



Crimea and Russia's "new" attitude towards Kosovo

Explaining the reasons for Russia's actions in the Crimea, Vladimir Putin said that "the West acts any way it wants, implementing power against sovereign states worldwide." Furthermore, he criticized the West for other acts, primarily the situations in Iraq, Iran and Libya, as well as for the so called "colour revolutions", through which "solutions were imposed on some of the countries not in line with their traditions". He also stated that in practice the West "does not follow international law, but only the law of power", and that the United States has crossed the red line leaving Russia with no other choice than to defend its interests¹. In addition, Putin remarked that the referendum and Crimea's accession to Russia are in coherence with international law, alluding to the case of Kosovo. The Declaration of Independence of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea refers to the Kosovo Declaration of Independence and the confirmation of its status by the United Nations Court of Justice ruling in 2010.² Thus it is evident that the question of Kosovo's independence is a key factor on which Russia rhetorically justifies the intervention in Crimea and the subsequent annexation.³

Russia's new approach to international relations and Serbia

Russia's principle standpoint on altering territorial boundaries has remained unchanged for years. Deeply concerned about the spread of NATO (and as we have recently noticed of the EU as well) to the East, Russia has strongly promoted the principle of inviolability of international boundaries and bases its attitude on it regarding the separatist movements across Euro-Asia.

In 1999 Russia formally objected to the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but rapidly seized the opportunity created by this conflict to put itself in the position of an important factor that would prevent what threatened to escalate into an armed intervention led by NATO. The result of the Russo-Finish tandem's (Viktor Chernomyrdin and Martii Ahtisaari) diplomatic mediation, was the binding UN SC Resolution 1244 which put Kosovo under the auspices of the UN while keeping the territorial integrity of FR Yugoslavia intact. In doing so, Russia had successfully positioned itself as a necessary piece of the Balkan puzzle, but has also managed to keep the principle of international law on the table by reopening the discussion of Kosovo in the UN.

During the direct negotiations regarding the future status of Kosovo, led by the UN and their Special Envoy for Kosovo, Martti Ahtisari, the question of recognition of new states was re-opened. The proposed solution stemming from the negotiations were presented in a document called the "Ahtisarii Plan", which states that "supervised independence of Kosovo" should be the final solution to this conflict, adding that Kosovo should be treated as a "sui generis" case. Russia, as a member of the UN Security Council, concluded that the implementation of this plan would bring misbalance to the state recognition system, and thus dismissed the parts of the resolution which would implement this plan. However, after the recognition of Kosovo outside of the UN framework by the Western powers, Russia has adopted a position in which it sees the world entering a new phase, one of hard power which allows countries to override the principles of international law if they have enough power to impose their will onto others based on their national interests.

At the same time, Serbia began to get politically closer to Russia in order to gain influence against the Western support for Kosovo's independence within the UN. Russia welcomed this affiliation which resulted in the

1) *Putin: I couldn't believe my eyes when they bombed Yugoslavia*. Blic online, 19.03.2014. <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Svet/450448/Putin-Nisam-mogao-da-poverujem-svojim-ocima-kada-su-bombardovali-Jugoslaviju>

2) The Declaration of Independence of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea also refers to the Kosovo Declaration of Independence as well as to the Decision of the United Nations Court of Justice in 2010. Парламент Крыма принял Декларацию о независимости АРК и г. Севастополя, Пресс-центр Верховного Совета АРК, 11.03. 2014. http://www.rada.crimea.ua/news/11_03_2014_1

3) Žarko Petrović, *Russian vision of security in Europe and Serbia*, ISAC fond, Beograd, 2009, page.8.

strengthening of economic and political-security ties, especially in the energy sector, from selling the majority of state-owned shares of the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS) with the preliminary agreement about the “South Stream” gas pipeline construction through Serbia, to establishing a Serbian-Russian Centre for Crisis Management in Niš. Although the end benefit of these arrangements for Serbia is questionable, both economically as well as strategically (considering Serbia’s geopolitical position), such arrangements have been justified due to Russia’s support for Serbia in the international arena regarding Kosovo.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that Serbia is not at the forefront of Russia’s political interest. Russia’s interests are primarily focused on its “near abroad”, in other words on preventing further European and Euro-Atlantic integrations in that region, as in making certain that Russian security and, as Vladimir Putin officially stated “legitimate interests of Russia” are secure. Russian interests in Serbia are primarily based on Serbia’s current political position that could contribute to achieving Russia’s previously mentioned goals. Also, there is an economic interest that consist of continuous export of energy sources to the countries of the European Union. It is through these lenses that the “principal standpoint” of Russia on the Kosovo issue should be viewed.

