



RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN KOSOVO: HOW AND WHY?



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ACRONYMS

EU	European Union
ICJ	International Court of Justice
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIS	Naftna Industrija Srbije
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
TAP	Trans Adriatic Pipeline
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNMIK	United Nations Mission in Kosovo

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kosovo is exposed to a genuine and formidable Russian meddling campaign against Western state-building model and its democratic values, in particular since 2008. Numerous subversive and non-military instruments will continue to be used against a multiethnic Kosovo in order to create a pretext for a failed-state and heighten local separatism within the Kosovo Serb community in northern municipalities. It is difficult to critically assess Russian influence in Kosovo on empirical terms due to a critical deficiency of data on both economic or financial engagement, as well as a lack of information on local and religious institutions in Northern Kosovo. The lack of proper financial control of Kosovo's institutions in the Serbian Orthodox Church creates opportunities for a disruptive agenda and a subsequent misuse of this vacuum in the interests of Russian engagement and strengthening of their potential influence in Kosovo.

- Russian continues interest in the development of Kosovo and its engagement in diplomatic and military policy has been a decade long priority for its foreign policy goals in the Balkans, as indicated by Putin's visit to the Russian Military Contingent in Kosovo on 17 June, 2001.
- Russia continues to pose a serious challenge for Kosovo's statehood and undermines the integration of Kosovo in the international community, and remains interested in maintaining a status-quo in Kosovo's domestic affairs.
- Since 2014, Kosovo's Sanction Policy on Russia has not been regularly updated and is not based on full alignment with US and EU Foreign Policy. Consequently, it has not proved sufficiently effective, as Russian economic proxies in Serbia and the region, primarily including petroleum products, continue to freely operate in the Kosovo market. Despite entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement, the EU is not ensuring equal treatment for Kosovo as with the rest of the Western Balkan countries when it comes to EU joint foreign policy statements and common positions towards Russia.
- During January-July 2017, the level of Russian goods imported in Kosovo exceeded 10 million Euros, whereas Kosovo's export figures remain zero. This negative asymmetry is also evidenced in terms of citizen mobility. More than 1000 Russian citizens visit Kosovo every year, while Kosovo citizens cannot travel to Russia due to immediate passport rejection.
- It is a paradox that Visa Policy of Kosovo considers the holders of Russian diplomatic and service passports under the Special Category exempted from Visa Requirements. The respective holders are allowed to enter, transit or stay up to 15 days in the territory of Kosovo.

- While the number of Russian citizens visiting Kosovo increases, Russia's current role in Kosovo is best indicated by the context of northern Kosovo. Ties between political parties from Serbian community and the political party United Russia - are consistently developing, whereas the creation of the Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities might present new terrain for a stronger Russian engagement to foster local nationalism in Kosovo. The religious factor presents an important element for Russian influence in Kosovo through the Serbian Orthodox Church. With political support given to religious institutions, Russia seeks to preserve and enhance a strong emotional presence among the Serbian community in Kosovo.
- A pro-Russian media presence in Serbia is an important card in spreading pro-Russian propaganda among Kosovo Serbs. Fake news is fabricated through different Russian media outlets including Sputnik and Russia Today.
- Serbia's neutral position towards NATO membership, along with negative public perception for the Western military alliance, remains a serious concern for the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the Western Balkans. The enigmatic operation of the so-called Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center based in the city of Nis since 2011, alongside the increasing military drills and investments between both countries, should be considered as a long-term security threat not only for Kosovo but also for neighboring countries.
- Kosovo's central institutions are not properly equipped to prevent Russian hybrid penetration through economic and political means aiming to influence its politics and policies in Kosovo, nor is there sufficient awareness of Russian interests in the region. Kosovo has no consistent strategy how to address its uneasy diplomatic relationship with Russia, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

METHODOLOGY

This report has been prepared by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) with the aim of providing a holistic analysis of an important issue for Kosovo: the Russian presence and its impact at both the bilateral and multilateral level. The lack of research on security, economic and diplomatic implications that derive from the emergence of the Russian influence hinders a critical understanding of the state-building process and the complex international position of Kosovo. This report is oriented towards developing a map of evidence and challenges to the political system of Kosovo, and proceeds with a chronological historical analysis as a means to identify what has shaped critical international decisions towards Kosovo and beyond. It also generates exclusive insights through a deconstruction of the Foreign Policy intentions of Russia.

In drafting this report, the author carried out desk research, literature review and conducted electronic communication with stakeholders based in key central institutions, including representatives from the Kosovo Police, Customs, Kosovo Agency of Statistics and Government Officials. It is worth stressing that lack of official data, as well as the sensitivity to explore confidential information has critically challenged this research. For this reason, the KCSS has conducted anonymous interviews with two senior officials.

INTRODUCTION

“The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including its role as a major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries.”

Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2013¹

With a permanent veto power in the United Nations Security Council and historical interests in the Balkans, Russia is an important player in Kosovo’s goal to finalize formal international recognition. Russia has a close, traditional friendship with Serbia and has consistently pursued an aggressive policy against Kosovo’s 2008 Declaration of Independence. Russia’s approach to Kosovo aligns with its broader interests in the region, such as maintaining political and economic influence in the Balkans, as well as by opposing the integration of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union (EU) and NATO. With a strong emotional attachment between Russia and Serbia, Russia has developed an attitude of a “protégé of the little brother”. Essentially, the interest of Russia’s foreign policy is preoccupied at restoring the geopolitical power of the former USSR and advancing Russia towards Greater Power status.

Being active on the Kosovo issue since the 1990’s, Russia is well represented in Kosovo through its Liaison Diplomatic Office in Pristina (accredited under United Nations Mission in Kosovo framework) – as a branch of the Russian Embassy in Belgrade, Serbia. Although this quasi embassy, operating outside the formal accreditation framework of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, would have been a good opportunity to channel the demands and positive signals to improve the relationship with Moscow, during last nine years of post-independence period this has not been the case. In addition, economic interests have a defining role in the complex formulation of Russian foreign policy in the Balkans. Evidently, in the Zagreb Summit (2007), Putin laid down the Russian interests in the energy sector in the Balkans and intentions to expand the Russian gas network to Kosovo, Albania and Southern Serbia through Macedonia.² Such interest for economic engagement by Russia in Kosovo was ignored at a time when Kosovo was on the cusp of declaring independence.

Simultaneously, the US and EU have launched a series of policies intended to reduce Russian influence in Europe by opening up new opportunities and challenges for Kosovo’s foreign policy. While the occupation of Abkhazia and Ossetia during 2008 marked a sensational and systemic example of the geo-politics of Russia against the post-Cold war international order, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has not only changed Russian policy towards continental Europe and the EU, but also towards the Balkan.

1 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2013). Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian. Retrieved from Federation http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186

2 President of the Russian Federation. (2007). Speech at the Balkan Energy Cooperation Summit. Retrieved from <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24368>

Putin has consistently compared Kosovo to Crimea whereas the latter has used ICJ opinion to seek the legitimization of annexation of the peninsula.³ Kosovo's Government has fiercely opposed such statements and comparisons, and it has strived to argue that its case is *sui generis*,⁴ but the Russian comparison with frozen conflicts in former Soviet territories, including Moldova, has an impact on many countries, including the EU five member states that still do not recognize Kosovo.

