



# ENC ANALYSIS

## **Russia and Serbia: Between Brotherhood and Self-Servings Agendas**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Branislav Radeljić** is Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of East London, with expertise in European Union, East European and Western Balkan politics. He has held visiting fellowships at the London School of Economics and Political Science, University of California at Berkeley, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Michigan and University of Pittsburgh.

He is the author of *Europe and the Collapse of Yugoslavia: The Role of Non-State Actors and European Diplomacy* (2012), editor of *Europe and the post-Yugoslav Space* (2013), *Debating European Identity: Bright Ideas, Dim Prospects* (2014) and *European Community-Yugoslav Relations: Debates and Documents that Mattered (1968–1992)* (2017), and co-editor of *Religion in the post-Yugoslav Context* (2015) and *Kosovo and Serbia: Contested Options and Shared Consequences* (2016).

Professor Radeljić has presented his research findings at numerous conferences and workshops, and has regularly been invited to give talks and provide commentary to different media outlets. Outside academia, on an occasional basis, he conducts research and supplies consultancy services within his area of expertise.

## Summary

Since the early 1990s, Russia's standpoint towards the Balkans and Kosovo in particular has largely reflected Serbia's position. However, while it opposes external interventions and insists on the principle of territorial integrity in the case of Serbia, Moscow has been primarily concerned with strengthening of its own position in European affairs and from this point of view, the Kosovo question has perfectly served such an ambition.

## **Russia and Serbia: Between Brotherhood and Self-Servings Agendas**

In recent decades, the Balkan region has represented an excellent opportunity for Russia's external engagement with and reassertion of its relevance in post-Cold War Eastern Europe, with Moscow's influence over the former Warsaw Pact states having been diminished due to their accession to NATO and the European Union. During the Yugoslav drama of the immediate post-Cold War years, Russian representatives attended the ceremony proclaiming the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, offering their support to this new state established by Serbia and Montenegro in 1992. Later, during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia was a member of the Contact Group, formed in 1994 to deal with the war, and while it kept condemning the fighting, it also opposed its Western colleagues who were determined to use force against the Serbs. This was not an easy task, especially when it became clear that many of the acts of violence were being orchestrated by the regime of Slobodan Milošević. Towards the end of the 1990s, during the escalation of the Kosovo crisis and consequent NATO intervention, Russia insisted that the Kosovo question be approached as a Serbian internal issue, leaving Serbian sovereignty intact, in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 1160, adopted in March 1998.

Following the Kremlin's inability to prevent the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, with some perceiving it as a direct insult to its efforts (a view shared by numerous Russian and Serbian officials at the time), Kosovo and the wider Balkan region came to be ranked high on Russia's foreign policy agenda. Even after the war came to an end and the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 had been adopted, Russia's mistrust about the West's response to Kosovo continued. The Russian Federation was welcomed to take part in KFOR [NATO-led Kosovo Force] within the framework of the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security; however, Moscow considered that this only provided Russia with scope for a rather limited presence as compared to NATO. This inferiority complex triggered the decision in Moscow to send troops to Priština international airport, occupying it before the arrival of the previously authorized NATO troops. Despite its peaceful outcome, this incident confirmed the Russian leadership's concerns about the future position of the Serbian population in Kosovo under the foreign supervision, but even more importantly, the Kremlin's concerns with its own reputation at home and within the international system.

In contrast to the West, which was concerned with the still-in-power Milošević regime, but also expected that it would need to come up with a common position regarding the status of Kosovo, Moscow stuck to its previously adopted standpoint – simply put, the West made a terrible mistake in the case of Kosovo. Putin, soon after being elected President of Russia in March 2000, approved an official Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which among other interests and priorities, stipulated that Russia was in favor of a just settlement in the Balkans and the preservation of territorial integrity, and not Kosovo's independence. In Serbia, following the overthrow of Milošević, the country's new president Vojislav Koštunica, expressed appreciation for the Russian approach; during his own visit to Moscow in late October, Koštunica welcomed Russia's interest in the region, stating that its presence was necessary for a greater balance of European, Russian and US forces. In return, some

months later, Putin visited Belgrade, reconfirming Russia's support for Serbia's territorial integrity. And again, while the international community was struggling to identify a durable solution for Kosovo and the region – be it in the form of the failed 2003 “standards before status” approach, requiring Kosovo to properly democratize, or the failed 2005–2007 Vienna talks, when it became obvious that none of the two conflicting parties were ready to compromise – the Russians seemed the most relaxed of the other counterparties. They believed that the promoted policy of Kosovan independence contradicted the sections of UNSC Resolution 1244 that related to Serbian territorial sovereignty, making the talk of status pointless. Moreover, the Russian authorities insisted that the decision on Kosovo should be of a universal character and that the portrayal of the Kosovo as a unique case was yet another attempt by the West to circumvent international law – an approach confirming the existence of inconsistencies or double standards within the international community. Even when Moscow joined the Contact Group on Kosovo, together with Brussels and Washington, aimed at furthering the negotiations on the future status of Kosovo and seeking to achieve a mutually acceptable solution, the Russian side still insisted on the preservation of Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

When the Kosovo Albanian leadership adopted a resolution, proclaiming independence from the Republic of Serbia in February 2008, the position of Russia was once again in stark contrast to the one adopted by the dominant Western powers, who rushed to recognize the new state. For example, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that, in addition to violating Serbian sovereignty, the Kosovan authorities ignored the UN Charter, Resolution 1244, the Helsinki Final Act, and so on. Putin characterized the act as a terrible precedent with unavoidable consequences for the international system, and soon-to-be President, Dmitry Medvedev proclaimed that what Iraq was to the United States, Kosovo was to the EU. Understandably, the Serbs welcomed the Russian approach, which went even further in mid-April 2009, when the Russian state submitted a long statement to the International Court of Justice, outlining its arguments as to why Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence was not in accordance with international law. In fact, the support continued, becoming the highlight of official visits and diplomatic exchanges between Belgrade and Moscow. On different occasions, Medvedev and the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandr Konuzin tried to assure the Serbs that the painful Kosovo problem was also in the hearts of all Russians. And, when Putin visited Serbia in March 2011, in addition to confirming Russia's willingness to support its southern Slavic brothers in the energy and financial spheres, he also stressed that Russia would support Serbia's Kosovo policy.

