

## Analysis

### Russia's Voice Heard in Serbia

By Dušan Reljić, Berlin

#### Abstract

Vladimir Putin has reason to thank the Western powers: They have allowed him to succeed where Stalin failed, namely in securing Russian political and economic influence in Belgrade. By supporting the Albanian demands for Kosovo's secession and ignoring Serbia's interests, the US and most Western European countries have paved the way for Moscow. For the first time since the Cold War, Russia has managed to gain a foothold in a part of Europe that the West considers to be part of its own sphere of influence.

#### History of a Troubled Relationship

The voice of orthodox Russia will be heard across Serbia this coming July, as part of an agreement between the two countries signed at the beginning of 2008. Three "top choirs" from Moscow and a number of Russian soloists will travel to several Serbian cities and give free open-air performances. In the interests of maintaining traditional "cultural and spiritual links," the shows will be supported by the Moscow International Fund for the Unity of Orthodox Countries.

There has not been such harmony between Belgrade and Moscow since 1948, when Tito broke with Stalin. Subsequently, the relationship between Belgrade and Moscow was determined solely by the pursuit of their often contradictory interests: The Soviet Union was the Eastern hegemon, while Yugoslavia was one of the pioneers of the Non-Aligned Movement. There was no mention of fostering "spiritual links" or other special sentiments; on the contrary, the Yugoslav People's Army, which long remained the fourth-largest military force in Europe, trained hard in the defense of both its western and its eastern borders. At the same time, Yugoslavia received arms and financial loans from both blocs. During the Cold War, both Moscow and Washington were intent on "not losing" Yugoslavia to the other side. The stability of Yugoslavia was of decisive importance for maintaining the status quo in Europe, as the then German chancellor Helmut Kohl put it in the mid-1980s.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the structural foundations of Europe shifted – and thus the stability of Yugoslavia was suddenly put to the test. The West forged alliances with the former Communists of Slovenia and Croatia, who had abruptly converted to democracy. Moscow's money was on Serbian despot Slobodan Milosevic. In the course of the Yugoslav wars of succession (from the conflict in Slovenia in 1991 to the fighting in Macedonia in 2001), Moscow

found to its dismay that it did not have the necessary political and military potential to project its power to this part of Europe. During the long decade of conflict, Moscow was continually determined to gain influence on the external diplomatic and military interventions on the territory of former Yugoslavia. As it turned out, however, the US was generally able to assert itself, rarely taking into account the opinions of its EU partners, much less those of Russia. Moscow's frustration reached a peak in the spring of 1999, when the US ignored Russia's protests and had NATO bomb Serbia for almost three months.

#### NATO-Bombing Shows Russian Weakness

Russia's experience in Southeastern Europe prompted Vladimir Putin to state bitterly that those who are weak are beaten and kicked by the strong. Under his leadership, the Kremlin reached the firm conclusion that Russia should never again be weak, as it had been under Boris Yeltsin. It was precisely because Russia had failed so miserably in 1999 to dissuade the US from deploying NATO's war machine against Serbia that the diplomatic wrangling beginning in autumn 2005 over the future status of the Serbian province became an overriding issue for Moscow. Frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space are of secondary importance for Moscow in this context. Russia is mainly interested in gaining equal standing with the US on the global political scene.

Strangely enough, Moscow's very obvious sensitivity with regard to the issue of Kosovo was ignored by Western diplomats. Martti Ahtisaari from Finland and his Austrian deputy Albert Rohan waved aside questions as to whether they really believed that Moscow would agree to their plan for Kosovo without further ado. The UN negotiators had given in to Kosovar Albanian demands for secession by presenting a plan for "supervised independence" of the province in early 2007, despite the fact that President Putin and his

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had already stated the Russian position in no uncertain terms a year earlier in conversations with top-ranking US diplomat Rosemary DiCarlo at the Kremlin: Moscow would only consider a solution for Kosovo that had been worked out amicably by Serbs and Albanians together. In other words, a separation of Kosovo against the wishes of Belgrade was under no circumstances an acceptable option for Russia.

While the US chief negotiator in Kosovo Robert Wisner subsequently described the refusal of Russia to follow the US policy on Kosovo as “unbelievably regrettable,” the US did not budge an inch on its support for the Albanian cause in Southeastern Europe – any more than it did in any other current disputes with Moscow. After the Kosovo Albanians had declared their independence on 17 February 2008, Wisner offered an interpretation of the US position in several interviews. He stated that the Kosovo issue was of importance to Washington because the US was also responsible for security in Europe. Russia, on the other hand, had no such interests, according to the seasoned diplomat, and it is not contiguous to Serbia, but was, on the contrary, remote from Serbia. Russia and the US should not try to interfere in each other’s backyards, according to Wisner.

However, Moscow was trying to secure access to Kosovo, and the US was determined to demonstrate that such meddling would not be accepted. Wisner’s remarks on geography are problematic because the US is much further away from the Balkans than Russia is, but his frankness is nevertheless revealing: From the US point of view, Russia’s participation in security matters is obviously not required when it comes to European affairs. All suggestions for cooperation that the State Department has made towards Moscow refer to possible joint security policy efforts relating to Afghanistan or the campaign against international terrorism, i.e., in areas where the US has interests of its own. But no such offers have been made with regard to Kosovo or the stationing of missile defense systems in Eastern and Central Europe, or other topics where Washington does not believe Moscow could or should be pursuing its own interests.

