** United Nations Office in Belgrade**

**Daily Media Highlights**

**Thursday, 27 February 2014**

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**LOCAL PRESS**

**Vucic: Serbs in Kosovo will survive and be safe (*RTS*)**

“We will have to improve many things, but don’t worry, I guarantee you that no one will jeopardize you or your children, your survival in Kosovo and Metohija, and I don’t say this only to you in northern Kosovo, but also to the Serbs in Priluzje, Plemetina, Gorazdevac, Hoca, from Gracanica to Kosovo Pomoravlje. Serbs will survive and be safe in every place in Kosovo and Metohija,” Vucic told an election rally in Leposavic. “They did everything and they will continue to do so. The arrest of our people after 12 or 15 years for alleged crimes, as if they couldn’t have known before that there was something, and there obviously wasn’t, shows that someone fears Serb power and unity. Our response must be courageous and wise,” said Vucic. He pointed out that he pronounced in Brussels “heavy and rude words” but that he always knew how important it was to smartly and wisely achieve goals for our people, and that this was more important than to boast. The result for our people is such that you can always say that Kosovo and Metohija is part of Serbia, that Serbs live in Kosovo safely and that Serbs will make effort to employ people in Kosovo so Serbs could live better by the day, said Vucic, recalling that many difficult decisions were made, but that this was smarter than those who used to say that nothing should be done, that we should isolate from the world. Vucic called Kosovo residents to support with all strength the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) at the early parliamentary elections on 16 March so their list would receive full legitimacy. “I would feel defeated if we wouldn’t win in Kosovo and Metohija,” said Vucic, adding that the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija can be best protected by a strong, powerful and respected Serbia. “We will continue talks with both the Albanians and the international community and regardless of how difficult it will be for us, our personal interests will never be above national,” said Vucic.

**Serbian parliamentary parties to conduct election campaign in Kosovo and Metohija (*Novosti*)**

The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) will hold a rally today in Leposavic and its leader Aleksandar **Vucic** will take part in it. Other parties will not forget voters from Kosovo and Metohija in their campaigns either, so their leaders will visit the southern province until 16 March. In 2012, 110,000 citizens from Kosovo and Metohija had the right to vote, while turnout was 32 percent. The outcome of voting in the province, according to analyst Djordje **Vukadinovic**, apart from political, always has a psychological dimension. “The Republican Elections Commission announces results from Kosovo and Metohija separately, as well as those from Vojvodina or Belgrade, so for the ruling parties – the SNS and Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), a good result would imply confirmation of the legitimacy of their policies towards Kosovo and Metohija, especially from the Brussels agreement onwards. It would free them from the encumbrance that they abandoned Kosovo and Metohija. For smaller parties, several tens of thousands votes from Kosovo and Metohija are certainly welcome. The SPS states that their candidate will hold several rallies in the province, and that the party’s leadership from Belgrade will visit Kosovo and Metohija in the next two weeks. The Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) is also announcing the visit of their party leaders to the province. According to Goran **Bogdanovic**, the New Democratic Party (NDS), for the time being, doesn’t plan a rally in Kosovo and Metohija where Boris **Tadic** would be present, but says that municipal boards are in contact with the voters in regions populated by Serbs. Ten days ago, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the movements “Obraz” and “Nasi” launched their campaigns in Kosovska Mitrovica where their leaders were present: “That was logical since we launched a campaign with the slogan ‘Both Kosovo and Russia’,” Zoran **Krasic** of the SRS told ***Novosti***.

**Final CIK results confirm Rakic’s victory (*Tanjug*)**

The Kosovo Central Electoral Commission (CIK) confirmed that leader of the Serbian (Srpska) Citizen Initiative Goran **Rakic** won in the elections for northern Kosovska Mitrovica mayor. According to the final results of the elections, Rakic won 2,778 votes which is 52.48 percent of the total turnout, stated Nenad **Rikalo**, the only Serb member of CIK. In a statement for ***Tanjug***, Rikalo said that the complaint submission deadline for participants in the 23 February elections expires on Thursday afternoon. “In case no such complaint is filed, the final results will be validated and Rakic will be able to assume office as the mayor next week already,” he said. Other candidates for the northern Mitrovica mayor comprised Oliver **Ivanovic** of the Citizen Initiative Freedom, Democracy, Justice, Fljorent **Azemi** of the Democratic Party of Kosovo and Musa **Miftari** of the League of Democrats of Kosovo. Rakic’s victory in the elections brought victory in nine out of ten Serb majority municipalities to the Serbian Citizen Initiative which was supported by the Serbian government.