By this point, it had already become clear that too many official disagreements surrounded the Kosovo question. Both the Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians only put forward a plan A as an option, meaning that one side would exit as an absolute winner and the other as an absolute loser. The international community played an important role in the formation of both sides uncompromising approach, due to the obvious differences between its actors. In contrast to 1992, when both the then European Community and all twelve of its members recognized Slovenia and Croatia as independent states, the situation was more complicated two decades later, leaving Kosovo in a truly unfavourable position. The EU was not united

around the Kosovo settlement (since five of its member states – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain – had refused to recognize Kosovo's independence), meaning that both the Kosovo Albanian and Serbian leaderships expected even greater support from individual players with a clear-cut position, namely the US and Russia. The prospects for interdependence and partnership between Belgrade and Moscow grew further in 2012, when Tomislav Nikolić, the founder and first president of the Serbian Progressive Party (a party formed in 2008 by Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, the former Deputy President and General Secretary, respectively, of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party) entered the Serbian political scene as the new President. Putin congratulated him, inviting friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation between the two states, and Nikolić chose Moscow for his first visit abroad. Although it was said to be an informal meeting, this visit opened numerous questions about the politics of alternatives and new opportunities, and whether the new Serbian leadership, contrary to their electoral campaign, was going to minimize its links with the West and move more towards the East. Indeed, Nikolić made clear in Moscow that the only thing he loved more than Russia was Serbia and announced that Serbia would never join NATO.

As would be expected, the Russian military intervention in Ukraine and the consequent annexation of Crimea in March 2014 encouraged all sorts of questions about the similarities between the cases of Kosovo and Crimea, and the contradictions and inconsistencies characterizing Russia's approach towards the notion of territorial integrity were widely commented upon. Putin was heavily criticized by numerous Western officials, whose views he tried to discredit by calling them cynical and beyond double standards. However, the Crimean question has revealed that Russia was ready to pursue its own geopolitical interest by assisting Ukraine's disintegration. Following the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, the Serbian leadership did not side with the EU's decision to introduce sanctions against Moscow, but has adopted a neutral position. This represents an attempt to show respect towards Russia, but is also a position that is acceptable for Brussels, so that Serbia's integration with the European Union would not be compromised. Still, the presence of Serbian volunteers supporting pro-Russian forces in Crimea – support that is inspired by their shared Orthodox faith, Russia's advocacy in the case of Kosovo and, more generally, anti-Western views – encouraged more debate about how Belgrade manages this balancing aspect between Moscow and Brussels, and thus about Serbia's overall direction. When Putin visited Belgrade in October, numerous words of mutual appreciation were exchanged, with claims that Russia and Serbia see each other as their closest ally. Indeed, whenever the two sides have interacted either in Belgrade or Moscow, the message has been the same, with Russia promising to back Serbia's claim to Kosovo.

The trajectory of the Russian–Serbian relationship outlined above has been further strengthened by the two countries' mutually supportive political regimes. They both oversee a privatization of the state, a process facilitated by mounting corruption and state-generated propaganda. While using every opportunity to stress that they are working in the best interests of their respective peoples, so that many members of the public will continue to express their admiration for the ruling elite. The two regimes have sought to maximize their

power even if this has implied widespread fearmongering, through threats, prosecution and the total exclusion of critics. Accordingly, issues around freedom, democratic change and societal transformation, bear no relevance on Russian-Serbian relations. Although it is understandable that the EU cannot do much about the highly problematic semi-authoritarian aspects of the Russian regime, it does come as a surprise that such practices have been tolerated in the Balkans. In fact, more and more voices have argued that the rise of President Vučić has, in fact, weakened the support for the EU in Serbia, because it has revealed the EU's hypocrisy towards its core principles and values, such as the rule of law and human rights. Many from the intellectual elite, who have firmly advocated for EU accession in the past, are now disenchanted with the EU's lack of reaction to Vučić's alleged undermining of democratic principles. Vučić and his closest associates are known for sending out mixed messages. On the one hand, they have declaratively supported EU values, pledged their support for EU accession and so on. Whilst, on the other hand, the slightest external criticism from the EU has resulted in a narrative that the West wants to overthrow Vučić, that big powers are working against Serbia and that Russia makes for a more honest and reliable friend.

Finally, the continuous support from Russia has also provided the Serbian authorities with greater bargaining power and capacity to balance its relations with Moscow and Brussels, so that they can secure economic and political benefits from both sides (as a part of the EU membership negotiation process and by good access to Russia's natural resources). In return, Moscow's policy of amity and cooperation with Belgrade has not only served the position of Serbian official policy within the international community, it has also served the interests of the Russian leadership, which has gained greater presence in and relevance vis-à-vis the growing uncertainties characterizing the EU's policies and the overall European integrationist project. The obvious fatigue faced by the Brussels administration in relation to the messy case of Kosovo (due to the ever-popular secessionist debates within some of its member states, even though they did not object to the previous NATO action, such as Spain) represents an additional incentive for the Russian leadership to insist on the rightness of its own uncompromising view and thus to reinforce its place in European affairs.

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