

# WESTERN BALKANS SECURITY OBSERVER

---

No. 2 • SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2006

---

BELGRADE

# Taboos, security and democracy

Filip Ejdlus

How far public discourse on matters of importance for the survival, security, national interest and sovereignty of a political community may be permitted to unfold? The question is which particular point marks the limit of the citizens' rights to freely discuss these things, which then become forbidden, to be addressed only by the "legitimate" interpreters of national interests and "authorized" defenders of national security.

In an authoritarian society, the punishment of those who violate this limit is a matter for the apparatus of state repression. Generally speaking, no one in a democratic society ought to be sanctioned because of the way they think or talk about public affairs. However, democracy, too, has its taboos, the only difference being that the principal method of censorship is not state- but rather self-imposed. Fearing what primitive peoples consider a "grave disease" and modern societies social marginalization, citizens avoid breaking taboos and disclosing in public what they think in private.

The main argument of this text is that this kind of auto censorship is detrimental not only for democracy, but also for the understanding and protection of the security of the state and individual. A precondition for the achievement and preservation of security is a free and democratic discourse about it.

## Israel taboo in the USA

For the American public the issue of Israel remained a taboo of this kind for quite some time. Even Israel itself offered greater freedom to polemicize on the political, economic and military support the Jewish state received from the USA. Anyone who dared criticize this support was first condemned as an anti-Semite and then ousted from the political, i.e. ac-

ademic mainstream. This prospect put paid to any further debate. However, two prominent professors of international politics, John Mearsheimer from the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt from Harvard have recently wedged into the "last American taboo", as late Edward Said put it.

In their article "Israel Lobby", published this March in the *London Review of Books*, after the American publisher refused to print it, these two prominent representatives of the realistic school of thought problematized the US backing of Israel. The starting assumption of their argument is that the outstanding American support to this country cannot be understood from the point of view of the American national interest any more than it can be justified from a moral point of view. In the first place, it facilitates the enemies of the USA and the Islamic fundamentalists to obtain wide popular support against American global domination. Furthermore, this kind of foreign policy alienates and destabilizes the states the US depends on for its oil supplies, including the moderate regimes in the Middle East, which are the most important US allies in its global war on terrorism. Mearsheimer and Walt also claim that the 2003 invasion on Iraq and increasingly intensive pressures on Iran because of its nuclear programme were for the benefit of Israel's security and at the expense of American interests. In addition, the authors criticize the US for tolerating the Israeli nuclear arsenal, since that encourages nuclear proliferation in the region and impairs the global credibility of the US foreign policy. Finally, the moral argument for an exceptional assistance to Israel to the disadvantage of the Palestinians loses its strength in the light of the long history of Israeli crimes, say these two authors who, incidentally, call themselves philo-Semites.

Mearsheimer and Walt focus on the activities of the Israel lobby as the key to understand this foreign policy departure from the national interest. They claim the lobby, the main part of which is the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), uses two strategies to attain its objectives. One is the influence on decision making centres, as in the case of the US invasion on Iraq. The other strategy tends to control the US public discourse on Israel and provide the pro-Israeli American foreign policy with immunity from any criticism whatsoever. The means the lobby uses for this purpose range from media manipulation to labelling as anti-Semites all who disagree with this policy and even financial support to their competitors.

As the authors themselves envisaged the article elicited stormy reactions. Thus certain circles denounced the text as anti-semitic, uncivilized, politically inflammable and irresponsible. In addition, it was also condemned as inadmissibly monocausal, since the understanding of the US foreign policy towards Israel hinges on more than one factor - in this case the influence of the Israel lobby. Furthermore, the critics claim that this policy is also backed by the US strategic and structural economic interest, struggle for the profit of oil companies and the military industry, as well as the historical-cultural links of the two countries.

However (un)founded this criticism may be, the article by Mearsheimer and Walt is crucial since it broached the debate on an issue that was considered a taboo for quite some time, and one of great importance not only for the US national interests but also for the global security. The article was written very moderately and offers ample proof for the arguments it presents. Therefore, the accusations that it emulates the style of anti-semitic theories that allegedly disclose the cabalistic "conspiracy of the elders of Zion" do not stand to reason. On the contrary, probably the best way to stop the mystification and remove this shad-

ow of doubt from the Israeli lobby is to address its activities in a transparent, free and critical debate.