**Djuric: Kosovo elections are not an obstacle to Union of Serb Municipalities (*Beta*)**

Serbian President’s advisor Marko **Djuric** claims that early elections for the Kosovo Assembly, announced for the first half of this year, will not slow down the drafting of the Statute of the Union of Serb Municipalities. “These two topics are not linked. There are prerequisites for municipalities to draft the Statute and I am sure they will undertake steps towards constituting the Union of Serb Municipalities very soon,” Djuric told ***Beta***. He said that, according to the Brussels agreement, the first draft of the Statute is proposed by the Management Team of the Union of Serb Municipalities and that conditions have been created for drafting this document following the mayoral elections in northern Kosovska Mitrovica.

**Oliver’s 30 days in prison (*Politika*, editorial by Biljana Radomirovic)**

It will be 30 days since Oliver **Ivanovic** has been detained over suspicion that he had committed a war crime and murder in 1999 and 2000. Regardless of whether the detention of the SDP leader will be extended or whether he will be released pending trial, the impression remains that someone needed, precisely now, to take this case out of EULEX’s drawer.

Ivanovic, as the mayoral candidate for North Kosovska Mitrovica, had participated in three election rounds, but he was only arrested prior to the fourth one. Some even considered that he was detained so that his rating, and chances for victory, would be raised. Not a few of those saw this experienced, dialogue prone, politician, who was a former leader of the Kosovo Serb electoral list ‘Return’ which contested earlier elections for the Kosovo provincial assembly in Pristina and also the former state secretary in the Ministry for Kosovo, as the future leader of the Union of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo. But it seems this was all in vain. Politics as destiny played with the former leader of the informal ‘Bridge Watchers’ group, who was, until recently, a welcome interlocutor both in Pristina and in Brussels. Ivanovic persuasively lost the elections from his opponent, from the Serbian (Srpska) Citizens Initiative list Goran **Rakic** who, until recently, was completely unknown to the broader public.

Ivanovic’s arrest should also be understood as a message, to the people of Serb-majority northern Kosovo, that cooperativeness in relations with international community representatives is not sufficient for someone to be protected. The Head of EULEX sees nothing unusual in the arrest of the mayoral candidate for North Kosovska Mitrovica in the middle of the election campaign. “Even many Kosovo Albanians considered Mr. Ivanovic to be a moderate politician, so the thesis that we arrested him only to make a balance doesn’t make sense,” explains Bernd **Borchardt**.

Still, how is it possible that Ivanovic, who is fluent in both Albanian and English, has been smoothly moving around, for a full of 14 years, throughout Kosovo and freely visiting Kosovo Albanian and Bosniak homes and meeting with high officials of the international community, was detained precisely during the election campaign? Several days before the arrest, the EU Representative in Kosovo Samuel **Zbogar**, visited Ivanovic in Mitrovica. Zbogar later didn’t lift a finger so that Ivanovic would be transferred from a prison in Albanian-dominated Pristina to Serb-majority North Kosovska Mitrovica.

Even though Serbian PM **Dacic**, First Deputy PM **Vucic** and Minister without Portfolio in charge of Kosovo **Vulin** requested that EU High Representative Catherine **Ashton** enable Ivanovic to be to be released pending trial, also filing written guarantees that he will respond, at any time, to summons, it seems that Belgrade didn’t do its best in protecting the SDP leader. It is obvious that Ivanovic doesn’t enjoy Belgrade’s support anymore, but neither that of North Kosovska Mitrovica, the town where he completed his elementary and high school studies.

Will this people’s tribune, with two university degrees, who has a come a long way from being the leader of the ‘Bridge Watchers’ on the Ibar River, to becoming a moderate Kosovo Serb representative whose political career is hanging in the air, be released from detention today? It seems this question is of serious interest only for his family and members of his ‘Civic Initiative Serbia -Freedom, Democracy, Justice’.