In a time when Kosovo aims to start an upgraded dialogue with Serbia under the same Brussels-led auspices that could eventually regulate Kosovo's relationship with the United Nations, it is not realistic to expect that, in the short-term, Russia would agree and support the process to allow Kosovo's admission as a full member state at the United Nations (UN). Most likely, Kosovo's admission in the UN is an issue that will eventually fall onto the agenda of Russia and the Western countries in the UN Security Council, rather than by finding a resolution through the EU facilitated dialogue with Belgrade.

Simultaneously, Russia uses its proclaimed interests and hybrid proxies to manipulate and coincide with Serbia's, in order to address internationally its expansionist aspirations. Russia fears that any new deal between Kosovo and Serbia could fasten the membership of Serbia to the EU and eventually bring Serbia into a closer relationship with NATO.

From such a viewpoint it can be expected that Russia will not easily give up its veto power on Kosovo's potential membership in the UN or its opposition in the UN-related agencies, unless its more recent geo-political interests are taken into consideration or even legitimized by the West.

It is worth stressing that the Russian policy on Kosovo has primarily been influenced by historical engagement in the Balkans, the geopolitical changes in Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain, and to an extent by the Russian economic interests in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

3 [ДЕКЛАРАЦИЯ о независимости Автономной Республики Крым и города Севастополя](http://www.rada.crimea.ua/app/2988) (in Russian). [Supreme Council of Crimea](http://www.rada.crimea.ua/app/2988). March 11, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.rada.crimea.ua/app/2988> Archived from the original on March 12, 2014.

4 According to the EU Council Conclusions adopted on 18 February 2008, "the Council reiterates the EU's adherence to the principles of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, inter alia the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and all UN Security Council resolutions. It underlines its conviction that in view of the conflict of the 1990s and the extended period of international administration under SCR 1244, Kosovo constitutes a *sui generis* case which does not call into question these principles and resolutions." Retrieved from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/98818.pdf

CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE BALKANS

Due to long term historical and religious interests, Russia has had a presence in the Balkans since the 18th century. Traditionally, from the Russian Empire until the fall of Communism in Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Balkans represented a critical arena for Russian foreign policy. There was a clear demise of Russian power after the breakup of the Soviet Union, but for Moscow's policymakers Russia was still an important player in Europe, a role that could be preserved only through the support to its traditional allies such as Yugoslavia. In Russian political thinking support to smaller Slav orthodox nations such as Serbia remains a deeply held conviction.

With Russian support, Serbia gained its independence in 1878, also standing on the same side as Russia during two World Wars, with Russia entered the war with Austro-Hungary and Germany in support of Serbia.⁵ The role of great power and the cultural and religious links to some of the nations in the Balkans remained a key tenet in Russian foreign policy engagement in the Balkans.

Russia expended its dominance during the Ottoman Empire to reinforce the orthodox minorities in the Balkans and ensure their rights were properly recognized and guaranteed by the Ottomans, while supporting national movements for independence in Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro, showed serious commitment by the Russian big brother.⁶ The support for Slav Orthodoxy in the Balkans was a genuine expression of ideological and religious belief in Moscow. The latter saw itself as a leader of the Orthodox world, and by maintaining a political dominance of the Slav Orthodox countries in the Balkans Russia found an opportunity to hold influence over the mainland European.⁷

The end of the Cold war brought the fall of the Soviet Union and the violent dissolution of Tito's Yugoslavia. This renewed Russian interests in Balkans based on religious and cultural ties to the Orthodox Slav nations; mainly Yugoslavia dominated by Serbia. The last Soviet Government shared the Western desire to maintain the unity of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as an essential element for keeping stability in the Balkans and guaranteeing peace in Europe.⁸ The brutal wars in Yugoslavia had less influence in Russia than in the West.

5 Stevenson, D. (1988). *The First World War and international politics*. Oxford: University Press. pp.12

6 Headley, J. (2008). *Russia and the Balkans-Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin*. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd. pp. 15

7 Savin, L. (2017). *Russia's Geopolitical Interests in the Balkans*. Geopolitica. Retrieved from <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/russias-geopolitical-interests-balkans>

8 Headley, J. (2008). *Russia and the Balkans-Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin*. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd. pp. 70

Trade between Russia and Yugoslavia was low compared to that of Western countries, with refugees mostly migrating to the West. The impact, however was more a strategic and geopolitical consideration rather than concrete economic loss. Russia recognized Slovenia and Croatia in February 1992 immediately after the recognition by European nations, with Moscow considering it as a foreign policy tool to prevent a break-up of the war.⁹

With Russian support the UN Security Council adopted on 19th September 1992 Resolution 777 which considered the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) not as a successor State of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia in the UN, but that it should apply for UN membership as a newly established country along with other post-Yugoslav countries.¹⁰

In 1991, Russia supported Western efforts to place weapons and military embargo on Yugoslavia and UN resolution 757 on 30 May 1992 to impose sanctions on Yugoslavia after it failed to comply with international obligations in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹¹

The support for those resolutions by Moscow was motivated by the Russian goal to use international organizations such as the United Nations and the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (latter Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), where Russia was a key player to engage in the Yugoslav crisis, rather than Western institutions such as NATO and the EC/EU where it had role.

However, the Russian Federation seemed divided over its policy in Bosnia. The Duma and the Ministry of Defense echoed a hard-liner policy, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to pursue a joint endeavor with the West. Evidently, the Kremlin found it difficult to reconcile differences between the liberals and the hardliners, often siding with the Duma and criticizing the ineffectiveness of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and their Yugoslav policy.¹²

Russian international efforts to find a solution to the Yugoslav wars declined due to the growing voice of hard-liners and nationalist factions in Kremlin. Russian interest was to remain engaged in the international efforts in Yugoslavia, but at the same time maintaining support its traditional ally Serbia. Due to the re-emergence of the religious and cultural

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia. (2017). 25 years of Slovenia's international recognition. Retrieved from www.mzz.gov.si/en/newsroom/news/archive/2017/1/select/sporocilo_za_javnost/article/141/37946/

10 United Nations Security Council. (1992). Resolution 777. S/RES/777 September 16, 1992. New York: The United Nations.

11 United Nations Security Council. (1992). Resolution 757. S/RES/757 May 30, 1992. New York: The United Nations.

12 Headley, J. (2008). Russia and the Balkans-Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd. pp. 237

variable in Russian foreign policy, and of some economic interest in arms sales, the privatization of state owned companies (energy, communication and heavy industry) and supply routes of natural gas, Russia opposed the intervention of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later Kosovo.¹³

A linkage of the Balkans with Central Asia and the Caucasus fed the idea of a regional rivalry for influence with Turkey on religious grounds, and with Germany and the West in the Balkans, with their policy towards Serbia a source of resentment. A third and important rivalry perceived by Russia in the Balkans and Eastern Europe was with the United States and NATO's Open Door Policy. This might risk the decrease of the sphere of influence of Russia in the Balkans, with countries including Serbia who were hostile towards NATO seen by Moscow as an important instrument to decline and deter the potential expansion of NATO.

13 Ibid, pp. 55

THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH FACTOR

Traditionally, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in foreign policy-making in Russia played an important role in shaping Moscow's engagements and its relations with the West over the Balkans. The church pushed the Government and hard-liners in the Duma to maintain a pro-Yugoslav policy and supporting the Serbian Orthodox people in Serbia and in the war-torn Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Even during the communist rule in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, both countries attempted to use the religious ties between both societies to open a new chapter in their relationship. In 1972, a meeting between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was organized with the agreement of both governments, and in the same year the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, Pimen, visited Belgrade.¹⁴ Return visits were also carried out by the SOC to the Soviet Union, but the SOC was not completely trusted by the communist Government in Belgrade due to the influence it had over Serbian nationalist, seen as a threat to the multi-national nature of Tito's Yugoslavia.