### **The taboo of Kosovo and Metohija in Serbia**

Serbia, too, has a series of important social problems that are tabooized. They cannot be discussed freely, since that implies the risk of public marginalization and even physical danger. The list of these problems is long and mainly includes sensitive topics of Serbia's responsibility and war heritage. However, the taboo that by far exceeds all others in terms of its importance and lack of open debate is the issue of Kosovo and Metohija (KaM). This author does not intend to draw a proper parallel between this issue and the problem of American support to Israel. KaM is formally a component part of Serbia and is central to the Serbian national identity, while Israel has no such status in the USA. Still there are considerable similarities in the public treatment of these sensitive issues.

In the first place, there is no rational debate on Serbian national interest in relation to KaM in Serbia. If anything elicits the agreement of the elites on the entire political spectrum, it is the fact that Kosovo represents an inalienable part of the Republic of Serbia. At the same time, they unanimously refuse to publicly tell their citizens what the international community has been largely suggesting, namely that, in one way or another, Kosovo will be an internationally recognized, undivided and independent state. However, dreading the outcome of the negotiations the Serbian authorities are already preparing the grounds to indefinitely continue their struggle against reality. Thus Article 114 of the proposed draft of the new Constitution anticipates that the president of the republic, taking his oath, should pledge to "devote all his powers to the preservation of the sovereignty and entirety of the territory of the Republic of Serbia including KaM as its component part". It is not clear whether the Serbian politicians deliberately sacri-

fice realism of their foreign policy in order to remain in power or genuinely believe that Kosovo will one day return to Serbian control.

Secondly, similar to what happens with those who criticise the pro-Israeli policy of the USA, anyone who publicly raises an issue of this kind in Serbia is labelled as traitor and banished from the political mainstream. Let us recall the symbolical public lynch and ostracism Goran Svilanovic was exposed to in April 2005 when he signed the report of the International Commission for the Balkans anticipating gradual independence for KaM. In the aggressive, albeit expected, response of the "patriotic bloc" the largest refinement was demonstrated by the Force of Serbia Movement pasting the city in posters featuring a photomontage of Svilanović sporting an Albanian skull cap. He was not spared even by the party on the list of which he had been elected to the republic parliament in 2003. President Boris Tadić, fearing the possibility that Svilanovic may communicate the "grave disease" to him and the entire Democratic Party, amicably advised him to leave the democratic caucus. After that, no one dared to publicly accept the independence of KaM, barring several politicians whose parties are struggling to reach the parliamentary threshold. In brief, as Teofil Pančić rightly observed, if you wish to be a respected member of the community in Serbia, and especially if you engage in politics, it is not enough to ignore the reality of Kosovo, but you also have to ritually deny it.

Silence on the issue of KaM prevails in Serbia, as if time works in its favour. However, the Westphalian principles of sovereign equality and inviolability of state sovereignty at the basis of the international law are undergoing a severe crisis that will hardly be resolved to the advantage of the nation state. The outcome in particular cannot benefit a small and until recently authoritarian rogue state that could not protect all its citizens such as Serbia. Furthermore, the geopolitical gambling on the card of global stability

and balance of power for the purpose of promoting one's own interests has already sent Milošević to The Hague tribunal and the Serbian people to the bottom of the post-cold war history.

If it will not recognize independence and does not intend to go to war, are there any political means Serbia has left to defend its own territory? Will the non-recognition and economic isolation of KaM increase the security of Kosovo Serbs? Is it in the interest of Serbia to have KaM as an abortive state emitting organized crime and terrorism to Europe across the Serbian territory, or as a stable, partner and democratic state? Finally, the question is how the continuing presence of the Kosovo mantra will influence the democratic processes in Serbia. It certainly suits the nationalistic forces, which thus permanently polarize the political life, in "patriotic" rather than social-economic terms, and find it easy to emotionally manipulate the voters.

### **Breaking taboos**

Henry Miller said that whenever a taboo is broken, something good happens, something vitalizing. That is why it is good that Mearsheimer and Walt's article has seriously dented the taboo of Israel in the USA. It is now only a matter of time to see it positively reflected in the US policy towards the Middle East. Unfortunately, with its new constitution Serbia turns the inviolability of the Kosovo taboo into the constitutional obligation of its citizens. This ritual institutionalization of collective self-delusion may have disastrous consequences for the national interest of Serbia and the security of all citizens and states in the region. The current political elite is thus wasting another opportunity to awaken Serbia from the Kosovo hypnosis, helping it to redefine its identity and at long last exit from the long-drawn-out Balkanic 20<sup>th</sup> century.

***The author works as research fellow in the Belgrade School of Security Studies***