**REGIONAL PRESS**

**B&H – toughest issue in Balkans (*Srna*)**

Outgoing Serbian First Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar **Vucic** says B&H is the toughest issue in the Balkans and that at this point he cannot see an easy solution for the neighboring country. Vucic said: “I talked about it with the EU High Representative Catherine **Ashton** and German officials too. I am not smart enough to find a simple or an easy solution for it, nor can I see one at this point, except that I think it is important that everything needs to be done through agreement of the three peoples in a peaceful and democratic manner. Such a solution would receive backing from Serbia.” During a Wednesday press conference, following a meeting with Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian **Kurz**, Vucic said he had told the Austrian diplomat that “B&H is the only issue I am frightened of in talks and which I am trying to preserve Serbia from, because it is the toughest issue in the Balkans.” Serbia behaves in line with the obligations set out in the Dayton Peace Accords and in no way threatens anyone’s stability or territorial integrity, but encourages regional stability with its behavior and statements, he said.  
When asked if Serbia and Austria would launch some kind of a common initiative for B&H’s stability or some kind of constitutional change, Kurz said he believed “a starting point for reforming the structure of B&H should be made” and that B&H should be able to take the necessary steps for economic growth. “We will help as much as we can because it is in our interest for B&H to develop. We have already talked about it with some other ministers and we all believe it is very important that we don’t overlook B&H,” Kurz underlined. According to the Austrian Foreign Minister, it is important to note that the religious and ethnic structure and differences in B&H pose a challenge and that the growing frustrations and anti-corruption protests should not be neglected.

**CoE delegation warns B&H Constitutional Commission (*Fena*)**

Members of a high-ranking delegation of the Council of Europe on Wednesday warned members of the B&H House of Representatives’ Constitutional Commission that failure to adopt a law on the prevention of money laundering and financing of terrorist activities and amendments and supplements to the B&H Criminal Code by the beginning of April at the latest will have negative consequences for B&H.

**INTERNATIONAL PRESS**

**Serbian Officers’ Trial for Kosovo Killings Opens (*BIRN*, by Marija Ristic, 24 February 2014)**

Two Serbian Army officers went on trial in Belgrade, accused of killing at least 27 Kosovo Albanian civilians including a four-year-old boy during the conflict in 1999.

The case against ex-officers Pavle Gavrilovic and Ranko Kozlin over the killings which took place during an attack on the Kosovo village of Trnje on March 25, 1999, opened in February at closed hearings at a Belgrade court.

Gavrilovic is accused of ordering the attack and saying that “there should be no survivors”, according to the indictment.

A commander of a unit in the Yugoslav Army’s 549th Brigade, Gavrilovic is alleged to have split his men up into three groups, with Kozlin being part of the one of these three, and ordered them to enter the village and ethnically cleanse the area.

The killings in Trnje were also part of a Kosovo war crimes indictment filed by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia against six former officials – Serbian President Milan Milutinovic, Yugoslav deputy prime minister Nikola Sainovic, Yugoslav Army commanders Nebojsa Pavkovic and Vladimir Lazarevic, Yugoslav Army general Dragoljub Ojdanic, and Serbian internal affairs minister Sreten Lukic.

All of them except Milutinovic were found guilty of “a broad campaign of violence directed against the Kosovo Albanian civilian population conducted by forces under the control of the [Yugoslav] and Serbian authorities, during which there were incidents of killing, sexual assault, and the intentional destruction of mosques.”

Two members of the 549th Brigade testified anonymously at the Hague trial about the attack on Trnje under the codenames K-32 and K-41.

According to their testimonies, around 80 to 100 soldiers from the brigade entered the village under the command of Gavrilovic, who before the attack pointed the soldiers in the direction of the village and said: “Today, no one should remain alive here.”

Gavrilovic, who testified for the defence in The Hague, denied the allegations, arguing that he didn’t order the attack.

In its ruling, the trial chamber accepted the testimonies of witnesses K32 and K41, while Gavrilovic’s testimony was described as “unconvincing and unreliable”.

The Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law in March last year published a file containing the most comprehensive documentation of the eight military offensives by the 549th Brigade in Kosovo villages in March and April 1999, which resulted in a total of 885 deaths.

**Opinion: The depressing paradox of Bosnian protests (*Kashmir Times*, by Milan Djurasovic, 26 February 2014)**

A short review of how Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with its own genius and the benevolence of the International Community, became a depressing paradox that it is today is essential in order to understand the protests that have been taking place for the past couple of weeks.

