

# The Influence of Russia on Events in Serbia



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**Even though Serbia turned its foreign policy course towards the direction of the Euro-Atlantic community in late 2009 with an application for European Union membership, Russia’s influence in Serbia remained intact.**

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*Serbia’s political moves for the ‘preservation’ of Kosovo, which, to a large extent, have relied on Russian support, have resulted in the increase in Russia’s influence over Serbia. Two years after it was labeled „one of the pillars of Serbian foreign policy“<sup>1</sup> Russia today influences the identification of Serbia’s priorities, as well as the general situation in the country. The politics aimed at establishing firmer bonds with Russia in order to assure its support in the prevention of Kosovo’s formal recognition, have in fact prevented the conservative and nationalistic forces in the country to use Russia as an alternative to the EU and thereby halt Serbia’s integration into the EU. In building strong relations with Russia, the pro-Western forces in Serbia managed to draw closer and temporarily bind Russia’s official politics to the pro-Western option in Serbia. In spite of this, in refusing to realistically analyze Russia and its interests and priorities in international relations and insisting on the short-term benefits this alliance offers, Serbia has put itself in a position where Russia can influence public opinion, and even the identification of Serbia’s priorities in foreign politics. This is best reflected in the issue of Serbia’s membership in NATO: using the „Kosovo ticket“, Russia is trying to prevent the NATO entry of a country with which it is building special ‘strategic’ relations.*

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Since 2001, Serbia’s foreign policy has been focused on European integration and regional cooperation, while it has been trying to maintain „balanced politics“ with Russia.<sup>2</sup> Since 2005, i.e. since the moment it became clear that the issue of the status of Kosovo was soon to be solved in a way which would damage the territorial integrity of Serbia, Serbian officials have put all their effort into strengthening the shaky relations with Russia. From that moment on, Russia has been perceived in Serbia as a country which could greatly contribute to Serbia’s efforts to prevent Kosovo’s independence. This has resulted in an increase in Serb efforts to strengthen relations with Russia.

After Kosovo declared independence on February 17, 2008, Serbia started looking for the best way to react to its recognition by most countries in Trans-Atlantic community. The government, established in July 2008

after a minor political crisis and special parliamentary elections, aspired to diminish, as much as possible, the negative effects of this independence declaration on its internal politics, which were polarized to the extreme.<sup>3</sup> The pressure created by conservative and nationalistic forces was such that not responding to the situation would be interpreted as *the betrayal of Kosovo*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, any disproportional response threatened to endanger relations with the countries of the European Union, which Serbia is seeking to join, and cost pro-European forces the support Belgrade needed to implement belated internal systemic reforms crucial to both its political course and the mid-term future of the country. The reaction to Kosovo's declaration was reflected in diplomatic action — downgrading diplomatic ties with countries that recognized Kosovo —, in the transfer of the issue to the legal terrain and in firm disapproval of any recognition of Kosovo in bilateral, and especially multilateral forums. The diplomatic action was Serbia's unilateral move, but transferring the problem onto the legal terrain and blocking further recognitions required allies. The primary logical choice for Serbia was the Russian Federation, a country which did not like the precedent set by Kosovo and which needed to pursue its interests in the Western Balkans.

Between 2007 and 2009, Serbia's foreign policy towards Russia shifted, with an open formulation of its plan to draw closer to Russia and simultaneously work on EU integration. Negotiations on the transit of the „South Stream“ gas route through Serbia and the sale of NIS started in 2007,<sup>5</sup> around the time when negotiations on the status of Kosovo under the auspices of the troika of representatives of the EU, the USA and Russia were coming to an end. Seeking to assure its support, Serbia offered Russia a lucrative privatization deal involving the sale of 51 percent privatization of the Serbian Oil Industry (NIS) to Russian interests, in exchange for Russia's promise that a branch of „South Stream“ would go through Serbia and that the underground gas storage facility „Banatski dvor“ would be constructed. In both cases the ownership ratio would be 51% - 49% in favour of Russia.<sup>6</sup>

After special parliamentary elections and the appointment of new government in July 2008, the politics of relying on Russia, both regarding the status of Kosovo and other international issues, continued. Since January 2009, or more precisely, since the Ambassadors Conference in Belgrade, Moscow assumed a place next to Brussels and Washington, an enhanced role compared to the period before 2005.<sup>7</sup> Aided by Russia, Serbia managed to secure the UN General Asse-

mblly's support for a resolution which asked the International Court of Justice to give an opinion on the legality of Kosovo's independence declaration.