Post-Kosovo world and Serbian-Russian relations put in perspective

Russia, clearly pressured by the West’s firm position on the Kosovo independence issue, as well as with announcements of Ukraine and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, has waited for a chance to support its actions with arguments that have been brought about through the Kosovo case. Within 6 months of Kosovo’s independence, Russia interfered in the official attempt by Tbilisi to regain sovereignty over South Ossetia by military means, causing Georgian forces to withdraw. Immediately afterwards, as if it did not object to such principles before, Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These cases were treated as “sui generis”, but using opposite argumentation, that is by claiming that these territories were exceptional cases due to fact that they were being attacked during the negotiation process, which was not the case when it came to Kosovo.

By intervening in Georgia, Moscow had taken advantage of the Kosovo precedent to draw its “red lines” in signifying how far they are ready to go, implying effectively that the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine and Georgia can not continue. Soon afterwards in both of these countries a new political elite came to power which were inclined to cooperate with Russia, marginalizing the problem. In 2010 Ukraine declared partial neutrality in an attempt to maintain simultaneous cooperation with both Russia and the EU, whereas NATO membership ceased to exist as an option.

Only two months before the intervention in Georgia, then Russian President Medvedev initiated talks about the new security agreement in Europe, that would be agreed upon at an all-European summit, thus leaving the USA excluded. That same year in October, Medvedev presented this idea through five principles, with the first one covering the need to respect international law, sovereignty, territorial integrity and a state’s political independence.⁴ Hence, Russia is still actively seeking to re-examine the boundaries institutionalized in the KEBS/OEBS principles, which would guarantee Russia’s security interests. A valuable factor for justifying the need for an agreement of this kind is also a “militarily neutral Serbia” that is not a part of NATO nor of the Euro-Asian integration.

The latest escalation of political instability in Ukraine is directly induced by the undefined position and balancing between EU and Russia, as well as by the internal divisions regarding country’s foreign policy. Russia has recognized the momentum to handle the situation in the same manner as in Georgia, by referring to the Kosovo precedent, even though it was clear that Ukraine’s scenario differs from Kosovo, and even Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore, Russia has this time used another principle of international law, the right of self-determination which does not automatically result with the right to succeed and which is granted through a consensus of international factors and based on certain specific conditions.

Still, the expansion of the EU and NATO has been stopped at the Ukrainian border. This attempt will also be halted out of official reasons, since these organizations do not welcome countries with limited territorial sovereignty into membership. Finally, through the latest events, Russia has been demonstrating its strength to its Western partners

4) Žarko Petrović, *Russian vision of security in Europe and Serbia*, ISAC fond, Beograd, 2009, page.8. Refer to the article for more information on the topic

and also how dangerous setting precedents can be, since Russia will not hesitate to use them either, and thus, Russia has confirmed its arguments about a new security vision.

However, Russia's annexation of Crimea has made its politics towards Serbia absurd. Russia took advantage via *realpolitik* of all the "benefits" that could be drawn from the Kosovo precedent and stopped, in the long run, any further approaching of the West towards Russian borders in Europe. A more important question for Serbia is what could be the practical consequences of these developments. Although this Russian decision can be somewhat understood from a *realpolitik*, strategic, even historical point of view, Russia has finally lost the principal, moral and practical position to further defend the Serbian standpoint about the unacceptability of Kosovo independence. Any future arrangement or claim that it is defending Serbian interests at the very least, lose their ground. If we observe the situation through Russia's eyes, and that is to accept that force is the basic argument in international relations, then the situation becomes absurd because Russia has only acted according to its own interests.

If the only true cause of making Russia a piece of the Balkan puzzle (which it actually abandoned by pulling away its troops from KFOR in 2003) was its assistance when it comes to the Kosovo status, a question arises: what really is the purpose of maintaining this course after the recognition of independence and annexation of Crimea regardless of how limited in actions it was compared to the situation six years ago?

Two factors emerge for Serbia to deal with. Firstly, joint projects that were drafted in 2007-2008 between Serbia and Russia are just beginning to be realized, which means that Russia will be paying closer attention to events in Serbia. Simultaneously, with the EU Candidate Status and the beginning of accession negotiations with the EU, primarily in regards to chapter 31, Serbia will have to coordinate accordingly to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, and that implies coordination with possible foreign and economic policy measures towards Russia. Serbia will come to the point of re-evaluating the benefits of its foreign policy from 2004 up to today and what will be the final outcome of it. The nature of the outcome will depend on the EU, but also on how Russia will assess the path Serbia can take, in the sense as the former president of Russia Medvedev stated on 20th of October, 2009 in his speech at the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia:

"For Russia, of course, is of great importance that new (...) member of the European Union maintain good relation with the Russian Federation so as for EU membership not to harm (...) and contribute to the deepening of mutual understanding."⁵

Serbia is an important factor for the Russian new security vision, as is Ukraine, and what behaviour of EU aspiring countries is harmful towards Russia will be decided by Russia itself and it will act accordingly. The question is will Serbia be able to accept or defy these decisions. It will mainly depend on the awareness and courage of the elite residing in the Serbian government at the given moment.

5) Zarko Petrovic, *op.cit*, page 3