On 18 March 1994, the Washington Agreement was signed by the warring Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia and the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The signatories of the mentioned ceasefire agreement decided that dividing the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina held by the Bosnian Croats and Bosniacs into ten autonomous cantons which would comprise the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) was a better alternative to further bloodshed. Knowing that the chances of pacifying and reuniting the conflicting sides into a single functional state was impossible, most of the cantons were divided along the ethnic lines so that Croats would not be dominated by Bosniacs, and vice versa. Each of the cantons has its own government and a Premier. This continues to be the makeup of the FBiH, and it right away becomes clear how in the pell-mell of post-civil war Bosnia and Herzegovina, its complexity was conducive for looting and criminal privatization of what were once public assets. It is also important to mention that it is in the cantons populated mostly by Bosniacs that the protests have been taking place over the past couple of weeks.

Drafted in November and signed on 14 December 1995, the Dayton Agreement officially ended the Bosnian civil war. Signed by the worst of the bad guys of the Yugoslav wars -- Slobodan Milosevic, Alija Izetbegovic, Franjo Tudjman, and Bill Clinton -- one of the most notable principles of the Dayton agreement was the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina. 51% of the territory went to the already mentioned Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and 49% went to the Republic of Serbs (RS). It is also important to mention -- because it is often portrayed, misunderstood, and in most cases completely ignored in the Western media -- that Serbs in Bosnia had lived on the territory of what is now known as Bosnia and Herzegovina for centuries and had wanted to stay within the Yugoslav federation when the declaration of Bosnian independence on 3 March 1992 was proclaimed.

Unlike FBiH, the Republic of Serbs has a centralized government and no cantons, and, therefore, at least in theory, has a potential to be more functional than the Bosniac/Croat messy counterpart. Moreover, unlike the cantons in the Federation that have seen significant protests comprised of vandals and people with genuine social and political grievances, there were only small, peaceful gatherings of people in some of the cities of the RS. The explanation of such a low turnout of protesters in RS, despite the comparable corruption and privatization, can be found in the results of the poll taken by the Brussels-based Gallup Balkan Monitor in November 2010. The poll revealed that 88% of the residents of the RS support secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina while 70% of the residents of FBiH were against it.

Confused and resentful that the international factors from United States and Western Europe refuse to allow RS to secede while supporting the efforts of every other patch of the former Yugoslav federation to declare its independence, and considering the recent protests as another attempt to abolish the Dayton Agreement, and with it any trace of Serb autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnian Serbs are rejecting the invitation of Bosniacs to join them in their fight against mass corruption, illegal privatization, and unemployment rate that exceeds 40%.

While working together against a common foe might seem like a long-awaited superordinate goal which would reunite the hopeless and tired people of all ethnicities and religions, we must be reminded that the side that is now calling for unity is the one that wanted to secede from Yugoslavia at all costs. This is only one out of many reasons why Bosnian Serbs are unwilling to cooperate. Most of the other reasons have to do with the international community's accusations, vilification, and violence that were, and continued to be aimed almost exclusively at Serbs (disparity of the indictments and convictions at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the sanctions, and NATO bombing of RS forces, and Western media's biased portrayal of the events to name a few), and which have, as the mentioned poll demonstrates, significantly contributed to the sense of entitlement of most Bosniacs to the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These and many other issues have been repressed and swept under the rug by the international community since the end of the Bosnian civil war. If any kind of reconciliation is ever going to take place in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, of course, must entail recognition of their crimes and culpability by all sides (including the incriminating roles played by the primarily Western superpowers, and their role in the continuing privatization of BiH assets), these issues must be addressed honestly and transparently.

It is because of these reasons that Serbs shrug their shoulders and say: "Here they go again," whenever they read Western media reports which imply that the entire Bosnia is protesting its corrupt system -- the system which ironically has 'made in America written all over it.'

Corruption, even hunger, is the price that Bosnian Serbs are willing to pay as long as there is a threat to their autonomy. Continued attempts by the international community to centralize the entire Bosnia are going to be met with additional resentment by not only Bosnian Serbs, but also Bosnian Croats who share their dissatisfaction with the imposed and dysfunctional union that is BiH.

Because any sincere and transparent discussion of the problems that were mentioned in this article is not going to take place in the near future, the only peaceful and viable solution is the dissolution of BiH into three parts according to the ethnic lines. For those who are going to be critical of this proposal, I would simply like to remind them that BiH has been 'functioning' this way since the end of the conflict. This would just make the current state of things official. Moreover, it would allow Bosniacs to abolish the dysfunctional cantons, to elect the government that will serve them rather than the domestic and foreign looters, and to recover their unjustly privatized industry. Finally, the elimination of the threat to their autonomy would also allow Bosnain Serbs and Bosnian Croats to do exactly the same.

