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## Domino effect in the Balkans

By Adar Primor

The moment of truth is approaching. The United States and most states in the European Union are planning to recognize the independence of Kosovo. In the streets of Belgrade, however, you could get the opposite impression. For several weeks, the billboards have been covered with portraits of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Willy Brandt and Charles de Gaulle, all accompanied by the slogan, "Kosovo is Serbia!"

Each image is accompanied by a short quotation taken from one of the speeches of the leader who is portrayed. The passages were carefully chosen, and some were adapted to the Serbian situation, as part of a campaign meant to suggest that were those legendary heroes among us today, they would certainly be siding with Serbia. That country is fighting for the integrity of its homeland and against the independence initiative of Kosovo, the province whose population of 2 million is predominantly ethnic Albanian, and which has been under United Nations administration since 1999.

Lincoln, looking thoughtful, declares on the poster, "In most important things, we cannot and must not give in." Churchill – holding his eternal cigar – declares, in the words with which he called on the British to confront Nazi Germany: "We shall defend what is ours. We shall never surrender." Whereas De Gaulle – dressed in army uniform – is quoted saying, "One day the tears will dry up, the hatreds will be silenced, the battleground will be leveled – but our fatherland will remain."

In the context of the efforts to enlist the support of countries Serbia considers "significant," Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremic visited here last week. As if to complement the campaign of billboards and quotations, Jeremic enlisted three departed Israeli leaders to his cause. At a speech at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, the minister cited Golda Meir, who once declared that you can't shake hands with someone whose fist is clenched. He also mentioned Abba Eban – someone "I deeply admire" – who declared that: "History teaches us that men and nations behave wisely only once they have exhausted all other alternatives," and added that "tragedy is not what men suffer but what they miss."

Also in the Abba Eban vein, Jeremic said: "The alternatives to a negotiated peace in the Western Balkans have been tried, and all they produced was more violence. For we Serbs and Albanians have pretty much never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity." In the end, the Serb mentioned the "great statesman" Yitzhak Rabin, who upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 1994, wanted to transmit a universal message that, in the Serb's words, "the Jewish people has carried for thousands of years, and is found in the Book of Books: venishmartem me'od lenafshotekhem – Therefore take good heed of yourselves – or, in contemporary terms, the message of the sanctity of life."

For Rabin, said Jeremic, "as for all of us, that means that ... there is only one radical means for sanctifying human life. The one radical solution is a real peace."

Jeremic's speech was a masterpiece of intellectual diplomacy, based on the values of justice and international order, which also played on the emotions of his audience, with whom the Serbs share a "heritage and common historical experience." Like the Jews, he said, the Serbs were also the object of severe persecution and extermination; he himself, he said, is the grandson of a survivor of the Mauthausen and Dachau camps. Yugoslavia, he explained, was one of the first countries in the world to recognize the State of Israel. Then he added: "I want to reassure you of my personal commitment to keep building, to further strengthen and deepen, comprehensive diplomatic, political, economic and cultural ties with the State of Israel."

In an interview with Haaretz, Jeremic presented the arsenal of claims, which have also been adopted in several diplomatic and academic circles in Israel, and which are designed, among other things, to warn of the possible consequences to Israel if the world recognizes Kosovo's independence.

### **No imposed solutions**

Jeremic opposes the idea that a political and territorial conflict can end by means of a solution imposed from the outside, which is not also accepted by the two sides to the conflict. Those in Israel who support his position believe that if Jerusalem does not adhere to that line of reasoning, it, too, is likely to have an agreement imposed on it – with the Palestinians. Moreover, who can guarantee that an attempt by Israeli Arabs to disengage from the state – in the Galilee, for example – would not gain active international support as well?

Jeremic himself prefers not to get into the Israeli–Palestinian

side of the equation. He is certainly aware of its limitations: The demographic/geographical situation in Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians constitute a 90-percent majority, is not similar to that of the Galilee, with a mixed population. Therefore, there is not a single significant body that would recognize an imagined secessionist claim by Israeli Arabs. Moreover, in the case of Kosovo, a declaration of its independence will not be unilateral, but will be made with the consent of the United States and (most of) Europe, and in accordance with conditions ("conditional independence" and a commitment to protect the Serbian minority) to be agreed upon in advance by the major powers.

