



Serbien

Igor Novakovic
International and Security Affairs Centre

Ever since its beginning, the Ukraine crisis has had a profound influence on Serbian domestic and foreign policy, though more in political than in practical or economic terms.

Political symbolism of the Ukraine crisis and in particular Russia's actions in Crimea are much more important. The status of Crimea and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine are in direct correlation with the Serbian approach towards the Kosovo issue. In March this year, 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.

One would believe that due to efforts in the international arena to preserve its own territorial integrity and the curb the consequences of Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Serbia would publically denounce actions of Russia in Crimea in total and align itself fully with the EU's CFSP. However, that did not happen. During the previous period, Russia, together with China, was Serbia's ally in the UN Security Council (UNSC), preventing eventual recognition of Kosovo's independence, and preserving the validity of the UN SC Resolution 1244. Thus, there is a paradox that Russia is backing Serbia's territorial integrity while undermining the territorial integrity of the other state by justifying it with the situation on Kosovo. On the other hand, there is a pressure on Serbia by the West to align with the EU approach. This situation renewed the discussion in Serbia about its foreign policy orientation, but also about the process of negotiations with the EU and possible »politization« of the Chapter 31 (Foreign, Security and Defence Policy) in the near future.

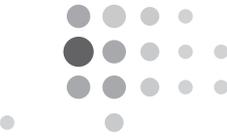
In the moment of the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, Serbia was in somewhat peculiar position, due to the approaching extraordinary elections scheduled for March 16. Ivica Dacic, the Prime Minister at the time, said that after the elections the new government will adopt an official standpoint towards the Ukraine crises, assuring

the public that it would be a »balanced approach«. In other words, Serbia would try to balance between the fact that it is an EU candidate country and the fact that it is a traditional friend of Russia, and that »friendship cannot be endangered by anything or anyone.« Than the first vice-president, Aleksandar Vucic, said that »Serbia would not take lessons from those that easily violated Serbia's own territorial integrity« and »that Serbia is on the EU path, Serbia will respect its international obligations, but Serbia will not have an enemy attitude towards Russia.« On March 28th, at the vote in the UN on the Ukraine's territorial integrity, Serbia did not vote in favour nor against, it abstained.

The new government was formed in April 27th, when the new Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vucic, repeated similar words in his expose: »Recent unrest and clashes between the East and the West are not in favour of Serbia. When our friends clash between themselves, we do not see a chance for profit. Serbia does not want to be a part of those tensions. Serbia will never be able to give up its friendship with Russia, furthermore that would not be a moral stance.« He has underlined this fact again, answering one MP question: »the Government of Serbia will fulfil all of the conditions for the EU membership by the end of its mandate, and it is on the member states if Serbia will get a green light for the integration, not on Serbia. As far as we are concerned, Russia is a friend of Serbia, it was like that in the past, it is the fact today and it will remain the fact in the future. As for the territorial integrity of all of the states in the world, Serbia protects its own territorial integrity, and Serbia protects territorial integrity of all UN member states.«

To this date, the government remains on its »balanced approach« and did not take an official standpoint on the Ukrainian government. However, until May 26th, there were 6 declarations issued by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the situation in Ukraine, and Serbia did not align with a single one. Within the OSCE ranks the situation is similar: Serbia did not align with 22 EU statements on Ukrainian crisis within in the Permanent Council and 12 within the Forum for Security Cooperation.

There are several reasons for this attitude: Serbia still needs Russia as a leverage in the Kosovo issue, what was clearly visible before the 9th and 10th round of politi-



cal talks in Brussels between Belgrade and Pristina, just before the conclusion of the Brussels agreement in April 2013, when Serbia's Prime Minister went to consultations to Moscow. In addition, one must keep in mind that Serbia was heavily hit by the crisis, and none of the governments dared to make necessary economic reforms to create suitable conditions for sustainable growth.

The consequence is that governments are more open for »international arrangements« that would result in new loans and new investors. Since 2008, Russia is much more present in Serbia, politically and economically. Gazprom is the major shareholder of the National oil company of Serbia (practically holding a monopoly on oil production market in Serbia) and major provider of natural gas for Serbia (via companies YugoRosgas and Serbijagas). Serbia also counts on the construction of the South Stream Pipeline on its territory, as one of the key infrastructural projects that would guarantee energy security, but also an economy boost. The Government also counts on already promised Russia's loans for infrastructural project; Serbia is also one of the rare countries that has a free trade agreement with Russia, and

numerous companies have their interest in preserving good relations with this country. And finally Russia has a strong influence in the public discourse of Serbia, since it is considered to be a traditional friend, especially after the declaration of Kosovo's independence. This influence is so visible, that only a few days after setting up the new government, the Prime Minister, unofficially visited Moscow. At this moment there is practically no one in the government, who would dare to make similar moves like Montenegro did.

At present, the most of the media are silently supporting government's position, except the few independent, liberal media. While speculating about the compatibility of the current Serbian attitude towards Russia and its European obligations, there is no widespread criticism. In fact, it seems that there is a widespread understanding. Civil society, especially those traditionally more liberal oriented, express their concern about the current foreign policy orientation and criticize, to an extent, Serbia's attitude underlining that the EU obligations should have an absolute priority.