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**Karadzic Demands a Year to Prepare Closing Statement (*BIRN*, by Denis Dzidic, 27 February 2014)**

Former Bosnian Serb President Radovan Karadzic asked the Hague Tribunal to order a one-year break in his war crimes trial beause of the complexity of the allegations against him.

Ahead of the resumption of Karadzic’s trial next week, when the last defence witness will testify, the former Bosnian Serb leader asked for an extended break because of the huge amount of evidence and testimony that he will have to sift through and sum up.

Karadzic argued that, in the only case of “similar complexity” at the Hague Tribunal, the defence teams for the former leaders of the unrecognised wartime Bosnian Croat statelet of Herzeg-Bosna were given nine months to prepare their closing statements.

“In the case against [the Bosnian Croat leaders], the volume of work could be divided among six indictees, their defence attorneys and assistants. In the case against Dr. Karadzic, he is the only one bearing the burden of preparing a closing statement,” his motion to the court said.

Karadzic said that, in order to prepare his closing statement, he would have to go through 48,000 pages of transcripts from hearings, 11,000 pieces of evidence and 2,300 determined facts, as well as testimonies from 600 witnesses.

“After that he has to analyse the complex accusations against him, which include 11 counts, four different joint criminal enterprises, 259 incidents and numerous cases of murder, causing of pain, destruction of property and forced resettlement. Finally, he has to prepare a clear final motion containing a limited number of words,” the motion said.

Karadzic is on trial for genocide in Srebrenica and seven other municipalities, the persecution of Bosniaks and Croats throughout the country, terrorising the citizens of Sarajevo and taking UN peacekeepers hostage

**10th death anniversary of former Macedonian president marked (*Xinhua*, 26 February 2014)**

MOSTAR -- Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Macedonia on Wednesday held jointly a ceremony to mark the 10th anniversary of the death of Macedonian former President Boris Trajkovski.

The ceremony, participated by BiH Presidency Chairman Zeljko Komsic and Macedonian President Djordje Ivanov, was held on the Matic hill near Stolac, where Trajkovski was killed in a plane crash 10 years ago. All nine passengers and crew were killed in the accident.

Trajkovski died on Feb. 26, 2004 in the plane crash en route to an economic conference in Mostar. The aircraft crashed in thick fog and heavy rain on a mountainside near the villages of Huskovici and Rotimlja, some 15 KM south-south-east of Mostar, BiH.

Ivanov said that in 2004 Macedonia lost a great statesman. "Trajkovski was at the head of Macedonia at the time of the most severe uncertainty since the country's independence...... Trajkovski successfully pulled us out of the rough waters."

Wreaths were laid at the memorial on the site of the crash during the ceremony. Government officials, officers from the armed forces of BiH and Macedonia as well as relatives of Trajkovski took part in the ceremony.

**Macedonian Albanian Joins Presidential Race (*BIRN*, by Sinisa Jakov Marusic, 27 February 2014)**

The former deputy speaker of parliament, Iljaz Halimi, is likely to be the only ethnic Albanian running for the presidency in April - though his chances of winning are remote.

Halimi was nominated on Wednesday by the opposition Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA.

He said he was not entering with any hope of winning, but to send a message that the country belongs to Albanians as well.

“Things are clear. The favourite in the elections is the candidate of [the main ruling] VMRO DPMNE party, [current President] Gjorge Ivanov. Our goal is to enter the key second round,” the head of the DPA, Menduh Thaci, said.

Thaci said if they won enough votes to enter the second round on April 27, the party might then advise its voters to abstain if they sensed that their Albanian rivals in the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, were engaging in “undignified trading” with VMRO DPMNE.

Halimi will need to gather 10,000 signatures by March 3 to enter the presidential race, a task that the party will probably achieve as Albanians in total comprise at least a quarter of the population of Macedonia.

Halimi is probably going to be the only ethnic Albanian to enter the presidential race as the DUI has already said it will not field anyone.

The DUI wanted an agreement with its senior partner in government, VMRO DPMNE, on a joint presidential candidate. This is unlikely to happen now because the DUI opposes supporting Ivanov, who is likely to be confirmed VMRO DPMNE's candidate on Saturday.

The DUI spokesperson, Bujar Osmani, on Wednesday said that if this happened, "We will call on Albanians not to support any candidate" and "we will call for early [general] elections".