### **The US Goal is to Keep Russia Out of the Balkans**

There can be no question: If Russia was indeed a neighbor of Serbia, or if the two states were at least connected via friendly countries that would have permitted Russia military aid to pass through to Serbia if necessary, neither the NATO campaign against Serbia in 1999 nor the West’s recognition of the Kosovo Albanians’ declaration of independence in 2008 would

have occurred. However, the US had made precautions, as Moscow became painfully aware already in 1999: The new NATO members Romania and Hungary denied overflight permission for aircraft carrying reinforcements for Russian troops that had captured the airport at Pristina before the arrival of NATO forces. Moscow’s surprise move, which had been intended to at least amend the outcome of the NATO campaign against Serbia, ended in humiliation: Russian soldiers at Slatina Airport were cut off from reinforcements, so that Moscow was forced after a few weeks to subordinate its forces in Kosovo to the NATO command. In 2003, Putin withdrew the last forces from Bosnia and Kosovo, stating that Moscow no longer wanted to support the misguided Western policies in these crisis-ridden areas.

Furthermore, at this point, hardly any political surfaces remained onto which Russian influence could have been projected: Russia no longer had any suitable allies in Serbia immediately after the Milosevic regime was overthrown in Serbia. Even the national-conservative groups still vividly remembered how emissaries from Moscow were sent on 5 October 2000, when the police and military had finally withdrawn support for Milosevic, to the election winner Vojislav Kostunica in order to convince him to agree to a compromise with the old regime. Milosevic’s brother (who had previously served as ambassador to Moscow), his widow, and his son enjoy political asylum in Moscow to this day. Also, Serbian intelligence agents and army generals who served under Milosevic have found refuge in Russia after the despot had been toppled. This fact serves as a clear warning to the pro-Western forces in Belgrade: Moscow is keeping these people in reserve in case the balance of power in Serbia should shift back towards the supporters of the old regime.

### **After Kosovo’s Independence: Serbia Pushed towards Russia, Away from EU**

Such a return might already be the case after the parliamentary, provincial, and local elections in Serbia on 11 May 2008. There is a real chance that eight years after Milosevic’s downfall, his political successors may get their opportunity. The West’s approach to the issue of Kosovo has undermined the position of the pro-European forces: President Boris Tadic (Democratic Party – DS) promised after his narrow win over his nationalist-populist opponent Tomislav Nikolic (Serbian Radical Party – SRS) both to pursue EU accession and to enshrine the retention of Kosovo in the country’s constitution. However, this position no longer appears credible after Paris, London, and Berlin have signaled to Belgrade that Serbia will only be allowed to join the EU after it relinquishes its claims to Kosovo.

While this “Troika” cannot speak for all EU members, since Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Greece, and Cyprus do not intend to recognize Kosovo’s independence, an impasse has ensued, even though Brussels continues to argue in favor of the prospect of EU accession for Serbia: No government in Belgrade will ever be able to sign a document that implies any kind of acknowledgement of Kosovo’s secession. On the other hand, a majority of EU countries have extended recognition to Kosovo, and will therefore not wish to sign a treaty with Serbia as long as it continues to maintain its claim to Kosovo.

The convergence between Serbia and the EU seems therefore to have reached a stalemate – and a political impasse always includes the danger of reverting to bad habits. A Serbia that refuses to move towards the EU will increasingly have to seek the proximity of Russia. Moscow’s ambassador to Belgrade, Aleksandar Alekseev, never tires of repeating that Russia is extending friendly support without strings attached to Serbia at one of the most difficult times in the history of the nation. Moscow’s NATO ambassador Dmitry Rogosin has voiced his outrage at the West’s “rape of Serbia,” but has confirmed that Moscow continues to support Serbia’s EU accession, though not its integration into NATO. This position also represents the majority of public opinion in Serbia. That is why populist Nikolic as well as the politically languishing acting Prime Minister Kostunica emphasize that they support the closest possible ties with Russia as well as joining the EU, though only if the EU respects the territorial integrity of Serbia. Since Serbia only has a very restricted range of options for external alliances, President Tadic is not in any position either to reject the extended hand of the “Russian friends” – especially because a very real Russian instrument of power is taking shape in Southeastern Europe.

### **Fast-Growing Economic Cooperation Between Serbia and Russia**

As a counterpart to the German-Russian “North Stream” project, there are plans to build a Russian-Bulgarian-Hungarian-Italian-Serbian natural gas pipeline dubbed “South Stream.” In order for Serbia to get access to this project, the country was forced in early 2008 to sell the state-owned petroleum company NIS to Gazprom at a knock-down price. While the transaction has not yet been finalized, since the Serbian parliament has been dissolved and can therefore not sign off on the contract, which also requires some further negotiations, there are good reasons to assume that any future government in Belgrade will support this deal. In return for the involvement of Gazprom, Serbia will receive assurances of long-term

oil and gas deliveries. Furthermore, the Serbian state coffers will receive transit fees as part of the “South Stream” project.