Nevertheless, Jeremic chooses to exploit the two conflicts in order to complain about the discriminatory policy of the West. As someone "who supports the Annapolis initiative with all my heart," he cites the words of President George W. Bush at the conference: "Any deal that gets done has to be agreed on by the parties. In other words, this country can't impose its vision on the two parties. If that happens, then there's not going to be a deal that will last. Our job is to facilitate the discussions ... But we can't dictate the results.

"All we are asking is that the international community adopt an identical approach toward us. That it invest the same efforts in our arena," says Jeremic. "The reason why all the talks about the future of Kosovo have failed so far is that a deadline was set for them: December 10. The U.S. and several Western partners told us: If you find a solution by then, excellent. We will applaud you. If not, we will support the position of one of the parties. Under these circumstances it is clear that that side – that of the Albanians in Kosovo – had no incentive except to wait, to let time take its course."

Jeremic, who is only 32 years old, is a meteor in Serbian politics. His last position was that of political adviser to President Boris Tadic. He has known Tadic since he was a high-school student in Belgrade, and the president was his psychology teacher. When Tadic the teacher became the Yugoslavian minister of communications and later the Serbian defense minister, he appointed Jeremic as his adviser; Jeremic is also considered his confidante today. His English is fluent, having studied in England and the U.S.: Jeremic holds a degree in physics from Cambridge and a master's in public administration from Harvard.

He speaks in a down-to-earth manner, and as he declaims his lengthy replies, his entire body leans toward the interviewer, until only a few centimeters separate them. His frequent smiles and the warmth he radiates – he has an unusually strong

handshake – may seem intended to give the sense that the fates of the two nations, that of the interviewee and that of his interviewer, are linked.

Jeremic appeals to Jewish emotions as he declares that the Serbs regard Kosovo as "the cradle of our civilization." The implication is clear: If the "Serbian Jerusalem" is stolen from Belgrade, what's to stop Al-Quds from being taken from Israel in the future, and turned into the capital of independent Palestine. Jeremic is familiar with the counter-arguments: The Palestinians want Jerusalem as their capital, whereas the ethnic Albanians have no designs on Belgrade; Jerusalem has had a Jewish majority since the 19th century, whereas Kosovo has not had a Serbian-Orthodox majority for almost 300 years. Nevertheless, there are still some Jews who are willing to compromise in Jerusalem, whereas the Serbs are unwilling to give up their "heart and soul."

Perhaps that is why he goes back to focusing on the legalistic claims; the "dangerous" undermining, in his opinion, of the international order that would occur if Kosovo becomes independent. The leitmotif of his rhetoric includes terms such as "sovereignty," "territorial integrity," "national pride" – and on the other hand, "humiliation." He mentions that UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which was passed after the Kosovo war, recognized Serbia's sovereignty in the province. "The division of Serbia – a democratic country recognized by the international community – will undermine the foundations of international relations based on the UN Charter, as well as the legitimacy of its Security Council."

In Israel, too, there are some who think the country should not recognize an entity whose independence has not been recognized by the Security Council. Bypassing the council, while slighting the right of veto of the Russians, who are opposed to Kosovo's independence – it is claimed – would end up serving as a boomerang for Israel, which itself is in need of the American veto.

But the need to bypass the UN actually stems from a recognition of its inability to solve ethnic and territorial conflicts. The "international order" did not succeed in solving the problem of Bosnia, nor that of Cyprus. Preserving that order makes it impossible to intervene in the genocide in Darfur, or to exercise force to prevent Iran's nuclear program.

Jeremic expresses irritation at the idea that Serbia brought on itself the upcoming Albanian independence in Kosovo, and rejects the suggestion that his country is the "bad guy" that has lost its moral right to claim ownership of the province.