But the DPA's ambition to enter the second round still seems far fetched, as this would require 350,000 votes, and no ethnic Albanian presidential candidate has ever won more than about 150,000.

This was achieved by the head of the small New Democracy party, Imer Selmani, in the 2009 presidential elections.

However, his moderate campaign avoided nationalist rhetoric and so won him the votes of many ethnic Macedonians as well.

Despite the DPA’s hopes, the main rival to Ivanov, various opinion polls show, will most likely be the candidate of the Social Democrats.

The main opposition party is expected to reveal its runner at a party congress in early March.

**Politics By Other Means: Balkan NGOs Breed MPs (BIRN, by Erjona Rusi, 27 February 2014)**

*Foreign-funded civil society organisations are serving as a launchpad for political careers, provoking debate over their true function*

The deal to decommission Syria’s chemical weapons did not calm its civil war, but it has brought gas masks and a new civic spirit onto the streets of Albania.

The small Balkan country was recently named as a possible destination for the banned munitions, which have to be removed from Syria this year.

United in their opposition to the plan, thousands of Albanians – middle-class families, students, hipsters and conservative Muslims – came together in the capital, Tirana.

Their protest had the usual hallmarks of 21st century activism, from a massive online campaign to catchy slogans and eye-catching costumes – including the gas masks and biohazard suits.

“It was a beautiful feeling,” says Ervin Qafmolla, a public relations professional who helped organise the demonstration. “People were saying that they had the right to choose, to be heard. They were no longer apathetic.”

Albania has an unfortunate reputation as a dumping ground for toxic waste. Under the last administration, tons of the stuff was being imported secretly from Western Europe. Inured to scandal, Albanians will assure you that governments come and go – but nothing really changes.

Last November, something changed. After a week of spiralling protests, Prime Minister Edi Rama said he would refuse to allow Syria’s chemical weapons into the country.

The announcement marked a u-turn for the government, which had been forced to reject a request from its most powerful international ally, the United States.

In the Balkans, it also marked a milestone in the history of “civil society” – a loose term that refers to a public space for action and debate that lies outside the state and the market.

Dozens of prominent activists in the region have been using civil society as a springboard for political careers. Their entry into politics has always been controversial – weakening or even destroying the organisations that they leave behind.

At the chemical-weapons demonstration in Tirana, the wheel had turned full circle. The protesters on the street and the politicians in parliament were former comrades in activism.

Ten years ago, a youth movement called Mjaft – named after the Albanian word for “enough” – announced itself by organising protests against waste imports. The movement operated as a non-governmental organisation (NGO), funded mostly by donations from European Union countries.

Mjaft’s campaigns were slickly executed, with stunts that attracted media attention and embarrassed the old guard. They addressed issues – from high phone bills to human trafficking – that the moribund Albanian establishment preferred to ignore. They revolutionised civil society, giving thousands of young people their first taste of activism.

The organisers of the chemical-weapons protest in November included several alumni or members of Mjaft.

However, Mjaft’s former leader, Erion Veliaj, was on the other side of the barricade – a member of the Socialist party and a minister in the government that was the target of the protests.

Veliaj’s entry into politics continues to polarise opinion in Albania. It has also triggered a broader debate about the intersection of politics, civil society and European aid to the region.

Some argue that Veliaj’s rise to power – and the success of the recent protests – shows the vitality of civil society, demonstrating its penetration into politics and its influence over it.

“I know he would have done the same thing in my position,” says Aldo Merkoci, a spokesman for Mjaft, referring to the chemical-weapons protest that he helped organise. “I have my obligations as a member of civil society. He has his obligations as a politician.”

Others come to the opposite conclusion. They argue that Veliaj has contaminated civil society by breaching its barrier with politics.

Sokol Shameti, a former communications director at Mjaft who now works as a TV journalist, says the movement’s former leaders – many of whom have joined Erion in the Socialist Party – misused the movement by treating it as a platform for their political ambitions.

“The movement’s image has not recovered from this treason,” he says. “It has even shaken citizens’ belief in other civil-society initiatives.”

Ilir Kulla, a political analyst from the Albanian Diplomatic Academy, says activists who enter politics “destroy the public’s faith” in civil society. “They make it clear that the entire rhetoric they used was simply preparation for entering politics.”

Squeezed for space

Most people in the Balkans regard politics as a dirty word, synonymous with greed and incompetence.