Partriach Pimen travelled again Yugoslavia in 1984 where he visited mostly the Serb Orthodox Monasteries in Kosovo at a time of strained inter-ethnic relations between the Albanians and Serbs due to the intervention of the federal police and military against the 1981 student unrests in Kosovo.¹⁵

The ROC and SOC cooperated more often in activities that promoted the revival of the Orthodox Church in the former Communist countries and in promoting the political agendas of the Russian and Serbian government. The Patriarch of Serbia, Pavle, addressed a letter to all Orthodox churches seeking the protection of Serbs in Croatia from "Fascist Croatians", which according to him were aiming for the destruction of the Serbian orthodox people in their homeland.¹⁶

Both Patriarchates called a conference of all Orthodox Churches in Istanbul in January 1991 aiming to re-establish the ties between the Orthodox Churches, and calling on the Soviet leadership to assist the Slav Orthodox in Yugoslavia in line with the tradition of Russian Orthodox tsars.¹⁷ That conference did not include the support on the SOC with regards to "Croatian aggression", but that did not prevent the SOC to seek ties with the ROC and Greek Orthodox Church and maintain an anti-western attitude as its key political position inside Serbia and abroad.

14 Perica, V. (2002). *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 53

15 *Ibid.* pp. 159

16 *Ibid.* pp. 159

17 *Ibid.* pp. 160

The SOC continued to endorse the wars against Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and opposed the Dayton Peace accord as a betrayal to Serbian homeland.¹⁸ Through the influence of the SOC and the Orthodox Churches of Greece, Russia honored Radovan Karadzic, former politician and convicted war criminal by the UN Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, with the highest church decorations for the protection of the Orthodox religion in the Serbian homeland.¹⁹ Such radical steps by SOC during the wars in Yugoslavia had encouraged a moral legitimacy and public support to the Pan-Serbian expansionist policies of Milosevic and other Serbian nationalist leaders. The SOC proved to be an important element in maintaining public support for the other conflicts that emerged in Yugoslavia.

The Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow who rebuilt the role of the Orthodox Church in Russia after decades of oppression by the Soviets, visited Serbia, Croatia and Kosovo before 1999 to show support of the ROC to Yugoslavia.

In April 1999 undertook a similar visit to Belgrade to show his solidarity with the Serbian people during the NATO Air campaign against Milosevic's regime.²⁰ During his visit to Belgrade, Patriarch Alexy II met the Kosovo Albanian Leader Ibrahim Rugova, who was being transferred from Prishtina to Belgrade by the Serbian authorities.²¹

The domestic effect of the ROC was a key pillar of influence in the decline of the weight of the liberals in the Russian Government, mainly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was seen as too accommodating to the West on Yugoslavia and therefore a betrayal to the Slavic Orthodox nations in the Balkans. The ROC is a source of authority of ultra-conservatism, anti-liberalism and anti-Western elements in Russia and of the traditionalist/conservative tendency of the society.

Specifically, although the religious factor has been undermined in the policy of Russia towards Kosovo, in practical terms it has been influenced by ROC. The mission of the ROC in Kosovo is to support the efforts of the SOC to preserve the spiritual heritage of Orthodoxy in Kosovo. For this reason, Russia has been actively supporting the SOC in Kosovo. Through a Presidential decree, Russia donated 2 million USD to UNESCO to finance the restoration of four Serb Orthodox shrines, which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage list - the monastery of the Serbian Patriarchate in Peja, monasteries in Deçan and Graçanica and the church of the Mother of God in Prizren.²² Russia also offered UNES-

18 Hedges, Ch. (1997). In Nationalist Doves, Serbs Flock to Renew Faith With Their Orthodox Church. The New York Times. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/1997/03/16/world/in-nationalist-doves-serbs-flock-to-renew-faith-with-their-orthodox-church.html?mcubz=1

19 Perica, V. (2002). *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 174

20 United Press International. (1999). Russian patriarch to visit Belgrade. United Press International. Retrieved from www.upi.com/Archives/1999/04/15/Russian-patriarch-to-visit-Belgrade/8917924148800/

21 Zolotov J., A. (1999). President's Men Show New Kosovo Policy. The Moscow Times. Retrieved from old.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/1999/4/article/presidents-men-show-new-kosovo-policy/278084.html/

22 Serbian Orthodox Church. (2010). Russia to help saving historical shrines in Kosovo. Serbian Orthodox Church. Retrieved from www.spc.rs/eng/russia_help_saving_historical_shrines_kosovo

CO expertise and engineers to finalize the work. The Russian Orthodox Church has also expressed a willingness to send to Kosovo Russian Monks that would support the SOC activities in Kosovo.²³

Since February 2012 with the direct initiative of the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Kirill I, Churches in Russia have raised funds for assisting the SOC financially in Kosovo.²⁴ According to a senior Kosovo government official,²⁵ the SOC is a religious institution that refused for many years to undertake a financial audit according to Kosovo's laws,²⁶ consequently ensuring that there is a lack of information on who are the main donors of the SOC and how far Russian financial influence is behind the claims of this important religious institution in Kosovo.

On the other side, Russia's fierce opposition to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO during 2015 was motivated by religious arguments, aside from the political argument that such a membership would be the first within a UN Specialized Agency by Kosovo as an independent state. The ROC had addressed a letter to President Putin urging him to prevent Kosovo's membership in UNESCO. The ROC has established a "Monitoring Center for Violations of the Rights and Freedoms of Orthodox Christians in Europe" in which Kosovo is often mentioned and the report of 2015 was distributed to many within the Permanent Delegation in UNESCO in opposition to Kosovo's bid for membership in UNESCO.²⁷ Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate has made clear the opposing position of the ROC to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO, viewing a potential membership as a transfer of the SOC monuments in Kosovo to those that destroyed them. In his view Kosovar membership in UNESCO would be a "total threat to the Orthodox shrines".²⁸

The extreme polarization of UNESCO's bid by the ROC and SOC has created an unprecedented campaign against the Government of Kosovo and an attempt to preserve the monopoly of a 'historical and mythological story on Kosovo'.

23 Novinite. (2012). Russian Church Prepared to Send Monk Envoys to Kosovo. Novinite-Sofia News Agency. Retrieved from www.novinite.com/articles/138898/Russian+Church+Prepared+to+Send+Monk+Envoys+to+Kosovo

24 Russkiy Mir. (2013). Russian Church Supports Serbian Church's Stance on Kosovo. Retrieved from <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/132770/>

25 Anonymous Interview with a Senior Government Representative, date 15 August 2017, Prishtina.

26 The draft-law on Amendment and Supplementation of Law No.02/L-31 on Freedom of Religion in Kosovo is still under parliamentary scrutiny, while there is no agreement by all religious communities as per numerous open issues, retrieved from: <http://www.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/ligjet/05-L-121.pdf>

27 Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe. (2015). Annual Report-Violations of the Rights of Orthodox Christians in Europe in 2015. Retrieved from www.orthodoxrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/annual_report_2015.pdf

28 Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia. (2016). Interview of the Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian Orthodox Church, retrieved from www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4349485.html

RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARDS KOSOVO

Russian policy towards Kosovo since the break-up of Yugoslavia has been shaped by its wider policy in the Balkans, the relationship with Belgrade and negative sentiments towards the West. Russia has been opposed to the demands of Kosovars for independence following the former Republics of the Yugoslav Federation, with its key goal maintaining the unity of the remaining Yugoslavia and finding a solution that would accommodate the Albanians under this federation. This policy was in a contradiction to the aims of Kosovo Albanians. After the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo and the installment of the UN administration, Russia did not pay much attention to the developments in Kosovo until the publication of the Kai Eide report in October 2005 which urged the international community to start talks on Kosovo's political status.