The convergence of Serbia's interests in preserving its territorial integrity and Russia's interests in preventing the legalization of the precedent set by Kosovo's independence was further strengthened by concrete, practical convergence of the two countries. Besides the energy sector deals, a Moscow Bank branch office was opened, and there are plans for other major Russian banks, such as Gazprom Bank, to enter the Serbian market, further improving conditions for the spread of Russian business in Serbia. There have been a few Russian commercial investments, and the list of products on which no or reduced duty is paid has been extended.<sup>8</sup> Among other forms of military cooperation<sup>9</sup>, Russian engineers have since April 2009 been removing unexploded bombs left over from the 1999 NATO bombing<sup>10</sup>. When Russian president Medvedev visited Belgrade on October 20, 2009, an agreement was signed on Russian-Serbia cooperation in humanitarian and natural disasters and other emergency situations.

When the issue of Kosovo was transferred to the legal terrain, with the clear message that the institutions in which Russia has a veto right would not recognize Kosovo, and after the discussion before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the process of Serbian-Russian convergence was completed. Even though Serbia turned its foreign policy course towards the direction of the Euro-Atlantic community in late 2009 with an application for European Union membership, Russia's influence in Serbia remained intact.

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When in early 2010 Serbia's Minister of Defense, Dragan Šutanovac, raised the issue of Serbia's entry into NATO<sup>11</sup>, his words elicited a tempestuous reaction. Leading opposition leaders asked for a referendum where the people would decide<sup>12</sup>, a response based on both the emotional antagonism towards NATO for the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, and the People's Assembly Resolution 125/07 of December 2007, which proclaimed Serbia's military neutral until a referendum on the issue was organized.

Russian officials stepped in loudly expressing their opinion, i.e. their opposition to Serbia's membership in NATO: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov, said he thought the majority of Serbia's people were against their country joining NATO<sup>13</sup> and the chairman of the

Duma Committee on International Affairs, Constantin Kosachev, said Serbia joining NATO would mean Serbian people accepted NATO's intervention and the independence of Kosovo.<sup>14</sup> Russia's ambassador to NATO went even further when he said Russia would re-examine its attitude towards Kosovo in case Serbia joined NATO.<sup>15</sup> The Russian maneuvering was effective, and both Serbia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremić<sup>16</sup> and President Boris Tadić<sup>17</sup> backtracked, issuing denials. It is unclear whether this turnaround resulted from the pressure exerted by Russia, or by a realistic assessment of the probability of Serbia's entry in NATO seen in the context of the Kosovo issue.

The reason behind Russia's rigid opposition to Serbia's NATO membership lies in the principle relationship between Russia and NATO. Unlike the military doctrine of the Russian Federation from 2000, where NATO was not mentioned, but only a vague formulation of external threat seen in „the spread of military blocks at the expense of the Russian Federation“<sup>18</sup>, in Russia's new military doctrine, NATO was explicitly mentioned as a „military danger“ (but not military threat).<sup>19</sup> It is, therefore, logical to expect Russia's increased efforts in opposing the accession into NATO of friendly countries such as Serbia. Russia is aware of Serbia's position and its environment, but it is also aware of the fact that Serbia's membership in NATO would present a setback for several important interests in the Western Balkans. In its present situation of „military neutrality“ Serbia is developing a „strategic partnership“ with Russia in the field of energy, and showing interest in Russia's initiative for a new Pact on Security in Europe<sup>20</sup> — it is less likely to do so as a NATO member, because in that case Serbia's bonds with the USA would be far stronger than they are now. Providing arguments in favour of a new Pact on Security in Europe, Russian officials have often said that the existing security architecture was not good enough because there are countries in Europe which are not, and do not intend to become NATO members — alluding, among others, to Serbia.<sup>21</sup>