Civil society groups – such as NGOs – are seen as a counterweight to bad government, representing the needs of the people to those in power.

Many NGOs in the region are funded by the EU, which is trying to push through reforms in the countries that have applied to join it.

In this sense, civil society groups have a political function. However, their credibility often stems from their distance from political parties.

Movements such as Mjaft have presented themselves as a permanent opposition – critics of whoever happens to be in power.

“Mjaft will be against the Socialist Party or any other party – whenever the interests of citizens are harmed,” says Elton Kacidhja, the NGO’s current director.

This stance is echoed by Vuk Maras, a programme director with MANS, a widely respected anti-corruption watchdog in neighbouring Montenegro.

“We will never be a political party,” he says. “We really believe that it is wrong for NGOs to become political parties. Someone needs to track the people in power and in opposition.”

Politicians can be punished if they appear to align themselves openly with civil society. In Tirana, the chemical-weapons protesters booed opposition leaders – including former prime minister Sali Berisha – when they tried to join the demonstration.

“Someone at the back of the crowd shouted – go away! Soon everyone was shouting – go, go!” recalls Merkoci, the Mjaft spokesman. “Their message was clear. This is our protest. We don’t want you to steal the only tool we have as citizens.”

On a personal level, however, civil society activists cannot always survive the attacks – or indeed, the overtures – of political parties.

“To be neutral in Albania, you must have two enemies – on the left and on the right,” says Lutfi Dervishi, the head of the country’s branch of Transparency International, an organisation that promotes good governance. “Rampant politicisation has left little space for civil society,” he says.

Mentor Kikia, the editor-in-chief of Top Channel TV station and the head of a local NGO, says political parties often recruit civil society leaders in order to broaden their appeal.

“Politicians have been co-opting civil society leaders to renew their own image,” he says.

In neighbouring Montenegro, the path from activism to politics is a well-trodden one. Several NGOs in the country have tried to morph wholesale into political movements or parties.

However, those who make the leap admit that they sacrifice some credibility in the process.

“When you move from civil society into politics, the NGO core is somehow lost,” says Dritan Abazi, an MP for Positive Montenegro, a centre-left party, who spent more than four years as an activist.

“This happens because there is no trust in political parties, especially in societies in transition such as ours,” he says.

The Movement for Change is among the best known of Montenegro’s NGO-turned-parties. The party had a promising start, winning 14 per cent of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

However, its support slumped in the election three years later, when it lost six of its eleven seats in parliament.

Boris Maric, a former party member and co-founder of the NGO that preceded it, complains that the Movement for Change came to be dominated by personal interests. “It became the same as all the other political parties,” he says.

Nebojsa Medojevic, the party’s leader, argues that the move into politics has been good for the organisation – but he has paid a price for it. “On a personal level, I think I made a mistake by entering politics because it destroyed my career,” he says.

‘No conspiracy’

For Veliaj, the former leader of Mjaft, politics is simply a natural extension of his work as an activist.

Speaking with the conviction of a practised debater, he dismisses the criticism that he has used civil society as a springboard.

“If Mjaft gave me a public profile, it’s a sin not to use that to promote the same causes now in politics,” he says. “In this sense, I don’t feel any guilt,”

He helped establish Mjaft in 2003 and left the movement five years later to form his own political party, G99. Mjaft shrank dramatically after his departure, losing the bulk of its staff and moving from a large villa to a smaller office in a converted apartment.

G99 did not fare well in the 2009 elections and Veliaj went on to join the Socialists, led by Rama, the man who is now prime minister.

During his time at the helm of Mjaft, the movement’s campaigns targeted the old guard in both the major political parties in Albania.

However, the movement’s leaders were also widely believed to be friendly with Rama, who was building up a following as a youthful and energetic mayor in Tirana.

“There were always questions – inside and outside the organisation – about [Veliaj’s] connections with Rama,” says Andi Kananaj, a former communications chief in Mjaft. Nevertheless, there was shock when Veliaj entered politics. “Some of the guys cried when he left,” he says.

Veliaj says that he spotted a similarity between Rama’s “agenda to transform the left and our agenda to transform politics”.

“To people who think this is a conspiracy, I believe that when two friends have a common purpose, there is no conspiracy. It is just useful to join forces.”

Leart Kola, a former Mjaft leader who has also joined the Socialists, argues that civil society activists should be free to enter politics, as long as they stick to their principles.

“There is only a problem when people from civil society enter the same politics that they have been criticising,” he says.