Before that period, President Vladimir Putin had unexpectedly visited Russian troops at the Airport of Pristina in June 2001 and met with international political and military heads of missions, ignoring the Kosovo Albanian representatives.²⁹ The visit of Putin in its official capacity as the President of the Russian Federation in Kosovo is often underestimated, but the statements he made have presented a core part of Russian policy towards Kosovo.

First, he outlined respect for Resolution 1244 as a crucial element for ensuring a firm Russian position in the region. Second, he confirmed that without the Russian role the Balkan Peninsula couldn't become a peaceful and stable region. Third, he promoted the already known policy of Russian objection to the Kosovo Albanian will for self-governance and later independence³⁰- a policy which remains consistent even after 16 years.

In 2005, the Western countries and Russia approved as part of the Contact Group a set of principles on how Kosovo's status should be addressed, including that the "settlement of Kosovo status will ensure that Kosovo does not return to the preMarch 1999 situation".³¹ The geostrategic challenge facing Kosovo status talks was that US-Russian relations were poor. The American Administration planned to install a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic that stirred opposition in Moscow, who considered it an immediate threat. The Russians had appointed their Balkans expert Alexander Botsan Kharchenko as Special Envoy throughout the negotiating process, with the Russian career diplomat Petar Ivancov would become the Political Director of United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for the Future Status Process for Kosovo. Before the talks

29 The New York Times. (2001). Putin Makes Surprise Visit to Kosovo. The New York Times. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2001/06/17/world/putin-makes-surprise-visit-to-kosovo.html

30 Kremlin. (2001). Speech to the Russian Military Contingent of the International Peace-Keeping Force in Kosovo. President of the Russian Federation. www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21267

31 The Contact Group. (2005). Guiding principles of the Contact Group for a Settlement of the Status of Kosovo. The Contact Group. Retrieved from www.esiweb.org/pdf/kosovo_Contact%20Group%20-%20Ten%20Guiding%20principles%20for%20Ahtisaari.pdf

started, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Kosovo in November 2005 and met with its political leaders and opened the Chancery of the Russian Embassy in Pristina as a branch of the Russian Embassy in Belgrade.³²

Kosovo had before the declaration of independence made few attempts to build direct contacts with Russia, with the only high-level visit from the former Prime Minister of Kosovo, Agim Çeku, in Moscow to discuss the final status of Kosovo with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov, who remains a key player in formulating Russian foreign policy in Europe.³³

Although the western-centric policy by Kosovo's leaders was viewed in Kosovo as strategically correct, tactically Kosovo was not prepared to face international challenges across the world due to a lack of contacts and diplomatic experience with other countries, including Russia. The Russian officials considered the Ahtisaari Proposal as a means for further discussion between the sides, and not as a final solution to Kosovo political status.³⁴ Its principal position was straightforward: Russia insisted on continuing talks, without supporting Kosovo claims for independence, unless it was agreed with Serbia. Their dual interest was to preserve the unity of Serbia and Montenegro on one side, as well as extend the status-quo of Kosovo for a longer period – aiming to enforce another frozen conflict in the Western Balkans.

On 17th February 2008 Kosovo declared its independence, whereas Russia objected bilaterally and in all multilateral institutions, calling on the same day for an urgent session in the UN Security Council.

The difference between the West and Russia on Kosovo was that the supporters of Kosovo's independence viewed Kosovo as a European issue, while Russia as an international dispute that must be resolved through the UN. Russia had no interest in allowing Kosovo's final status be resolved through any multilateral mechanisms where it is not a member and it has no leverage on outcome of the process.

32 The People Daily. (2005). Russia opens liaison office in Kosovo. The People Daily. Retrieved from <https://archive.li/9hgoD#selection-719.0-726.0> as well as the statement by the MFA of Russia, retrieved from http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/visits/-/asset_publisher/EN163PfuF6Qy/content/id/421668

33 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2006). Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Titov Meets with Agim Ceku, Head of the Executive Branch of Kosovo's Provisional Institutions of Self-Government. Retrieved from www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/386380

34 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2006). Transcript of Remarks by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Following Meeting with Martti Ahtisaari, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Kosovo Status Talks, New York, September 20, 2006. Retrieved from www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/392656

RUSSIA AND POST INDEPENDENCE KOSOVO

Russian policy towards Kosovo, after 17th February 2008, faced its most difficult period since the early 90's. Russia was no longer involved in Kosovo and the only instruments it had was through international organizations where it was a key player or with countries where it could influence the non-recognition of Kosovo. Russia's goal was to obstruct an independent Kosovo and prevent its membership in international organizations and its diplomatic recognition by UN member states. Russia succeeded to install a status neutral position at the UN and some of its specialized agencies, at the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) in Europe and the Council of Europe. With robust Russian support and diplomatic investment, Serbia achieved its goal to get a UN General Assembly Resolution, seeking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the legality of Kosovo's declaration of independence.³⁵

The Russian and Serbian goal was to slow the pace of Kosovo's international recognition and pressure Kosovo and the West to return to a dialogue on its 'final' status. In 2010, this move revealed itself to be counter-productive to the objectives of Serbia, with the ICJ ruling that the declaration of independence by Kosovo was in accordance with international law.

In contradiction to the Russian position on Kosovo, Russia would later take advantage of this ruling as evidenced during the annexation of Crimea. With the signing of the April 19th Agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, Russia acknowledged the 2013 local elections in Kosovo and supported the results of the dialogue by clarifying that the stability of the Balkans is in Russia's interest.³⁶ However, this approach has been in contradiction to its continued objection to maintain even informal relations with Kosovo, as some other non-recognizing countries do.

Russia attempted during the war against Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in August 2008, to name the case of 'Kosovo's Precedent' by recognition of the two Georgian breakaway regions that have not yet expanded their recognition except from Russia, Venezuela and Nicaragua.³⁷ The case of Georgia showed that Russia attempted to use Kosovo's independence for its foreign policy interests in the former Soviet area, using the frozen conflicts as a precedent. Even though Kosovo and the West oppose such a comparison,

35 The General Assembly. (2008). Backing Request by Serbia, General Assembly Decides to Seek International Court of Justice Ruling on Legality of Kosovo's Independence. The United Nations General Assembly GA/10764 8 OCTOBER 2008. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2008/ga10764.doc.htm>

36 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2013). Briefing by the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Lukashovich, 8 November 2013. Retrieved from www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/796228

37 Brooks, Courtney. (2012). To Recognize Or Not To Recognize Abkhazia? That Is Vanuatu's Question. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/abkhazia-vanuatu-georgia-russia-recognition/24688283.html>

this policy by Moscow and Serbian argues that Kosovo is a secessionist case rather than the last chapter in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. One should confess that this military intervention slowed down the pace of the international recognition of Kosovo, mainly influencing countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Africa and Asia.

