

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 (in German).
- Svetlana Lur'e, “Iskustvo razrushat' predopredelenosti,” *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

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

the new partnership between Russia and NATO did not pass the test of the Kosovo crisis. One of the priorities of Russian diplomacy therefore became to restrain NATO while cooperating increasingly closely with the EU and OSCE. Third, despite its weakness and disturbances in relations with NATO, Russia remained an important actor on the international scene, particularly for the UN, OSCE, EU, Contact Group and G-8, which are becoming more important as a framework for Russian engagement in addressing Kosovo and other regional crises.

After Milošević, Serbian Hopes in West Disappointed

Milošević's resignation in October 2000 and the subsequent democratic changes in Serbia shifted Belgrade closer to the West and encouraged expectations that it would be possible to gradually stabilize the situation in Kosovo and find a compromise solution to the dispute. Such expectations seemed to gain credence in the spring of 2001, when a crisis broke out in the Preshevo Valley, which is located in Southern Serbia and is home to a strong Albanian community that is supported by Albanian groups in Kosovo. Contrary to the former policy of Milošević, the new authorities in Belgrade turned to NATO, the EU and the OSCE for help. Ultimately, the crisis was resolved by political means and almost without any casualties, which reinforced the pro-Western orientation of Serbia.

Therefore, the Serbian public expected that the West would react resolutely when a new wave of violence against Serbs in Kosovo broke out on 17 March 2004. However, such expectations were frustrated when in early 2005 first the International Crisis Group (ICG) and then political figures close to the former Clinton administration (i.e. Richard Holbrooke, former Ambassador to U.N., Morton Abramowitz, former Assistant secretary of State for Intelligence and Research and one of the founders of the ICG, U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos and others) forwarded a request to determine the "final status" of Kosovo, meaning its independence from Serbia. The Bush administration soon came onboard and launched an initiative supporting these plans in the UN Security Council. Although the report of the UN General Secretary's special representative Kai Eide criticized the state of human rights and the results of international administration in Kosovo, the Security Council, at the initiative of International Contact Group, at the end of 2005 abandoned the former "standards before status" policy in favor of a "standards and status" policy and entrusted former Finnish President and former member of the ICG board Marti Ahtisaari with the job of launching negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina about Kosovo's "final status." Although

Serbian-Albanian negotiations in Vienna during 2006 produced no results, in early February 2007, Ahtisaari presented his proposal for the "limited independence" of this Serbian province and soon submitted it to the UN Security Council.

Serbs reacted negatively to the requests for Kosovo's independence and the Ahtisaari plan. Pro-democratic groups in Serbia were forced to make the difficult choice between losing a significant portion of the country's national territory and further European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbs have a strong connection to Kosovo since it is where the Serbian state was founded and the most important monuments of Serbian civilization are located. It is also a place where the Serbian population is under great pressure because about 226,000 Serbs and other non-Albanians have been expelled from Kosovo since June 1999. The West's pressure in support of the Ahtisaari plan provoked discontent among the Serbian public. Many feared that Kosovo's independence would lead to a new cycle of crisis in Serbia, particularly in the Preshevo Valley (with a strong Albanian community) and Sandzak (Rashka in Serbian) with a large Muslim community, as well as across the region. Many Serbs assumed that these problems had been overcome with the end of the Milosevic era and the subsequent implementation of democratic changes between 2000–2007.

The consequences were soon felt in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the "limited independence" proposal for Kosovo disturbed the post-Dayton political balance and increased inter-ethnic tensions. The Serbian public was particularly angered by Ahtisaari's February 2007 statement that "someone must pay the price of Milosevic's Kosovo policy," which directly threatened the integrity of key political promises made by Serbia's democratic and pro-European parties after 2000 (the key slogan of the anti-Milosevic opposition during the winter protests in 1996 and in October 2000 was "We are Europe," i.e. that the democratic opposition could end the decade-long crisis and isolation and integrate Serbia into the European and Euro-Atlantic communities).