There is already talk of further massive Russian investments not only in Serbia, but also in the Serbian part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Currently, approximately 60 percent of Serbia’s foreign trade is with EU states – the country’s greatest single exporting company is US Steel (which owns the Smederevo steel works) – while Russia only accounts for 11 percent. However, this balance could now shift rapidly in favor of Russia. Overall, Russia will indeed have an important economic and political voice in Belgrade and in this part of Southeastern Europe for the first time since 1948.

### **The Danger of Kosovo Instability**

Under the auspices of the US, the West has ignored the Serbian points of view and interests in the debate over the future status of Kosovo. The course pursued by the West has consistently been portrayed as being the only conceivable option, which a priori precluded any consideration of Russian concerns. At most, there was a willingness to accept a certain deceleration in the secession of Kosovo, in order to “make it more palatable for the Serbs.” This uncompromising stance was, presumably, based on the assumption that Serbia was unable politically and militarily to do any damage to the West; nor was Russia seen as being capable of enforcing its own point of view in the matter of Kosovo. Both of these assumptions have proven to be correct in the sense that the proclamation of Kosovo’s independence has created a *fait accompli* and is irreversible. However, the Serbian resistance, aided by Russia, is now concentrating on a focal point where any possible Western “victory” in Kosovo may yet come at a substantial political and military cost: in the almost exclusively Serbian-populated northernmost point of the province around the town of Mitrovica. While the State Department has pointed out that it considers the protection of Kosovo’s “territorial integrity” to be a task for NATO, Belgrade’s tactics are apparently aimed at deepening the already existing factual separation in the north in order to prevent the issue of Kosovo from stabilizing. Any military action on the part of NATO would most likely lead to an exodus of the Serbian population and create major international fault-lines. Moscow has warned NATO several times not to exceed KFOR’s mandate.

In any case, Russia is emerging in this part of Southeastern Europe as precisely the kind of actor that the US has tried to prevent: As an inevitable protective power for Serbian interests – in the same way that the US has long acted as a patron of the Albanians. It remains to be seen how the EU will fulfill its role

in the field of tension between the US and Russia as a self-declared “driving force” in conflict transformation for Kosovo and the region: At this point in time,

the outlook for a successful mission looks less promising, while the prospect of a rollercoaster ride is much more likely.

*Translated from German by Christopher Findlay*

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*Further reading:*

- “Law and Politics in the Conflict over Kosovo,” An online dossier of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, [www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org) (in German).
- Svetlana Lur'e, “Iskustvo razrushat' predopredelennosti,” *Zhurnal politicheskoi mysli Rossii*, no. 28 (February 2008), <http://www.politklass.ru/cgi-bin/issue.pl?id=955>
- Ivan Krastev, “What to do about Russia's Newfound Taste for Confrontation with the West,” *Brussels Forum Paper Series* (March 2008), [http://www.gmfus.org/brusselsforum/2008/doc/krastev\\_web.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/brusselsforum/2008/doc/krastev_web.pdf)

## Analysis

### Kosovo, Serbia and Russia

By Predrag Simić, Belgrade

#### Abstract

The debate over the independence of Kosovo, which Serbs consider to be their southern province, has divided the United States and Russia. It is seen as a possible precedent in international relations, which might affect the future of the Western Balkans, as well as many other territorial and ethnic conflicts in the world. This conflict represents a clash between the interests of the Serbian and Albanian populations in Kosovo, as well as two principles of international law: the territorial integrity of sovereign states versus the right of peoples to self-determination (the third and the seventh principles of the “Helsinki Decalogue”). Russia is among the countries likely to be affected by the Kosovo precedent, as it faces similar problems domestically in Chechnya and throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union – e.g. in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transdnistria. Moscow supports Belgrade's position that Kosovo's independence would not be the final stage of the breakup of Yugoslavia, but the starting point of a new round of conflicts, with consequences that could spill beyond the borders of the Western Balkans.

#### NATO Campaign Strains Ties with Russia

The NATO campaign against Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999 put relations between Russia and the West to the toughest test since the early 1980s. For the first time since the Cold War, Russia and NATO found themselves on opposite sides of an armed conflict. The reason for the fierce Russian response was not the Kosovo crisis alone, but accumulated Russian discontent with the direction of NATO's transformation after the Cold War. Contrary to Russian expectations, NATO had outlived its Cold War opponents, started to expand to the East, and demonstrated an intention to use force beyond the territory of its member-states without the per-

mission of the UN (i.e. without the consent of Russia and China).

The Kosovo crisis revealed the consequences of this process to the Russian political elite and confirmed their fears. Moscow drew at least three conclusions from the 1999 crisis. First, despite the fact that nuclear arms still make war between Russia and NATO unlikely, Russia and NATO could find themselves on the opposite sides of regional conflicts. Therefore, Moscow became increasingly ready to oppose NATO ambitions to rise above the UN and the OSCE, where, unlike NATO, Russia had representation. Second, institutions that were believed to have become the cornerstones of