

***Ivo Visković, ambassador of Serbia, analyzes in this interview with EurActiv.de the difficulties of the past and the challenges of the future of Serbia. The interview has been conducted February 12, 2010 by Michael Kaczmarek and Ewald König. The German translation of this interview has been published at EurActiv.de: <http://www.euractiv.de/erweiterung-und-partnerschaft/artikel/tadic-will-srebrenica-resolution-oder-neuwahlen-002784>***

**EurActiv.de: Serbia has declared that it wants to join the EU as soon as possible. What are the reasons for this push to beat previous EU integration processes?**

**VISKOVIC:** We think and feel that we have lost too much time. The 1990s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are almost two lost decades in a sense that we have not achieved what would have been possible. For a long time Serbia has had its problems with the conditions for European integration, especially because of the cooperation with the Haag tribunal. Now all government coalition partners and some opposition parties – that represent two thirds of citizens – agree that European integration is Serbia's primary strategic goal and should be achieved as soon as possible.

Of course, everyone in Serbia is aware that Croatia is in front of us in this process and that it is impossible today to catch it up. Nevertheless, I think Serbia is able to do many things better and sooner than others not only because of this strong political will, but because of our administrative capacity that is better than in neighbouring countries and because of one important moment – that we have learned from the EU integration experiences of our neighbouring countries and the countries of Eastern Europe. We have learned to avoid some mistakes and to do things more efficient and quicker than they did at that time. That's why we think that Serbia is able to implement some reforms sooner than other candidate countries did.

**EurActiv.de: So Serbia will be ready to join the EU in 2014 as it has been stated several times?**

**VISKOVIC:** I don't like to name dates. Some mention 2014, some mention 2018 (as a hundredth anniversary of 1914 and 1918). These are historic dates for Europe and their symbolic meaning is an inspiration for those who work for the European integration of Serbia. It is a motivation to make enormous efforts in such a short time. Symbolic gestures already have been used in other occasions of the EU integration. Take the examples of Spain or Greece. When Greece started negotiation on entering the EU the situation in the country was not ideal but it was an important symbolic step in order to support democracy in Greece at that moment.

No one in Serbia will be angry if the EU tells us in 2014 that we have to postpone the accession because Serbia has not achieved this or that European standard, if we really don't do that. But people are afraid that the EU might say: Serbia is almost ready but we don't have an EU perspective for you because of attitude of this or that country, or because of this or that external circumstance. The accession of Serbia to the EU has to depend on the achievements of Serbia only, not on the development in third countries, not on the problems in the EU.

We do not ask for any privilege. We do not ask to become a member state before we have reached some EU standards and fulfilled some benchmarks. Tell us the standards and benchmarks that we have to reach and we will go for it. In the visa liberalization process we have demonstrated our capacity. We had very precise standards and very precise benchmarks and we fulfilled them in six months. Serbia expects the same procedure in the case of the EU integration.

**EurActiv.de: In some „old“ EU member states, for example in Germany, skepticism regarding further EU enlargements has increased after the EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Can you understand this skepticism?**

**VISKOVIC:** I cannot understand this reported level of “panic” of common citizens regarding the enlargement of the EU. We are aware that there had been problems and some bad examples but I am convinced that the EU integration of Bulgaria and Romania was the best solution for both countries and the EU yet.

We fear that such examples could be used as an excuse against Serbia and other Western Balkan countries to become members of the EU. We feel to become the “collateral damage” of skepticism on Bulgaria and Romania entering the EU or of the critics regarding financial situation in Greece today. We understand that there are problems in the EU but is it fair that Serbia has to pay the price for that? Neither Serbia nor any other Western Balkan country is guilty because of these problems.

Croatia defined the standard that the Western Balkan countries do not go in a convoy into the EU. We are not a line of six or so “vehicles” traveling together, where the slowest one is the standard for the others. Each country is a case for itself. The EU did accept this approach, we did accept it. So let’s focus on the case of Serbia, although we are aware that entering EU and not giving the same chance to other countries of the Western Balkan is suicidal as well for Serbia as for the others. This could cause problems on our own borders. Looking on the map of the EU now you see a “black hole” in the Western Balkan. The crucial question is: How long will this “black hole” absorb energy of the EU (as all “black holes” do)?