Evidently, the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs put forward different public statements on Kosovo. This was also the case during the aftermath of the Crimean annexation. While the Foreign Ministry maintained its position that Kosovo declared its independence in violation to international law, later adding that there was no popular support through referendum on Kosovo.

Putin and the Kremlin used the Kosovo example as a right choice for the people of Crimea, stating that every people have the right to self-determination similar to Kosovo.³⁸ In his view, the Parliament of Kosovo declared the independence accepted on a global level, but it did not have the endorsement of the people of Kosovo through a referendum, which was the case in Crimea.³⁹

The argumentation supporting the Russian annexation of Crimea was in full contradiction with Moscow's official policy against the declaration of the independence of Kosovo. Undoubtedly, the ICJ Advisory Opinion on Kosovo's independence has played a role in shaping the public discourse towards Europe by the Moscow discourse. The Russian imposed authorities in the Crimea declared independence on 11 March 2014 by linking this declaration to the ICJ Advisory Opinion as following: "... and taking into consideration the confirmation of the status of Kosovo by the United Nations International Court of Justice on July 22, 2010, which says that unilateral declaration of independence by a part of the country does not violate any international norms, make this decision jointly".⁴⁰ In Putin's view, the ICJ ruling allowed the right of self-determination without the approval of the supreme authority of a country, as happened in Kosovo.⁴¹

Putin's statements were often underestimated, but they present a diplomatic language that will show how difficult it will be for Kosovo to bypass the Russian challenge in the United Nations, even if it reaches a deal with Serbia. Russia will try to impose its interests in the Balkans, and the Kosovo card is the only open question left in the hands of Moscow in the region to bargain with the West over its own interests in the Balkans.

38 Blome, K. (2016). Putin „For me, it is not borders that matter“. Bild. Retrieved from www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russian-president-wladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html

39 Blome, K. (2016). Putin „For me, it is not borders that matter“. Bild. Retrieved from www.bild.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin/russian-president-wladimir-putin-the-interview-44092656.bild.html

40 Russia Today. (2014). Crimea parliament declares independence from Ukraine ahead of referendum. Retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-parliament-independence-ukraine-086/>

41 Kremlin. (2014). Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. The President of the Russian Federation. Retrieved from www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860

By permitting Kosovo's membership in the UN, Russia would not be able to handle the Crimean issue with the West, while there are no interests in the West to consider any correlation between Kosovo and Crimean issue.

In the Russian view, the independence of Kosovo was the beginning of the end of the post-Cold War European order, where Russia sought to impose its interests and views on the political developments in Europe. The difficult relationship between the US and Russia, the missile defense system in Eastern Europe, as well as the Euro Crisis all-together influenced Kosovo's acceptance as a reality in Europe. The biggest lost in all those developments was the lack of unity in the European Union and the recognition of Kosovo becoming a Trojan horse in the EU for Russia: it found allies to oppose the US in the Balkans and divided the Europeans on a key political issue to advance their foreign policy goals in the region.

“KOSOVO CARD” IN SERBIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Russia has used Kosovo as an important card in its relationship with Serbia. Portraying itself as the defender of Serbian interests, Russia has developed a diplomatic maneuver by being the closest ally to Serbia since the fall of Yugoslavia. Russian companies have gained access in key economic monopolies.

The Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), supported by Russian investments, has become one of the key revenue contributors to the Serbian budget, making up approximately 15 percent.⁴² Serbia has continuously promoted an equal relationship with the EU and Russia, as the two most significant strategic pillars in their foreign policy. Lavrov has opposed any EU pressure in Serbia that would bargain for the recognition of Kosovo.⁴³

Serbia, although an EU candidate country, remained one of the few countries in Europe to oppose the alignment of its foreign policy with the EU regarding sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, the EU has incorporated in their sanctions list 2 Serbian-based banks, Sberbank Serbia and VTB Serbia, which are in fact subsidiaries of Russian banks Sberbank and VTB (Vneshtorgbank).⁴⁴ The Serbian political elite defended their foreign policy from a Russian perspective, while Russia was not interested in undermining its relations with Serbia, its only ally in Western Balkans, at a time when Serbia was seeking EU membership. According to Bechev,⁴⁵ “though in the short term Serbia’s participation in the sanctions against Russia is not a priority for the EU, Chapter 31 in the membership negotiations (‘Foreign, security and defense policy’) should serve as a vehicle for full alignment on external relations. The opening of the chapter by Serbia should be conditioned on joining the sanctions.”

The issue of Kosovo contributed to the maintenance of Russian-Serbian relations, while the Russian investments and military cooperation did not give enough impetus to Belgrade to denounce its EU membership perspective.

42 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2016). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Ivica Dacic, Moscow, April 1, 2016. Retrieved from www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/2196346

43 Lavrov, S. (2015). Russia’s Priorities in Europe and the World. Horizons Winter 2015, No.2. Retrieved from www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/916716

44 For more on EU Sanctions, see the Official Journal of the European Union (2014), retrieved from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014R0833&from=EN>

45 Bechev (2015). European Policy Centre, Russia in the Balkans: How Should the EU Respond? Retrieved from http://www.epc.eu/documents/uploads/pub_6018_russia_in_the_balkans.pdf

With the start of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia under the EU facilitation, Russia remained the only card in Belgrade's hand to obstruct to some extent Kosovo's recognition and membership in international organizations.

The Russian presence in Serbia in the gas energy sector has been limited since Russian suspension of the South Stream Project after opposition by the European Union. This excluded Russia from the Southeast European gas market whereas the conflict in Ukraine and the reluctance of the EU to allow Bulgaria to let Russian owned pipelines to bypass Bulgaria, undermined Russian interests in the energy sector in the region. The multiple gas projects in the region, mainly in Bulgaria, Albania and Croatia, aim to limit an important source of Russian influence, and diversify different import sources, thus maintaining an independent gas and energy sector in Southeast Europe. Kosovo has yet to develop its gas connection and the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) is seen as Kosovo's only link to the gas market in the region.

Serbia utilized its close relationship with Russia to blackmail the EU, as well as influence the manner in which Brussels handled the agreements reached with Kosovo in the political and technical dialogue. Prior to the April 2013 agreement, at a time when Serbia was under pressure to accept Kosovo admission to international organizations as part of the Agreement on First Principles on the Normalization of Relations, Serbian leaders visited Moscow, using the Russian card to make clear to the EU that pro-Russian orientation was a serious option.⁴⁶ In this context, Lavrov stated that before the April Agreement "that the enforcement of rights of all ethnic minorities in Serbia in general and in Kosovo, in particular, is a priority for Russia and it was not right for the EU to use ultimatums but play a constructive role as mandated by the UN General Assembly."⁴⁷

In the end, the compromised agreement was reached between Kosovo and Serbia, however, the admission of Kosovo to international organizations was not included, but in fact softened in a way that both sides would not obstruct each other during the European integration process.⁴⁸ Evidently, the lack of diplomatic specificity to underline the need for the UN quest of Kosovo will remain a serious area of contention in upcoming EU-led processes, for both the US and EU.