First of all, he says, the Albanians in Kosovo are also guilty of serious crimes and ethnic cleansing of Serbs. Second, the crimes of the late Yugoslavian president Slobodan Milosevic were undoubtedly terrible, but they were not unique: The crimes of Saddam Hussein, for example, did not affect Iraq's right to continue to claim sovereignty in Kurdistan.

Third, the Serbs themselves were the ones who brought down Milosevic in a democratic revolution in 2000; they were the ones who extradited him and senior members of his regime to the International Criminal Court in The Hague; and they were the ones who in July, 2005 sent their president, Tadic, to bow his head before the families of the 8,000 victims on the 10th anniversary of the massacre in Srebrenica. Why, then, should they pay the penalty that Milosevic himself was not required to pay? And finally, since Milosevic was deposed, the Serbs have been busy building a state that is based on democratic institutions and a lively market economy. Theirs is a country with its face toward the West, which aspires to full integration into the European Union.

One can believe Jeremic. In spite of the shared history of Russia and Serbia, in spite of their shared culture and religion, the similarity of their languages and their economic and military ties, many Serbs today see their destiny linked to Europe. "The question of Kosovo has always preoccupied Russia. In that sense it serves us as a megaphone," says the Serbian minister. A megaphone for voicing historical claims. The EU, on the other hand, is the future. When he speaks about it, his eyes shine. "This is the largest peace project in the history of humanity. In its context it is unimaginable that a violent conflict will break out between two nations."

And if that is the case, why shouldn't Serbia recognize reality and accept the route Europe is offering it: recognition of the "conditional independence" of Kosovo in return for emergence from international isolation and an opportunity to join the EU very soon. As far as Jeremic is concerned, it's the story of the chicken and the egg. The demand to demonstrate pragmatism and realism works in both directions, in his opinion. Why should it not be the Kosovars who relinquish their demand of independence in exchange for the broadest possible autonomy and an opportunity to join the EU very soon as part of the Serbian state, he asks.

And at a time when it doesn't look as though either side intends to compromise, Jeremic warns of the apocalyptic implications of hasty Western action.

Although he rejects the claim by Serbian propagandists that Islam is a significant factor in Kosovar society, Jeremic does believe that imposition of an external solution is liable to turn the ethnic conflict into a religious one. Moreover, in the unique Balkan geopolitical dynamic, there may be a "significant domino effect, which will harm regional stability, undermine democracy and the legitimacy of the existing borders, as it turns the prosperity into an illusion.

"And we all know that there are dozens of 'Kosovos' throughout the world, just waiting for secession to be legitimized, to be rendered an acceptable norm. Many existing conflicts could escalate, frozen conflicts could reignite, and new ones could be instigated."

Finally, Serbia – whose citizens will go to the polls on January 20 to decide whether they wish to reelect Tadic as president – is liable to fall into the hands of the Radical-ultranationalist opposition, a scenario whose outcome Jeremic calls a "black hole." In two sentences the Serbian minister pulls out the main points of his lexicon, which express his entire philosophy in a nutshell: "Anyone who touches sovereignty, territorial integrity and national pride – is playing with fire. If Serbia is humiliated, Serbian democracy will be humiliated, and the efforts to 'Westernize' and to become part of Europe will be severely damaged."

### **'Great empathy'**

In Israel, Jeremic met with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, "and received a great deal of empathy," according to a senior Israeli diplomatic official. The decline of stability in the Balkans and the possibility that the Radicals will take control of the political arena in Serbia is cause for concern in Jerusalem, which fears "a return to the Milosevic era." At the same time, the expected turn of the back on Europe by the Radicals will lead to a clear Slavic orientation that is liable to be expressed – among other things – by an invitation to the Russian army to establish bases in Serbia, says the official.

During his visit, Jeremic heard the anticipated Israeli stance, which supports arrangements that are an outcome of negotiations between the parties to the conflict and is opposed to imposed solutions. He was told that "Israel will not be one of the first to recognize the independence of Kosovo if and when it is declared." On the other hand, as an ally of the U.S. and Europe, and as a country that considers itself part of the "enlightened First World," it will not be among the last, either.

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