We think that we deserve to leave such position when we have reached European standards. We deserve it geographically, for our system of values, for our culture, for our political system and for our economic system. We are not a “forest civilization”. We strongly believe that we are able to reach all European standards, even if we have our characteristics and particularities that might be strange for some in the EU.

**EurActiv.de: Do you think the Serb people are ready to join the EU?**

**VISKOVIC:** The situation in Serbia is very complex and complicated. Unfortunately, we have the “baggage” of the 1990s. We have a lot of troublesome nationalistic feelings and nationalistic political statements in Serbia. Fortunately, their political influence now is under 20 percent of votes on elections. These political forces are present, they make troubles, but they are not decisive.

The necessary reforms are another problem. In my opinion, in the first two Serbian governments after Slobodan Milošević some politicians tried to go two or three steps in front of the common citizens. This was a problem since the citizens could not follow the leaders because they did not understand them. I firmly believe that in countries in transition political leaders have to go one step, perhaps sometimes two steps, ahead of the common citizens, to be mostly followed, when they want to lead. We have learned that lesson. From time to time you witness that our President or other politicians do statements that are not always in accordance with the majority feeling of the common citizens. But they understand that in certain situations they have to lead, to take some political risk in order to reach our strategic goals.

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Many people still have a problem with the new standards. They would like to join Europe but with their own habits which often are not in accordance with European values. For example, our working habits are absolutely non-European. Many people think it is everybody's right to have a working place and it doesn't matter whether he or she works or not. Even today, almost two thirds of the people think that most things had been better in times of socialism in Yugoslavia than today, of course with the exception of political or religious freedoms. It changes, but slowly.

Many people fear that we lose our identity by integrating into Europe. There are rumors that Serbs would lose the right to write in Cyrillic letters and we have to explain to the people that this is not true and show them the case of Bulgaria. There are other examples of prejudices. People fear that they would lose the right to prepare brandies by themselves, which is a typical habit in Serbia, for many people in the countryside produce famous Slivovitz and we are very proud of this family tradition. And again we have to explain that it is not true. You must not sell a brandy on the market unless you reach some production standards, but you can produce the brandy for your own consumption. We have to fight these prejudices each day but I think we have been quite successful.

When we ask older people, if they are in favor of the European integration of Serbia, some of them will say: No, personally I am not, but I would support it because of my children or grandchildren. This demonstrates that they are perhaps personally afraid, but they know that there is no future for Serbia without European integration.

Some 90 percent of the younger generation supports European integration although we have a very militant group of some 10 percent against European values. These groups that deal with Serbian nationalist ideas, are in the absolute minority, but they are very militant and because of that very present in the media.

**EurActiv.de: The massacre of Srebrenica still divides the people of Serbia. President Boris Tadić has proposed two resolutions to pay homage to the victims of Srebrenica and to the Serb victims in the war. There is a growing political resistance against these resolutions. Will the resolutions fail in the parliament?**

**VISKOVIC:** We intend strongly to make a resolution in our parliament condemning the Srebrenica case. This divided political parties, politicians and individuals. Most people understand that it was terrible what happened in Srebrenica; that it was a crime by the people who so-called acted "on behalf" of us. They pretended to defend Serbia and the Serbian people. Many people in Serbia feel strongly guilty because of that. The proportion of the massacre of Srebrenica, where several thousands people had been killed, is terrible by itself. But on the other side many people remember that thousands of Serbs, even close to Srebrenica, had been killed and no one mentions them. They ask: Do our victims count less than the victims of the Muslim side?

That's why most political parties prefer to have two resolutions. One on the crime in Srebrenica (some refuse to name it genocide and prefer to name it crime), and the second resolution refers to the Serb victims in the war. This resolution demonstrates that the victims on the Serb site also have to be respected. Someone has to ask for pardon for these Serb victims, not only for the victims caused by some Serbs.