46 Novaković, I. (2012). *Neutrality in Europe in the XXI and the Case of Serbia*. Belgrade: ISAC Fund. pp. 7

47 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2013). Answers to questions of Russian mass media by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov summarizing the results of the session of the Foreign Ministers Council of CIS member-states, Tashkent, 5 April 2013. Retrieved from www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/integracionnye-struktury-prostranstva-sng/-/asset_publisher/r17Fzr0mbE6x/content/id/115762

48 The First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations (2013), retrieved from http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/FIRST_AGREEMENT_OF_PRINCIPLES_GOVERNING_THE_NORMALIZATION_OF_RELATIONS,_APRIL_19,_2013_BRUSSELS_en.pdf

SECURITY ASPECT OF RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT IN KOSOVO

Kosovo has a legitimate concern that Russia remains a serious security burden that can militarize the Serbian Army. This concern is also justified when considering the recent construction of the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in the city of Nis, less than 100 km from Prishtina. This structure is viewed by Kosovo as merely a Russian military presence, and seen as a threat to Kosovo's national security and a counter-balance to KFOR presence in Kosovo.⁴⁹ This has prompted calls in Washington to consider the build-up of a permanent US military presence in Kosovo as deterrence to Russian goals in the region and instrument to maintain stability in the region.⁵⁰

Belgrade has consecutively signaled that it is considering the granting diplomatic immunities and privileges to the Nis Humanitarian Center as stipulated by Article 20 of this inter-state agreement,⁵¹ which would only increase the suspicious nature of that Center.

According to numerous international security experts, Serbia is the most important bridge-head for Kremlin in the Balkans,⁵² "whereas such a facility is a perfect asset in terms of legalizing the presence and movement of intelligence staff, devices and operations, in such a close proximity to Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia."⁵³

In the US view, the biggest threat coming from that Center is to turn it into an outpost for Russian military and intelligence activities in the region, targeting mainly Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This policy is mainly oriented to keep the respective countries away from NATO membership and secure a zone of neutrality in the Balkans that would enable Moscow to maintain influence in some parts of this non-NATO area. More specifically, this center may impact on NATO members such as Bulgaria, Romania and Montenegro.

49 Christofer, Ch. (2017). Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee, retrieved from https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT468/RAND_CT468.pdf

50 Wilson, D. (2017). Southeast Europe: Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence. Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation. Retrieved from https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/061417_Wilson_Testimony_REVISED.pdf

51 "U.S. Senator urges Serbia to deny Russian Center diplomatic immunity" Retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-senator-johnson-urges-serbia-vucic-deny-russian-humanitarian-center-diplomatic-immunity/28704529.html>

52 Bezbednost (2017). Interview with Ferenc Katrein, by Belgrade Center for Security Policies, retrieved from <http://www.bezbednost.org/All-publications/6598/Serbia-is-the-most-important-bridgehead-for.shtml>

53 Ibid.

Triggering nationalistic mobilization by calling for Kosovo's cause will remain a part of their strategy. Considering that such views further strengthened in Serbia when the presidential election campaign was loaded with Kosovo-related provocative rhetoric and actions, including the Russian donated train in January 2017 sent to northern border with Kosovo. Consequently, this orchestrated move by Belgrade was viewed in Prishtina as a threat against regional stability. This goal was also the aim during the attempted coup d'état in Montenegro when Russian organized groups attempted to remove the pro-Western government of Milo Djukanovic in 2016 as a means to prevent the membership of Montenegro in NATO. This had high level backing from Moscow and provides as example of Russia's attempt to undermine the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the Western Balkan countries.⁵⁴

The accession of Montenegro in NATO in May 2017 was the first blow to such goals. The Russian involvement in Montenegro's attempted Coup D'état has shown how far Russia is able to go in order to achieve its interests. Furthermore, the Russian Embassy in Skopje is frequently vocal towards internal political developments in Macedonia. According to the Guardian, "Russian spies and diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long effort to spread propaganda and provoke discord in Macedonia."⁵⁵

Evidently, the overwhelming support given to former Prime Minister Gruevski and the leader of VMRO-DPMNE political party by the official Moscow, had long-term orientations to cement their business and political influence within Macedonia.

According to the BIRN investigative report, "Russia insisted that although former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and his VMRO DPMNE party had won the December 11 general election, Western politicians wanted to hand power to the runners-up, the Social Democrats."⁵⁶ Indeed the democratic transition which culminated with a new Prime Minister Zoran Zaev from the Social Democrats, was in full contradiction with Russian interest in this country.

54 The Telegraph. (2017). Surveillance photos 'show Russian intelligence officers plotting Montenegro coup'. Retrieved from www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/28/surveillance-photos-show-russian-intelligence-officers-plotting/

55 The Guardian (2017). Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence>

56 BIRN (2015). Russia Accuses West of Backing 'Greater Albania'. Retrieved from <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-jumps-into-macedonia-election-crisis-03-03-2017>

RUSSIAN SOFT POWERS IN KOSOVO

There is a broad consensus that Moscow's strategies and tactics are both hybrid and flexible. On this note, as Bugajski observed, "a diverse assortment of weapons are deployed to disarm the adversary, whether energy, business, trade, corruption, blackmail, cyberspace, espionage, politics, religion, ideology, disinformation, proxy conflicts or outright warfare."⁵⁷ Apparently, in the Western Balkans all these diverse instruments and mechanisms are oriented to create energy dependence, including gas supplies, pipelines and refineries, in order to generate in return obedience by exposing respective countries to diplomatic blackmail and political compulsion. Evidently, Russian economic activities are very limited in Kosovo, due to the lack of bilateral relations and the small and hostile market Kosovo offers to Russian companies.

However, it is apparent that the asymmetry in trade balance between Kosovo and Russia is further deepening. While during 2016, Russia imported diverse goods in total of 13.304.435 Euro, the exports from Kosovo were modest, with only 42.038 Euro. During January - July 2017, Russia imported 10.723.490 Euro, whereas Kosovo's figures remained zero.⁵⁸

On 17th September 2014 the Government of Kosovo imposed economic sanctions to Russia in light of the annexation of Crimea and the meddling in the internal affairs of Ukraine. The decision of the Government seemed to be administratively insufficient to the Border and Customs agencies in Kosovo as it did not specify administrative instruction on the areas and extent of these sanction, which has also not been updated.⁵⁹ It is also worth stressing that the Law on Implementation of International Sanctions (No.03/L –183) has not been amended accordingly, since 2010. Apparently, there is a lack of willingness from both public and private sector to coordinate and align their common interest towards implementing the Sanction's Policy against Russia. Compared to other countries in the region, Russia ignored the imposition of such sanctions by Kosovo and did not reciprocate.

At the same time, the sanctions by Kosovo were imposed on its own initiative and not as a principal request of the EU institutions to harmonize the foreign policy activities as with other Western Balkan countries. This gap was not fulfilled even after the entry into force in 2016 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Kosovo and the EU, considering that the Political Dialogue within the SAA framework clearly stipulates political, economic, and legal rapprochement between the EU and Kosovo. Despite five

57 Bugajski, J. (2017). Russia's Malign Influences in Europe: Moscow's Strategy to Dismantle the West. Testimony for the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. Thursday, July 13

58 Official figures by the Statistical Agency of Kosovo, September 2017. Those products consists mainly on mineral fuels, mineral oils and products of their distillation, bituminous substances, mineral waxes, fertilizers, perfumery, perfumery or cosmetic, inorganic chemicals, organic or inorganic compounds of precious metal.

59 Anonymous Interview with a Senior Officer at the Kosovo Customs, date 10 August 2017, Prishtina.

EU non-recognizers, full alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy is of utmost importance both for Kosovo and the region. As Dimitar Bechev (2015) precisely emphasizes, Russia's chief strength is profiting from the EU's weakness and a clear commitment from the EU is therefore essential in keeping the region on track.