‘One-man bands’

The international donors to civil society in the Balkans also seem untroubled by the transformation of activists into politicians.

“This happens throughout the world and it’s a natural political process,” says Alberto Camaratta, the head of the political section in the EU’s delegation to Montenegro.

“One can argue that NGOs might be used as a trampoline to enter politics,” he says. “But it doesn’t hurt the credibility of civil society because, thank God, civil society always finds its own energies to regenerate.”

The foreign donors’ attitude to activists-turned-politicians seems to reflect the status of civil society at home, which is typically more robust than it is in the Balkans.

The government of The Netherlands is the biggest unilateral donor to civil society projects in Albania. It has also been among Mjaft’s biggest donors. Over the last five years, it has given the organisation €1.7 million.

“There are no rules that you cannot be in an NGO and a political party,” says Miriam Struyk, the programme director at IKV Pax Christi, a Dutch civil society organisation. “Here the system is mature enough.”

Arjan El Fassed, a human rights worker in Amsterdam, spent two years as a parliamentarian before returning to activism – because he felt he had more freedom outside politics. “We have a different concept of civil society here,” he says.

The Dutch embassy in Tirana did not comment on Veliaj’s move into politics.

In an emailed response to BIRN, the embassy’s charge d’affaires, Efstathios Andreou, says: “The Netherlands... supports the development and strengthening of civil society in Albania, not specific individuals.”

Foreign donors make a clear distinction between the actions of individual activists or movements – and civil society as a whole.

Such was Mjaft’s profile in Albania, however, that for many young people civil society was synonymous with Mjaft – and Mjaft was synonymous with Veliaj.

“Mjaft was the biggest achievement in civil society at the time, but it buried the citizens’ movement when it started leaning towards politics,” says Gimi Fjolla, a former activist with the organisation.

It seems the distinction made by the international donors – between the individual, the organisation and the sector – was not always clear on the ground.

Qafmolla, an organiser of the chemical-weapons protest who also served as a spokesman for Mjaft, remembers a common question from the period after Veliaj’s departure.

“People kept asking us – is Veliaj still your chief?” he says. “I would say – no, he has left. But they didn’t trust us. Yeah, yeah, they would say, he’s still there.”

The suspicion was logical enough, he says. “In countries like Albania, it is difficult to believe the founders of an organisation would not keep trying to control it.”

But if former activists such as Veliaj cannot be faulted for entering politics, perhaps the criticism they face is connected to the fate of the organisations they leave behind.

Many NGOs struggle to survive the departure of their leaders, re-enforcing the perception that the organisation was a one-man band.

“It would have been quite logical for Mjaft to remain as effective and successful even after Veliaj and the others left,” says Endrit Shabani, a former director at Citizens Advocacy Office, a US-funded NGO whose leader also entered Albanian politics.

Stefano Calabreta, the official in charge of civil society in the EU delegation to Tirana, says founders often act as the owners of an organisation, claiming: “I have an NGO.”

“And that is the truth in many cases,” he adds. “Without the leader, the rest of the NGO collapses,” he says.

Veliaj describes his present relationship to Mjaft as that of a parent to a grown-up child. “The logo was my handiwork,” he says, referring to the movement’s symbol, a red palm-print. “Therefore, of course, there was a lot of love and affection there.”

“And maybe the generation that inherited that logo is managing it in a way that I wouldn’t have done. But that doesn’t matter,” he adds.

Pausing during this summer’s election campaign in the southern town of Gjirokaster, Veliaj retold an anecdote from his early days in civil society.

At the time, Mjaft was trying to highlight the government’s failure to increase the education budget. After organising petitions and protests, the leaders hit upon the idea of bringing some donkeys to the parliament, done up to resemble students.

“The policemen were totally confused,” recalls Erion. “One of them calls his chief and says – there are two donkeys here, what should we do? And the chief answers – come on, the parliament is full of donkeys!”

For Veliaj, joining the establishment that he mocked is now the best way of changing it.

Qafmolla, his former colleague who protested against the government last month, says the move was inevitable.

“If somebody decides to have an impact on public life, politics and government are at the top of the hierarchy,” he says. “This may not be perfect – but it is one way to go.”

*Erjona Rusi is a Tirana-based journalist. This article was edited by Neil Arun. It was produced as part of the Balkan Fellowship for Journalistic Excellence, an initiative of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and ERSTE Foundation, in cooperation with the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.*

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