President Boris Tadić, who leads the Democratic Party, decided to go this way regardless of the prize. I expect that the voting on the two resolutions will happen very soon, within the next two month. If

the coalition partners are not ready to follow, the coalition will fall apart and the President will then have to call for new elections. Then we would see what the people really think. We have to find out what is going on in Serbia. Is it really the will of the people or only the will of some politicians including those who are not able to face their own past? I know that some people think it is too early for this step. I learned that Germans needed some 20 years to face their past. But Srebrenica is not only a political issue – it is a moral issue, as well. The President told in several occasion that it is in our interest to face history; we have to face the facts in order to close the issue. Srebrenica should be finished. We have to accept our part of responsibility.

President Tadić told me that cooperation with the International Haag tribunal also should be brought to an end as soon as possible. The best men from our police and our secret police look for Ratko Mladić 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Many people in the West speculate that our President and our political elites are afraid to arrest him because there would be demonstrations against his arrest. This is not true. We experienced it with Radovan Karadžić. Several hundreds of people demonstrated for several days when Karadžić had been arrested but nothing big happened. And politically Karadžić was a more complex case than Mladić. It was quite difficult for some Serbs to accept the idea that Karadžić is also perhaps a war criminal. So why shouldn't we do it with Mladić? Politically it would not be more difficult than with Karadžić. Many people know that Mladić really did some things, including Srebrenica, which cannot be accepted in any way as a defense of national interest or our nation. We have no reason to protect Mladić. We have been prisoners of Mladić for a long time, for Serbia and its EU integration depend very much on the Mladić case.

**EurActiv.de: How is it possible that Croatia or Serbia may join the EU, while not all Western Balkan countries, especially Bosnia-Herzegovina, have a sustainable political structure and while not all frontier disputes in the region are finally solved?**

**VISKOVIC:** There have been very unpleasant comments in the West regarding the so-called intentions of Serbia. But: Serbia does not ask for any split of Bosnia-Herzegovina, we do not wish it and we do not support it. Our leaders do understand the complexity of the situation in the region and we know what kind of problems a split could cause. We are aware that it is necessary to keep Bosnia-Herzegovina together. Our President said several times publicly that Serbia supports the integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina. We are ready to put this statement in any kind of official form although we know that this is not a popular statement for many people in Serbia think that it is the “natural right” of the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina to declare their independence like the Albanians did in Kosovo. Some surveys indicate that up to 90 percent of the population in the Republika Srpska would vote for independence.

But, of course, Serbia tries to protect the rights of the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina that are guaranteed by the Dayton Agreement. Everyone is aware that the Dayton Agreement is not an ideal agreement. It was designed first of all to stop the war and not as a long term solution. Many people think that Bosnia-Herzegovina in such a form is not a functioning state. We can accept the arguments but we cannot accept that the rights of the Serbs or the Serbian entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina are negated because of these problems. You cannot simply come and withdraw the rights of the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Perhaps something is worth to be sacrificed; perhaps something is worth to be changed; perhaps something has to be put in a new form. The people of the country have to find a solution; we cannot do it for them.

## **EurActiv.de: Another unsolved problem is the status of Kosovo. How is it possible that Serbia may join the EU while there is still no final solution for Kosovo?**

**VISKOVIC:** The Kosovo issue is not an official condition for Serbia to enter the EU. We take this as two separated processes: On the one hand, the process of the European integration of Serbia and, on the other hand, the process of solving the Kosovo problem. You won't find the Kosovo issue as condition in any official EU negotiation document or statement. There might be individual political statements in EU member states that refer to Kosovo as a "may-be" condition to Serbia's EU integration. But we negotiate with the EU Commission and the position of the EU Commission officials is that these are two separated issues. If you link both processes, we will have a serious internal problem in Serbia. We even think there might be a regional problem, too. We are aware that the current situation is complex and politically not acceptable for some countries, but I think that the Kosovo issue could be fully solved after our entering in the EU.

The International Court of Justice in October 2008 was asked for a non-binding advisory opinion on Kosovo by the General Assembly of the United Nations. We expect the advisory opinion around June this year. This will be a precedent for the international community. There are similar complex situations not only in Europe but also in some African, Latin American or Asian countries. The example that one part of the country can simply declare its independence and secede from the rest is very dangerous. If you one day declare legal such a unilateral declaration of independence then you will talk tomorrow about new "Abkhazias" and "South-Ossetias". And there are some other cases in Europe that I don't want to name.

