



**Group of the Progressive Alliance of
Socialists & Democrats
in the European Parliament**

Mission to Serbia Friday 16 April 2010, Beograd, Serbia

European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialist and Democrats in the European Parliament

Introduction

On 16 April a delegation of the European Forum and the S&D Group, headed by Hannes Swoboda (vice-president of the Progressive Alliance of Social Democrats in the European Parliament) and Jan Marinus Wiersma (vice-president of the European Forum), visited Belgrade and held talks with government representatives and social democratic partners, the outgoing governor of the Bank of Serbia and journalists.

The mission to Serbia included meetings with Rasim Ljajić, President of Social Democratic Party of Serbia and Minister of Labour and Social Policy; Oliver Dulić, Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning; Božidar Djelić, Deputy PM for EU Integration and Minister of Science and Tech. Development; Gordana Čomić, Deputy Speaker for the Democratic Party led delegation of “For a European Serbia” (Za Evropsku Srbiju, ZES) at the National Assembly of Serbia; Aleksandar Marton, vice-president of League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina; Ivica Dačić, President of Socialist Party of Serbia, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior; Elvira Kovács, and László Varga both MP’s and members of the presidency of Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians; Žarko Korać, Social Democratic Union president and only MP of the party in the national Assembly; Nina Živanović, president of Social Democratic Union Youth and vice-president of the party; Vuk Jeremić, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Radovan Jelašić, Governor of the Bank of Serbia; representatives of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung office in Belgrade and the National Democratic Institute.

Political Context

In a short period of time Serbia experienced some very important and rather tumultuous political developments that were closely, and with great concern, followed by the EU and the international community. In 2008, Serbia had crucial presidential and parliamentary elections, signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, and, under the new elected pro-European government, Serbia finally succeed in improving the cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) as it delivered Radovan Karadzic to The Hague. Although the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) has been significantly weakened and radical forces are less united — after the presidential candidate Tomislav Nikolić left SRS and established the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) — there is still a societal and political division between a pro-European and a nationalist camp.

Regarding the EU integration process, Serbia appears to be catching up, winning praise for its ambitious programme to join the EU and for possessing the administrative capacity to make “substantial progress towards the EU”, as it is argued in the European Commission Progress Report 2009. Furthermore, the country has made progress in meeting the political criteria and addressing key European Partnership priorities. Serbia is aiming to submit the application for EU candidate status before the 1st of June of 2010. Further reforms are needed to ensure that the new constitutional framework is implemented in line with European standards, particularly in the area of the judiciary. Kosovo will remain a major question. Although the EU has decided not to connect the Kosovo issue with the European integration process, sooner or later Serbia will have to tackle the Kosovo issue. After Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence, Serbia took the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Pieter Feith, head of the International Civilian Office in Kosovo, believes the ICJ’s ruling on the legality of Kosovo’s independence will be delivered before the end of July.

Conclusions

The visit of the European Forum and S&D Group delegation to Serbia proved to be very interesting and informative as it gave an excellent insight in the political situation in the country and the position of Serbia in the region. It was stressed during the meetings that despite the worrying economic situation, the political situation in Serbia is stable due to the strong commitment between the coalition partners.

In this environment, Serbia has managed to improve the relations with the neighbouring countries. The relations with Croatia — due to the election of Ivo Josipović as the new president of Croatia — have strongly improved, just as with Albania whose foreign minister Ilir Meta, made a historic four day visit to Belgrade. The adoption of the Srebrenica resolution and Istanbul declaration between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina — in which it has been agreed that regional policy should be based on ensuring security, permanent political dialogue and preservation of multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious characteristics of the region — have resulted in a visit of the BiH Presidency Chairman Haris Silajdžić to Belgrade, his first in 18 years. Furthermore, it has been stressed during the meetings that Serbia has always clearly expressed full commitment to the Dayton Peace Agreement and the sovereignty of BiH.

Despite the enlargement fatigue among some EU member states and the economic crisis, Serbian government representatives were optimistic about the EU integration process, of which the visa liberalisation was a very concrete and important step. Government officials were very pleased with the support of the S&D Group for the visa liberalisation and the EU integration process of Serbia in general. Although it is not clear when the next step will be made in the EU integration process, Serbia is putting huge effort in lobbying and making the necessary reforms, Božidar Djelić, Deputy PM for EU Integration said. The next steps for Serbia in this process will be to submit the application for EU candidate status before the 1st of June, and to lobby for the start of the ratification of SAA by the EU member states.

Despite the fact that the EU has decided not to connect the Kosovo issue with the European integration process of Serbia, it has sent a clear message that Serbia will have to deal with it before entering the EU. The government officials our delegation met made clear that there is no room to manoeuvre on the position of Serbia when it comes to independence of Kosovo. Moreover, Serbia’s Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić is expecting a positive ruling of the ICJ for Serbia which, according to him, will bring both parties back at the table to find a solution that is a compromise and not one sided.

Recommendations:

- Serbia should be encouraged and supported in its process towards EU membership. In this process the cooperation between countries in South-eastern Europe is of crucial importance. This cooperation, in which Serbia plays a key role, has strongly improved recently and should be further promoted. Serbia has a key role when it comes to stability in BiH.
- The EU-Western Balkans Sarajevo Summit on June 2, is a great opportunity to underline strong commitment of both the EU and Western Balkans towards each other and to send a clear message to the EU that the cooperation between the countries in the region has strongly improved.
- Cooperation between left wings parties in Serbia should be advanced and advocated.
- The cooperation between social democrats from the EU and Democratic Party has to be intensified
- SAA should be ratified by EU member states as soon as possible.
- Kosovo should not be linked to the European integration process of Serbia. In addition, on the issue of Kosovo social democrats from the EU should await the ruling of the ICJ on the unilateral declaration of independence which is scheduled by the end of June.
- The reforms of Socialist party of Serbia (SPS) and all developments related to the party should be closely followed. SPS has strongly expressed its willingness to become a modern pro-European party and positive developments into this direction have been noted. Improving the relations with the PES and SI member parties in the region should be a priority for SPS.