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Immediately upon the start of the Kosovo status talks, Russia informed the world it was not supporting the independence of the province: it has not changed this attitude, although a big part of the Euro-Atlantic community hoped it would. Its reasons stem from its perception of Kosovo's independence as a dangerous precedent that threatens to have negative effects on Russia's territorial integrity, as well as the integrity of neighboring countries. This is, most certainly, one of the reasons why the co-

untries such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova have not recognized Kosovo. Furthermore, protection of international law is the cornerstone of Russian foreign politics<sup>22</sup> and one of the few, but still available weapons Russia is using in order to maintain the status quo in international relations, where it plays a key role in spite of its actual significance in the world. Russia's legal conservatism aims at retaining some form of control over realpolitik processes in the world, a control endangered by the bombing of Yugoslavia (1999), the intervention in Iraq (2003), as well as „the coloured revolutions“ in post-Soviet territories (2003 – 2005). The conservative protection of international law enables Russia to come up with solid arguments, based on international law, against the spread of NATO, against the placing of military infrastructure in Eastern Europe, against interventions, and especially against USA unilateralism. Excluding the limited bombings of Serb positions in Bosnia in 1994,<sup>23</sup> NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999 was the first intervention since the founding of this alliance, and it showed that Russian opinions will be ignored if contrary to essential interests of the Euro-Atlantic community. This shows there is a serious realpolitik value in the question of the status of Kosovo, as expressed by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin when he drew a parallel between the situation in Kosovo and that in the renegade Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia :

*From the moral and ethical point of view, the comparison of Kosovo, the precedent set by Kosovo, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia is completely grounded. They do not differ at all. There were ethnic conflicts both here and there, as well as violations of law.<sup>24</sup>*

The question of the status of Kosovo is both a practical and a usable question in contemporary international relations. Russia uses this question to point to the NATO-centric system of security in Europe, because NATO bombed Kosovo without a UN Security Council decision, which led to Kosovo's proclamation of independence. Russia sees the recognition of Kosovo by most NATO members as a move contrary to the principle of territorial integrity of countries and a direct consequence of the bombing of Serbia.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, intervening in Kosovo, NATO emphasized its (supra-)legal arguments that values had priority over realpolitik, and that protecting a great number of possible victims was more important than some global-level consensus with countries such as Russia, which did not share the same value systems and priorities with NATO states.

However, the situation changed in 2008, both for NATO and Russia. NATO could not secure the nece-

ssary support to Kosovo's independence even among its own member states, since four out of 28 member states refused to recognize Kosovo. NATO was faced with the limitations of its own possibilities to violate international law. The violation of the existing norm with the aim of protecting possible victims from mass violations of humanitarian law and human rights, both quantitatively and qualitatively differs from violation of the existing norm in the international law for the purposes of stability – because the conflicting parties are unable to agree on the status. On the other hand, the recognition of the unilateral proclamation of the independence of Kosovo has changed the political climate in Russia as well. Immediately after the proclamation of independence of Kosovo, Russian leaders said this would set a precedent, which would have consequences in Georgia. Relations with *de facto* regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been formalized in Georgia.<sup>26</sup> The attack of Georgian forces on Chinvali in South Ossetia gave Russia a reason to respond to the recognition of Kosovo's independence, and Russia recognized these two provinces on August 26, 2008. Justifying its own violation of the international law, Russia used, *mutatis mutandis*, the arguments presented by the Euro-Atlantic community in the case of Kosovo (mass violations of human rights resulting from the attack, lack of possibilities to otherwise maintain security). Faced with accusations it was inconsistent in its interpretation and application of international law, since it had completely different attitude in the case of Kosovo, Russia said it was *true* that the cases of Kosovo and Abkhazia and South Ossetia could not be compared, because Serbia had not attacked Kosovo as Georgia had attacked South Ossetia, which was why the case of South Ossetia was the *sui generis* case, and the case of Kosovo was not.<sup>27</sup>

The realpolitik effect is, however, completely different in these two cases. Kosovo was recognized by 65 countries, including most countries from the Euro-Atlantic community, while only four (Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru) recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Regardless of the results of a legal analysis on the status of these provinces, this fact best depicts the reach of their argumentation, as well as the actual influence that Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community have in international relations.

The question of Kosovo remains open for Russia, although it is aware that its influence on the final decision on its status is limited to preventing the legalization of Kosovo's status in those bodies in which it has the right to veto. Having withdrawn its troops by August 2003, Russia's involvement in the issue has been reduced to discussions on the principles and international law, and it has freed itself from any responsibility to influence the final decision. The daily paper „Kurir“ reported that president Medvedev, while visiting Serbia, asked president Tadić not to change Serbia's policy towards Kosovo.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the accuracy of this information, the fact remains that Kosovo is Serbia's priority in relations between Russia and Serbia, as well as a part of the platform on which Russia is building its opposition to the politics of the Euro-Atlantic community.

