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by ROBERT FISK

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With Serbia and Kosovo Both Vying for EU Membership, the Question Remains: Who Won the War?

Who won the war? There are a few ruins left from the Nato bombing of 1998, and outside the parliament building in Belgrade – of “Serbian democracy”, more later – there is a long banner containing photographs of the Serbs who were killed in Kosovo two decades ago. Men, women children, civilians, soldiers and, of course, the occasional war criminal or two, or three.

Nato were not exactly surgery clean in its airstrikes, and the “UCK terrorists” (Kosovar Muslim militia) killed civilians. A point to be remembered here: the mass dead of Kosovo itself (from both mass murders by Serbs and promiscuous airstrikes by Nato) have no place on this record of suffering.

So it was a relief to see that Aleksandar Vucic, former sympathiser of Saddam Hussein, and Hashem Thaci, former “terrorist” chieftain in Kosovo, could meet in the EU’s offices in Brussels last month as presidents of their respective countries to be told that a legally binding agreement between them was “key for their respective European paths [sic] and essential for sustainable regional stability”.

Will Vucic hold a referendum for Serbs “so that the people can decide”? But how can he ask that when he said just over a week ago that “there is nothing good about Kosovo that we can get and offer to the people; just trouble and hard things...”

It sounded like blood, sweat and tears in reverse. The referendum, in EU terms, sounds even worse. Didn’t Serbia hold a rather bloody referendum 20 years ago when it decided

to fight for Kosovo – and for a rather dotty dictator called Slobodan Milosevic? And after a UK referendum on leaving the EU, who wants a referendum on a bloodbath to get into the EU?

In theory, both sides must recognise each other's "rights" – which means that Serbia must recognise Kosovo – because Brussels is not going to have two hostile members joining its hygienic ranks for the sake of its "Western Balkans stabilisation and association process". As for both Serbia and Kosovo, of course, they want the EU's moolah. So there was the familiar Vucic baby face last week staring through an EU Brussels window beside Federica Mogherini – yet another of those Ottoman-named "High Representatives" which gives the EU its colonial respect – while across the table Thaci glowered threateningly at the camera.

Talk to the old cynics and journos of earlier times in Belgrade and it all looks much more Balkan and familiar and depressing. For them, the EU is too tired to play peacemaker and has decided that it will tolerate "the criminalisation of the elites", the dirty money and the mafia which again runs Belgrade.

"The people in the street were not fighting for this kind of government," a member of the BIRN – the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, which speaks much truth about Serbia (to the anguish of its politicians) – mourns. "But the EU has realised this is the most democracy that these people here are capable of. They don't believe we can sustain more than this. Yes, Serbia will join the EU in some distant, very foggy future."

Vucic has managed to shunt his former president, Tomislav Nikolic, into the chairmanship of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China – the first six words are pure politburo speak – but he's not exactly a magnetic leader of his people. Nikolic can be seen chatting with Putin – although, as one old Serb reporting hand put it, "Russia doesn't care a shit about Serbia and never did".

But Vucic suffered an attack of realpolitik when he went down to the Serbian Muslim district of Novi Pazar to parade alongside President Erdogan of Turkey, the nation whose former Ottoman rulers were once ensconced in what is now Serbia. "Welcome, Sultan!" exclaimed the Muslim crowds to the Turkish president. "We are your faithful Ottoman grandchildren!" Vucic gave a boring five minute speech "at the crowd", as one Serb noticed. Erdogan spoke from the heart, to the people, for 15 minutes and, even though listening to his words through an interpreter, these Muslims from the Sandjak cheered him to the echo.

A former reporter for the old B92 radio station, the brave wartime curse of Milosevic but now a much humbled broadcasting animal, thought that Serbia was suffering from a divided personality. “We have reduced our debts to below Maastricht levels, our growth is expanding, we have a budget surplus. But when you look below this, you see holes and gaps. We are the IMF’s poster boy. Vucic took on the political parties and broke them. He owns the country. But we will never join Nato – that would be political suicide for any Serbian politician now!”

The same bearded and eloquent old journalistic lion – a touch of both Lenin and Tolstoy rolled into one – spread his large hands open in contempt. “You know, you hear much hear about our joint military activities with Russia. There’s a lot of publicity. Twenty-two joint exercises, we are told. But in various areas, our army has had 135 exercises with Nato!”

Prediction time: Serbia will probably never join Nato since “neutrality” is written into its constitution. Serbia and Montenegro (which is a member of Nato) could join the EU by 2025. So who won the war?

One thought: some three years ago, Tony Blair – the man partly responsible for the Nato bombing of Serbia – took up an advisory role for Vucic’s government in Belgrade via Blair Associates. And there he is again now – and I mean now – sipping orange juice in the coffee shop of one of Belgrade’s best hotels this very Thursday morning! Yes indeed, who *did* win the war?