We are ready to negotiate a final solution for the Kosovo issue after the advisory opinion has been published. The so-called solution of today – that one side gets everything and the other side loses everything – is not acceptable for us. It was an attempt to impose a so-called solution prepared by others to Serbia and, of course, Serbia didn't agree with that.

## **Euractiv.de: From Serbia's point of view: What is the spectrum of possible solutions for Kosovo?**

**VISKOVIC:** We are convinced that the only possible final solution might be a compromise. We know that Serbia will have to sacrifice something for this compromise. But you cannot put one side in a situation where it loses everything and cannot gain anything, not even symbolically. It is important not to be humiliated, not to be blackmailed. Face saving is very important in this issue, like in many others.

There are examples how Western countries have solved similar problems after World War II. Take the example of the Territory of Trieste. The United States and Great Britain did find a solution to put the parts of territory that had been claimed as a whole by Italy and Yugoslavia, under a so-called civil administration. Everyone knew that this will be a final solution. This formula was at that time in interest of Italy in order to save the face, not to be treated like a country that has lost territories. After twenty years Italy and Yugoslavia sat on the table and found a solution for themselves. There are a lot of other cases in history that could be adopted – not literally but as an inspiration – for the Kosovo issue. We are ready to discuss each possible solution, and we are ready to find a final compromise scarifying a lot of our current position.

There are people in Serbia with non-realistic demands, but no one of the people ruling Serbia today think about the idea that Serbia could rule again over Kosovo. Serbia already had proposed to the

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Albanians in the Kosovo all rights except for two: 1) formal international sovereignty and 2) military sovereignty. Regarding our constitution, we cannot accept that Kosovo is treated like a sovereign state with a seat in the United Nations and so on. And we like to see a demilitarized Kosovo because of the bad experiences of the past where the force was used against the Serb minority in the Kosovo. All other things – that affect 99 per cent of their life, including the right to have an own police and juridical system – had been already proposed by our negotiators to belong to Albanians.

**EurActiv.de: Serbia has been hardly hit by the financial and economic crisis. In May 2009 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) increased its financial support for Serbia to 2.9 billion Euros. The state has to cut public expenditures and hast to implement unpopular reforms. Do you see the risk that this might cause another push of popularity to Serbian nationalists?**

**VISKOVIC:** It is a quite frequent phenomenon in countries in transition to “punish the government” that introduces changes, but governments change in Western countries, too. Now we are in the politically comfortable situation that even if the government changes it will be, I believe, on the same pro-European course. With our application for EU membership we have formally announced our decision that Serbia will go in the direction to EU – not in the direction to someone else. I know that there are people in Serbia that would like to see Serbia with Russia or with China, but they are a minority. Today they represent not more than eighteen per cent of the votes.

The electoral system in Serbia guarantees coalition governments. The government that in 2000 ruled after Slobodan Milošević was a coalition 18 parties. The current government is a coalition of six parties. Sometimes, parties, especially small, tend to blackmail and to misuse this necessity to find a political profit. They ask for this or that type of privilege. This makes political life sometimes difficult but it guarantees that a single party could not install a kind of dictatorship. So, there is almost no possibility that tomorrow will govern one party, especially not such party that would change the course of Serbia.

**EurActiv.de: What reforms get under way in Serbia and what are the main challenges for Serbia on its way to the EU?**

**VISKOVIC:** We just made an enormous reform of our juridical system and we have reformed our health security system. In the economy sector we cut off some 700 regulations. We use the rules of Western countries and adopt it to our particular situation. We want to make the system more transparent and known to Western investors. For example, in the former system it was not possible to buy land as a private property. You could only rent land for 99 years but not buy it. Now we introduce standards that are normal in the Western countries.