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The focus on the status of Kosovo and the shaping of politics around this issue has, to an extent, stabilized the internal political situation in Serbia, providing the country with the possibility to continue with reforms on its European path. The countries of the Euro-Atlantic community have not been exerting much pressure on the government in Belgrade, sensing the delicate situation it is in. However, through its insistence on strengthening ties and building a „strategic partnership“<sup>29</sup> with Russia, without a realistic insight into Russia's and its own interests and priorities in international relations, and by insisting on the short-term benefits this alliance offers, Serbia has put itself in a position where Russia can objectively influence public opinion, and even the setting of Serbia's priorities in foreign politics. This has additionally limited the space for foreign-political maneuvering, regardless of the issue of Kosovo.

Serbia has to realistically analyse the extent to which its short-term decisions, regardless of how important the issues they pertain to are, will lead to a double negative effect: the increased Russian influence on Serbia's internal affairs, which the Euro-Atlantic community will not tolerate for long and which will halt Serbia's further integration, and the failure of the efforts aimed at defending the country's territorial integrity. ■

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Tadić: „EU is the most important objective“ January 12, 2009, available at: [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=01&dd=12&nav\\_category=11&version=print](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2009&mm=01&dd=12&nav_category=11&version=print)
- <sup>2</sup> Statement by the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs Goran Svilanović at the SRJ Federal Assembly, <http://www.mfa.rs/Srpski/Foreinframe.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> When the independence of Kosovo was proclaimed, a part of the then leading coalition failed to react even when protesters were burning the flags of the countries perceived as the culprits for „the stealing of Kosovo“.
- <sup>4</sup> These accusations were presented on October 26, 2008, Vojislav Koštunica, To recognize EULEX is to recognize independence, [http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/24180/P\\_riznanje+Euleksa+tje+priznanje+nezavisnosti.html](http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/24180/P_riznanje+Euleksa+tje+priznanje+nezavisnosti.html)
- <sup>5</sup> Milan Simurdić, Russian Energy Politics and the Balkans, p.4. <http://www.isac-fund.org/lat/publishing.php>
- <sup>6</sup> Šojgu: The price of NIS is a done deal for Russia, Dnevnik, Tuesday, September 23, 2008, <http://www.naslovi.net/2008-09-23/dnevnik/sojgu-za-rusiju-cena-nis-a-gotova-stvar/833240>
- <sup>7</sup> Beta, January 12, 2009, President Tadic said that Serbian priorities in foreign politics were the defense of Kosovo, European integration and the strengthening of regional cooperation. He also pointed to the fact that Serbian foreign politics was based on the developing of relations with the EU, Russia and the USA. „Serbia has three pillars of its foreign politics, and those are the European Union, Russia and the USA.“  
[http://www.msp.gov.rs/Srpski/Bilteni/Srpski/b120109\\_s.html](http://www.msp.gov.rs/Srpski/Bilteni/Srpski/b120109_s.html)
- <sup>8</sup> Official Gazette of the SRJ ratified – International contracts, no. 1/2001
- <sup>9</sup> The reparation of the aircraft MIG-29 agreed on, December 23, 2006 [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2006&mm=12&dd=23&nav\\_id=224736](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2006&mm=12&dd=23&nav_id=224736)
- <sup>10</sup> According to the Russian Ministry for Emergencies’ data, from April 6 to August 12, members of the Ministry’s Center for High-Risk Rescue Operations cleared 539, 413m<sup>2</sup> of land, and additional 418, 000 will be cleared in the future. 177 explosive devices were found. Available in Russian at [http://www.mchs.gov.ru/portal\\_news/detail.php?ID=22992](http://www.mchs.gov.ru/portal_news/detail.php?ID=22992)
- <sup>11</sup> Interview, Dragan Šutanovac, Defense Minister, Press, January 9, 2010, Šutanovac: Srbia in NATO, why not, [http://www.presidentonline.rs/sr/vesti/vesti\\_dana/story/95318/%C5%A0utano+vac:+Srbija+u+NATO.%C5%A1to+da+ne.html](http://www.presidentonline.rs/sr/vesti/vesti_dana/story/95318/%C5%A0utano+vac:+Srbija+u+NATO.%C5%A1to+da+ne.html)
- <sup>12</sup> Bečković: The decision on NATO should not be made behind people’s back, January 12, 2010, <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/171951/Grupa-od-200-Intelektualaca-za-referendum-o-NATO>