On this note, while Gazprom was enlisted on the respective sanctions decision by the Government of Kosovo, its branch in Serbia (NIS) was never explicitly sanctioned. Russian company Gazprom Neft owns 56.15 % of the share capital of NIS, while 29.87 % of NIS shares are held by Serbia.⁶⁰ Furthermore, according to Kosovo Customs, "in 2015, total import of petroleum products from Serbia was 9 million liters or 27 million Euros, out of 500 million liters that Kosovo imports on annual basis."⁶¹ Nevertheless, the situation in 2017 is rather dissimilar. According to the Association of Enterprises dealing with Oil Circulation and Oil Product in Kosovo, over 60 million liters are imported only from Serbia, approximately 133 liters from Greece and around 25 million liters from Bulgaria.⁶²

While energy dependence compared with neighboring countries as an instrument of Russian Foreign Policy does not apply to Kosovo's circumstances, nevertheless, this increasing trend of Russian goods exchanged either through its proxies in Serbia or direct from Russia, is in contradiction with Kosovo's decision in 2014, as well as with Russian diplomatic behavior since 2007.

In the Zagreb Summit (2007), Putin presented Russian interests in the energy sector in the Balkans and concrete plans to expand the Russian gas network to Kosovo, Albania and Southern Serbia through Macedonia.⁶³ Such signs for Russian economic engagement in Kosovo did not get the required attention in Prishtina. Former Serbian Minister for Kosovo, Alexander Vulin, who currently is Minister of Defense, has utilized Russian interest in access to Kosovo's gas market, and in several meetings with Russian companies, including Lukoil and NIS owned mostly by Gazprom, urged them to invest in Kosovo in areas where Serbs live in Kosovo, with such meetings also attended by Russian Ambassador in Belgrade.⁶⁴

Given the investments made by Russia in the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, such initiatives are a clear sign that Russia can support Serbia in creating the dependence of Serb-populated countries on Russian and Serbian economy, and make such areas a strategic target for Russian investments in the Balkans.

60 NIS (2017), retrieved from <https://www.nis.eu/en/about-us/company-information>

61 Portal Energjia (2015), "Kosova importon 3% nafte nga Serbia" retrieved from <http://energjia.al/2016/04/06/kosova-importon-3-nafte-nga-serbia/>

62 Radio Free Europe (2017). Prej cilave shtete importon naftë Kosova? Retrieved from <https://www.evropa-elire.org/a/prej-cilave-shtete-importon-nafte-kosova-28806391.html>

63 Kremlin. (2007). Speech at the Balkan Energy Cooperation Summit. The President of the Russian Federation. Retrieved from www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24368

64 InSerbia Today. (2014). Russian companies ready to invest in Kosovo – Vulin. Retrieved from <https://inserbia.info/today/2014/01/russian-companies-ready-to-invest-in-kosovo-vulin/>

In this view, in December 2016 the Government of Kosovo closed three gas stations in Northern Kosovo opened by the Serbian company NIS without the appropriate license issued by Kosovo's authorities.

Even while the Government of Kosovo and the European Union attempted to deal with that issue as an "illegal construction of gas station", it showed that Vulin's attempts to extend Russian investments into Kosovo had succeeded.⁶⁵

In this context, on 25 September 2017, Russian extension instruments from Serbia (the so-called NGO Russia Humanitarian Mission) signed publicly a Memorandum of Understanding with Marko Djuric, director in the Serbian Government office for Kosovo, aiming to implement charity programs dedicated for Kosovo Serbs.⁶⁶ These practices, under the humanitarian label and in the name of Russian – Serbian brotherhood, beyond symbolism are the best example of Russian hybrid methods to influence Kosovo's public opinion through Serbian institutions.

While there is an increasing trend of Russian citizens⁶⁷ entering Kosovo during last two years, there is no exact information regarding purpose of these visits. According to Kosovo Police, the number of Russian citizens entering Kosovo is as following:⁶⁸

Estimated Period	01/01/2015-31/12/2015	01/01/2016-31/12/2016
Number of Russian citizens entering Kosovo	1274	1311

Although Kosovo's passport are not even accepted by Russian authorities, contrarily, the Visa Policy of Kosovo adopted since 2013 provided considerable privileges for Russian holders of diplomatic and service passports.⁶⁹ In this context, the respective holders are exempted from visa requirements and shall be allowed to enter, transit or stay up to 15 days in the territory of Kosovo.

65 Portal Telegrafi (2016), "Kompania ruse e naftes futet ilegalisht ne Kosove" retrieved from <https://telegrafi.com/kompania-ruse-e-naftes-futet-ilegalisht-ne-kosove/>

66 Serbian Portal B92 (2017), "Russian NGO teams up with Kosovo Office to assist Serbs", retrived from https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=09&dd=25&nav_id=102397

67 Russian Passport is enlisted in the Visa Policy adopted by Kosovo, however their citizens can enter in Kosovo without an entry visa provided that they possess a valid Schengen Visa.

68 Interview with Kosovo Police Press Office, date 26 July 2017, Prishtina.

69 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017). In the special Categories Exempted from Visa Requirements are also holders of People's Republic of China, Egypt, Indonesia and Ukraine. Retrieved from <http://www.mfa-ks.net/?page=2,158>

Evidently, Kosovo has not yet developed policies and actions that aim to prevent Russian influence and any subversive challenges Russia poses to Kosovo. In recent years, Kosovo has experienced an intensive media propaganda and fake news activities by Russian owned media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today. Russian owned media is produced in Serbian language, including such as R Magazin, Nova Srpska Politicka Misao, or Radio and TV Sputnik, and aim to target the Serbian community living mostly in Northern Kosovo. Through this audience, they aim to spread fake news that might contribute to the perception of Kosovo as a threat. Kosovo's government has not been able to create and finance an independent Serbian media in Kosovo, and the influence of Radio Television of Kosovo Serbian channels requires further attention.

Russian media propaganda in the Balkans has seen a rise in fake news publications for Kosovo in recent years through different media sites and languages, the main outlet being Sputnik. In many democratic countries, fake news is seen as a threat to national security. This has not been the case in Kosovo, where the media and online influence is strong in the public realm. Furthermore, Kosovo is a targeted country for Sputnik's propaganda and fake news activities in the region in all languages with the aim to portray Kosovo as a failed state. Despite being more active in its English and Serbian versions, Sputnik in French has been the most active in recent months as an attempt by Russia to influence Kosovo's image in the French-speaking world and in Paris where UNESCO is seated (3677 articles in total).⁷⁰ Similarly, the German version of Sputnik⁷¹ has been very active with articles on Kosovo relaying Moscow's viewpoint on Kosovo in the German-speaking world, considering that Germany plays a key role in promoting the Euro-Atlantic perspective of Southeast Europe (3375 articles in total). The articles in English on Kosovo have also seen a significant rise in the last two years (2240 articles in total) with an overarching theme: Kosovo is troubled by organized crime and of Daesh/ISIS, which the West/NATO helped create by bombing the Serbs.⁷²

70 KCSS's desk research during July-August 2017.

71 Ibid.

72 NOTE: The Russian-backed news agency Sputnik has consecutively misused the reports by KCSS, by quoting previously produced research papers as a matter of misusing the KCSS's credibility in the field. For instance, they start referring to the report produced by researchers Vesë Kelmendi and Rudinë Jakupi in 2017, while latter they used allegedly other sources to support their own arguments. Sputnik seeks to give the impression that their text is based purely on KCSS's empirical research, as following: <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/201707161111943194-kosovo-dzihadistkinje-daes-terorizam1/>