Equally troubling for Serbia's pro-Europe parties was the situation within the EU after its major enlargements in 2004 and 2007, which caused great resistance among the old members for further EU expansion, making it unlikely that Serbia and other Western Balkans countries would be admitted soon. The failure of the EU Constitutional referendum in France and the Netherlands in May and June 2005 coincided with increased Western pressure on Serbia for Kosovo independence, sending a strong message that membership in the EU was not a short-term prospect. The situation surrounding the EU sharply polarized Serbian society during the election campaign at the end of 2006,

bringing supporters of the former regime back onto the political stage. These groups advocated that Serbia shift away from its pro-European political orientation. Although pro-European parties won the parliamentary elections of January 2007, publication of the Ahtisaari plan in February caused a political crisis, which postponed the establishment of a new coalition government until May, returned the Kosovo crisis to the top of the political agenda, and united all Serbian parties in an effort to preserve national sovereignty.

Kosovo's Impact on Russia

The situation in Kosovo had a powerful impact on Russia. First, many saw Ahtisaari's plan for "limited sovereignty" in Kosovo as a risky precedent for other countries with ethnic problems. Russia fell into this category, as it only recently started to come out of the long-lasting crisis in Chechnya and must address the problems of Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia, and Transdnistria. Therefore, determining the "final status" of Kosovo became a problem which directly affected its national interests.

Secondly, after its negative experiences during the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, Russia became very sensitive to any disturbances of the existing balance in the Balkans and to changes in the present world order. Moscow has not forgotten that during the 1990s Serbia was a "metaphor for Russia" for many in the West and that NATO military interventions against the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 and against Serbia in 1999 revealed Russia's weakness, sending a strong message that it should abandon its interests in the Balkans and in Europe.

Third, differences between the American and Russian policy toward Kosovo coincided with the aggravation of relations between Washington and Moscow resulting from the US initiative to deploy a missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, the war in Iraq, and other issues that top the agenda of international problems. Russia managed in the meantime to greatly recover from the consequences of the breakup of the Soviet Union and to reinforce its economic and political power in Europe and the world owing, primarily, to oil and gas exports, as well as an increasingly wide range of industrial (particularly military) products.

Finally, the precedent of Kosovo independence for international relations is also a test for Russia's role as a permanent UN Security Council member. In this forum, Russia found itself defending fundamental principles of international law, such as the inviolability of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN members. In an interview given to a group of leading European papers on 3 June 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin explained Russia's position on Kosovo in the follow-

ing way: "We advocate dialogue and the implementation of international law, which implies respect for the territorial integrity of states. If we decide to give preference to the principle of ethnic self-determination over territorial integrity, that should be done everywhere in the world, particularly in Southern Ossetia, in Abkhazia and Transdnistria. In the West, such a solution would unleash separatisms in Europe. Look at Scotland, Catalonia, the Basque country ... I do not think that a European nation like Serbia should be humiliated in an effort to bring it to its knees. We need to be patient, opportunities for reaching compromise have not been exhausted yet." Putin's position was countered by US President George Bush, who after the failed US-Russian consultations on Kosovo and during the G-8 Summit in Germany took the stand that "Ahtisaari's plan can no longer be postponed," while during his visit to Albania in June 2007, he openly spoke in favor of independence for Kosovo.

US-Russian Disagreement over Kosovo

Open conflict between the American and Russian presidents at the G-8 summit in Heilingendamm (Germany) on the Kosovo issue in June 2007 was prevented by the proposal of French President Nicholas Sarkozy to launch a second round of Serbian-Albanian negotiations for a limited period of 120 days. However, this round of negotiations ended in failure in October and reinforced Western support for the Albanian position, leaving no choice to the Serbian government but to lean on Russian support, which was confirmed with the signature of the accord between Belgrade and Moscow on the South Stream Russian gas pipeline in February 2008.