- <sup>13</sup> Novosti, January 22, 2010, Lavrov: NATO is not brining a solution, [http://www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?ld=1&status=jedna&vest=168804&title\\_add=Lavrov%3A%20NATO%20ne%20odonosi%20re%C5%A1enje&keyword\\_add=lavrov%2C%20sergej%20lavrov](http://www.novosti.rs/code/navigate.php?ld=1&status=jedna&vest=168804&title_add=Lavrov%3A%20NATO%20ne%20odonosi%20re%C5%A1enje&keyword_add=lavrov%2C%20sergej%20lavrov)
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.srbijanet.rs/vesti/vesti-iz-zemlje/43095-kosaov-rusija-ne-bi-razumela-odluku-srbije-da-udje-u-nato.html>
- <sup>15</sup> B92, Rogozin: You can join NATO without Kosovo, February 6, 2010 [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=06&nav\\_id=409229](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=06&nav_id=409229)
- <sup>16</sup> B92, Jeremić: Cooperation with all players February 6, 2010, [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=06&nav\\_id=409270](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=06&nav_id=409270)
- <sup>17</sup> Danas, Unnecessary referendum on NATO, February 14, 2010, [http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/politika/nepotreban\\_referendum\\_o\\_nato.56.html?news\\_id=183687](http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/politika/nepotreban_referendum_o_nato.56.html?news_id=183687)
- <sup>18</sup> The Russian Federation Military Doctrine, April 21, 2000 <http://www.iss.niit.ru/doktrins/doktr02.htm>
- <sup>19</sup> The Russian Federation Military Doctrine, February 5, 2010 [http://news.kremlin.ru/ref\\_notes/461](http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461)
- <sup>20</sup> The transcript of statements and answers to questions of media provided by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov at joint press-conference on results of negotiations with the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs V. Jeremić, Moscow, February 20, 2009. (Стенограмма выступления и ответов на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова на совместной пресс-конференции по итогам переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Сербии В.Еремичем, Москва, 20 февраля 2009 года), available at: [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/B38351266782BAE6C32575670037ABC8](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/B38351266782BAE6C32575670037ABC8)
- <sup>21</sup> See Dr. Vladimir Voronkov, The European Security Treaty After Corfu, p. 2 [www.crep.ch/en/pdf/09-07-13+Voronkov+article\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.crep.ch/en/pdf/09-07-13+Voronkov+article_ENG.pdf)
- <sup>22</sup> The rule of law in international relations is the second priority of the Russian Federation, see: Foreign politics of the Russian Federation (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации) , July 12, 2008 <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204108.shtml>
- <sup>23</sup> James Headley, Russia and the Balkans, Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin, Columbia University Press 2008, p. 150 – 155.
- <sup>24</sup> It was later explained that this statement did not mean Russia was planning to recognize Kosovo. ITAR Tass, the meeting of the Russian president Putin and the S. Ossetia president Kokoity, available at: <http://www.itar-tass.com/level2.html?NewsID=14271740&PageNum=0> , also <http://news.mail.ru/politics/2853710> See the RTS news, available at: <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/116721/Putin+o+Kosovu++Abhaziji.html>
- <sup>25</sup> The commentary was made by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative on the 10t anniversary since the beginning of the bombing of Yugoslavia, (Комментарий официального представителя МИД России А.А.Нестеренко в связи с 10-летием начала натовских бомбардировок Югославии), [http://www.mid.ru/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/CD4437FE5D59AC21C325758300245215?OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/CD4437FE5D59AC21C325758300245215?OpenDocument)
- <sup>26</sup> Russia Moves to Legalize Ties with Abkhazia, S. Ossetia, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17591&search=Russia%20Abkhazia%20ties>
- <sup>27</sup> Sergej Lavrov, Face to Face with America: Between Non-confrontation and Convergence, Journal „Profil“, no. 38, October 2008, available in Russian at: [http://www.mid.ru/Brp\\_4.nsf/arh/B3C8684DEA14B242C32574E1002FD07B?OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/B3C8684DEA14B242C32574E1002FD07B?OpenDocument)
- <sup>28</sup> The daily Kurir, 21. October 2009, Close-knit Brothers, <http://kurir-info.rs/clanak/politika/kurir-21-10-2009/slozabraca>
- <sup>29</sup> Žarko Petrović, Russian-Serbian Strategic Partnership: Content and Reach, available at: <http://www.isac-fund.org/lat/publishing.php>