We are also aware that corruption in the Western Balkan is much bigger than in Western European countries. The system that has been developed during the 1990s in Serbia was practically a legalized system of corruption. Everyone was expected to be corrupted. You have to do enormous efforts to change this situation. Almost each week corrupted people are arrested. We even have sentenced a judge of the Supreme Court for corruption. I cannot promise that we solve the problem by tomorrow and Serbia will have reached the normal standard of a Scandinavian society within two years. But we improve the situation each year.

One of the biggest problems for Serbia today is the current pension system. A healthy pension system can work only if at least three people work for one pensioner. In Serbia we have 1.3 salaries

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that pay for 1 pensioner. The main task of our finance minister is to find each month enough money for the retirement pensions. It is difficult to cut pensions not only because pensioners are voters, but also because we have to admit that average pension is shameful low. It is around 190 Euro per month.

Pre-candidate and candidate countries receive some money from EU funds that shall help to realize the reforms but this is not, looking from their side, enough money. The day that a candidate country becomes a member state the financial support from EU funds is increased significantly – up to ten times, experts told me. I think a progressive assistance program would be better: The money from EU funds should increase with the progress achieved by the candidate countries. The current regulation is not good because most Western Balkan countries now need strong support to initiate the reforms. A progressive assistance would encourage investors; it would help people to find a job. If people see results they are willing to work for the objectives. People need results, not only promises.

You cannot expect people to love reforms that endanger their position and that make their life more difficult. We have to adopt our specific system to the rules of market economy. This is not so simple. In the countries of Ex-Yugoslavia we had so-called social property. It was not a state property like in Eastern countries. Everyone was the owner, and no one was the owner. It was not easy to change the system, but we have almost finished the process of privatization.

Now we have a better economic performance. One example: Sartid, the biggest steel company in Serbia, was producing each year terrible loss but it was employing several thousand people and no politician dared to close the factory. In 2003 U.S. Steel acquired Sartid and six subsidiaries. They made the company profitable. The company, that was the biggest problem for Serbia, became the most successful company and the biggest exporter from Serbia.

Of course there is another side of the story. Many firms bankrupt. Politically it was terrible difficult to say: now that you are bankrupt you are jobless.

### **EurActiv.de: How established is the commercial relationship between Serbia and Germany?**

Our balance of trade is very negative and we are, of course, unsatisfied with this situation. Our exports to Germany are two time less than our imports. But, last year Germany was our first trade partner, in front of Russia. Serbia import mainly gas and oil from Russia and cars and machines from Germany. No one of the German companies contributes more than 4 per cent of the German exports. On the other hand, the mentioned steel company in 2008 exported 18 per cent of all our goods to Germany. Another company, a producer of wind generators, exported 14 per cent of Serbian goods to Germany. So, two companies produce more than 30 per cent of all our export goods to Germany. Now, we try to come to the German markets with other products as well, first of all with our traditional food products, vegetables and fruits. We export mushrooms and Serbian raspberries, which are a worldwide “benchmark” for quality. During the times of the sanctions (1990s) other countries entered the market and now it is difficult for us to regain it.

German companies are important investors in Serbia and we think there is more potential.

Practically, 70 percent of our technology is originally from Germany. Now, our task and necessity is to modernize the machines that are in some cases very, very old.

### **EurActiv.de: How are the political relations between Serbia and Germany?**

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**VISKOVIC:** We want to improve further our relations with Germany. Usually diplomatic missions have five tasks, and the fifth is to develop friendly relations. When I was sent to Germany, my President told me that the fifth task of diplomats will be my first task: to improve and to develop friendly relations to Germany.

It is well known that we had problems in the past. We were in two wars; we think even in three wars when we include the war in Kosovo. There had been a brake in diplomatic relations from 1957 to 1968. It was Germany that broke relations because we recognized the GDR at that time. Have I to remember that we did not break relations with Germany after Germany recognized Kosovo? Is not even that a signal of a new age in our relations? Our leaders visit Germany very often, we all in Embassy try hard every day to work on improvement of relations – as ambassador Maas does in Belgrade – and I think that it can be said that our relations are significantly improving, in spite of some differences, especially on Kosovo issue. Maybe even more important than that, our citizens, our companies and our cultural and other institutions deepen our cooperation constantly.

Interview: Michael Kaczmarek, Ewald König

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