbors, in fact building itself a better negotiating position for talks on Kosovo. Serbia knows that negotiations would be conducted under the auspices of the European Union and therefore wants to have a better bargaining position. Good regional cooperation and solving problems with neighbors, especially with Croatia, are very good advantages for Belgrade. In addition, the event of reconciliation between Serbia and Croatia tells us that progress occurred only when new leaders not burdened by wartime history came on the scene. In Belgrade, the government leaders are not encumbered by any conflict in the former Yugoslavia or the war in Kosovo. In Pristina, the war-lords are in power and this fact may further burden the negotiations.

Belgrade is aware that Pristina is under pressure by the international community to begin negotiations. The European Commission's Report on the progress of Pristina in European integration warns that "**determined efforts of all parties**" are necessary to start the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The Serbian government also knows that the elections are taking place on Kosovo and that it is almost impossible to start negotiations before the formation of the new Kosovo government. Therefore, all that Belgrade does in connection to reconciliation and fostering of regional cooperation should be seen as preparation for the last major test awaiting Serbia before the road to the EU becomes wide open. Unlike earlier situations, this time Serbia will not enter negotiations handicapped.