The decision of the United States and major Western states to recognize Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence (UDI), disregarding the Serbian and Russian opposition and the blockade in the UN Security Council, only deepened the differences between the USA and Russia. This decision confirmed Moscow in its belief that Washington decided to marginalize the Russian influence by acting outside the framework of international law and disregarding the UN and OSCE.

The West expected that Russia would respond to UDI with the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, instead Moscow apparently decided to advance its position as the guarantor of the provisions of the UN Charter and hence the interests of the states that are concerned with the consequences of the Kosovo UDI on their security. While the US intends to strengthen its position by pushing the largest possible number of allies and partners to recognize Kosovo outside the framework of the UN, Russia most probably will try to bring the US back within the in-

ternational system and prevent the escalation of the Kosovo problem into a new quasi-Cold-War dynamic. This course of action may be further strengthened by the immediate consequences of Kosovo's UDI in Macedonia (the collapse of the coalition government), Israel (Gaza strip), and China (unrest in Tibet), as well as with the enthusiastic response of the separatist forces in some other multiethnic countries.

Thus, Kosovo moved near the top of international issues on which Moscow and Washington have divergent positions. The dispute is now second only to the issue of the American anti-missile shield in Europe, as shown by the failure of two presidents to find a compromise, despite several meetings in mid-2007 and the first part of 2008.

This problem also became a domestic policy issue both in the United States and in Russia because of the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections (December 2007 – March 2008) and the American presidential elections (November 2008), forcing the EU to make an awkward choice between two options, each of which may have long-lasting consequences. Although the leading West European countries backed Ahtisaari's

proposal on "limited independence" for Kosovo, the inability for compromise in the UN Security Council called into question the legitimacy of this decision. Without UN backing, the EU could hardly assume responsibility for sending its civil and military mission (Eulex) to Kosovo as envisioned by Ahtisaari's plan. This precedent might force certain EU members to choose between possible risks for their own security and their loyalty to achieving a common European foreign policy and coordinating these efforts with the US. African (South Africa) and Asian (China, Indonesia) members of the UN Security Council also treated Ahtisaari's plan with caution, fearing that a possible precedent might encourage secessionist movements and open the issue of changing existing international borders.

Seven years after the NATO intervention against Serbia, the establishment of an international civil and military administration, and Milosevic's descent from power, the "Kosovo problem" has again unleashed the spirit of nationalism. For Moscow it has become one of the major problems in relations with Washington, but Russia is certainly not the only federation in the world facing this challenge.

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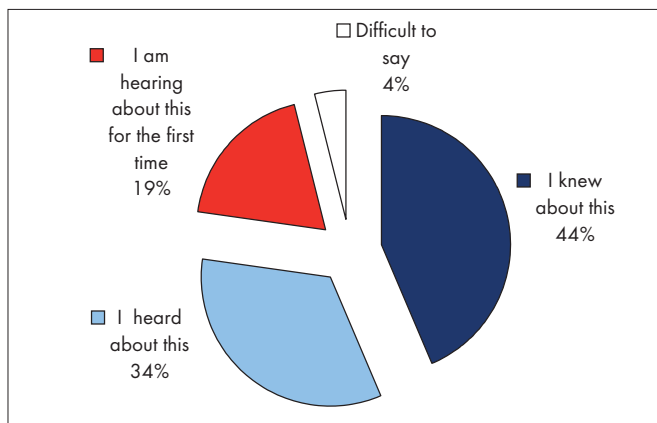
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Opinion Poll

Russian Popular Opinion Concerning the Issue of Kosovo

Attitudes Towards an Independent Kosovo

The Kosovo region is a part of Serbia that is inhabited for the most part by Albanians. A few days ago, Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia. Do you know anything about this, did you hear anything about this, or are you hearing this for the first time?



Source: Public Opinion Foundation, FOM. <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0809/d080922>, 29 February 2008