RUSSIA AND THE SERBIAN COMMUNITY IN KOSOVO

The biggest political challenge Kosovo faces in the coming months concerns how the country might keep the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo as a mechanism that does not fall at risk to becoming a third governance level of Russian influence, as is the case of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, this high-stake topic caused unprecedented crisis among all political parties, threatening the viability of the country's institutions. The Constitutional Court of Kosovo found the agreement reached on 25 August 2015 in Brussels, in violation with the Constitutional spirit. Through this judgment,⁷³ the Court outlined the competencies of the Association/Community, while addressing issues that are outside of its mandate. The Court also called upon all parties to take its judgment into account when drafting its Statute and final legal act – by correcting and limiting any vacuum which would harm the political system of Kosovo. Indeed, as stipulated by the Brussels Agreement of 2013, the respective association would have full overview of the areas of economic development, education, health, urban and rural planning in 10 Serb-majority municipalities.

While there is no specific provision about the external representation of this body, however the Organizational Structure of the original agreement⁷⁴ stipulates a broad framework, inter-alia as following: “a President, who will represent the Community/ Association, including before the central authorities and outside Kosovo.”

In the last months, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has given attention to the process of the establishment of that Association/Community viewing it in light of the difficulties of the EU to play a constructive role in the dialogue. This ministry has criticized the Kosovo leadership for not making progress in the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, while Lavrov has condemned the violation of the rights of the Serbs in Kosovo and the Kosovo Albanian sabotage to the Association/Community. Russian influence through the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities would pose a challenge for the normal functioning of the state of Kosovo, causing a blockade of the country's decision-making and raising inter-ethnic tensions between Albanians in the south and Serbs in the northern part of Kosovo. Their primary intention is to develop alternative foreign policy tools to be used by the representatives of this body, potentially for Russian interests.

This might include direct visits to Moscow without prior coordination with the Government of Kosovo; joint declarations and unilateral statements etc. The similar political behavior by establishing the chief representative of the Republika Srpska⁷⁵ entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Moscow, might set an unprecedented problem for Kosovo's image and its international position.

73 Case No. KO 130/ 15 (2015).

74 EEAS (2015). Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo – general principles/main elements, retrieved from: http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/150825_02_association-community-of-serb-majority-municipalities-in-kosovo-general-principles-main-elements_en.pdf

75 The respective office in Moscow was opened on March 2010. For more information, see the official website http://rsmoscowoffice.ru/serbska_sr/

Russia traditionally functioned in the Balkans in areas where there are tensions and crises, and it is not in the Russian interest that the north of Kosovo and other areas inhabited by Serbs are integrated into the political system and everyday life in Kosovo. Rather, the interest is in boycotting them to create a situation of crises and frozen conflict. Another element of the increasing Russian role in Kosovo is the establishment of ties between Serbian political parties in the Srpska Lista with Putin's United Russia. The strengthening of ties between Russian political elite and regional political actors is a growing phenomenon in recent years in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska) and Macedonia.

In this context, with direct sponsorship by senior officials from the Serbian Government the extension of Putin's United Russia has been directly linked with the Srpska Lista – a part of a ruling coalition in the Kosovo Government, where the latter attended the Congress of the United Russia in September 2017. The ties between the two, however, date months earlier, where the United Russia endorsed the Srpska List during the 11th June 2017 general elections in Kosovo as a “guarantee” of Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo.⁷⁶ By establishing such contacts at a higher political level, Russia attempts to support pro-Russian political actors in Kosovo. The aim is to contradict the western oriented policies of the Kosovo Government.⁷⁷

The cooperation between United Russia and political parties in the Balkans is actively promoting pan-Slavism, financing political activities and shared programme and coordination on different domestic and international issues. The development of close political relations with shared ideological and cultural traits aims to bring together Serbian nationalists, populists and elements of the former communist ruling elite that would end up in an establishment of political alliances that have common positions in the whole region.⁷⁸

It is worth stressing that the public perception towards Russia from both communities, Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, is highly variable. According to the KCSS Security Barometer⁷⁹ in 2016, Russia has been considered as a hostile state by 86.7 percent of the respondents, followed by 8.5 who believe that it is neutral towards Kosovo and only 3.2 percent listing it as a friendly state.

The positive opinions about Russia are reflected among the Kosovar Serbian respondents taking part in this survey. On the contrary according to Gallup World Poll in 2016⁸⁰, in Serbia the public opinion is more likely than any other nationality in the Balkans to express approval of Russian leadership, as 54% percent approved of Russia's leadership over the past two years.

76 United Russia. (2017). Железняк: В Косово и Метохии важна консолидация всех патриотически настроенных по отношению к Сербии сил. Retrieved from www.er.ru/news/156043/

77 BIRN (2017). Russia Backs Serb Party Joining Kosovo Govt. Retrieved from <https://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-s-united-russia-supports-kosovo-serb-party-09-14-2017>

78 Clarks, D. & Foxall, Dr. A. (2014). Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?. London: The Henry Jackson Society. Retrieved from www.henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Russias-Role-in-the-Balkans.pdf

79 KCSS (2016). Kosovo Security Barometer: Special Edition, Public Perceptions on Kosovo's Foreign Policy and Dialogue with Serbia. Retrieved from: http://www.qkss.org/repository/docs/Public_perceptions_on_Kosovo's_Foreign_Policy_and_Dialogue_with_Serbia.jpg_531411.pdf

80 Gallup World Poll (2016). Many in Western Balkans See Benefit in Joining EU, retrieved from http://news.gallup.com/poll/213899/western-balkans-benefit-joining.aspx?q_source=mn2-world

CONCLUSIONS

Russian influence in and around Kosovo will continue to pose a challenge to Kosovo's statehood and functioning as a stable country. The impact of Russia on Kosovo's integration in the international community is immense. Russia has the ability to block Kosovo's full-membership in the UN and other important pan-European organizations through its veto power, but also in other organizations and other countries through its direct influence. The lack of integration of Kosovo in the international community undermines Kosovo's international subjectivity as an independent state and tends to define Kosovo's statehood as an unresolved issue domestically and internationally.

The Russian influence in the domestic affairs of Kosovo must be addressed properly and taken seriously. The financial and religious influence over the Serbian Orthodox Church is an important element in the Russian engagement in Kosovo. It gives space to the imposition of radical voices among the Serbian Orthodox Church and could block the integration of the Church into the daily life in Kosovo. Political influence through Serbian political parties in Kosovo and the Serbian-led institutions, including the frozen Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities, is an issue that will continue to foster a climate of mistrust between Albanians and Serbs living in Kosovo. It showcases the direct political influence of Russia in Kosovo's local and central institutions.

Northern Kosovo is a region that attracts Russian influence due to its inhabitants being mainly Serbs, and the lack of Kosovo's institutional control in the area. While the economic influence exerted through its proxies in Serbia focus mainly on the areas where Serbs live in Kosovo, it does provide the primary tool of influence in Kosovo. A final factor which attracts Russian influence in Kosovo comes through the Russian owned media in Serbia and fake news produced on Kosovo by Sputnik, Russia Today and other Russian managed outlets.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ Full alignment with the U.S. and EU Foreign Policy actions, within the SAA framework, by strengthening inter-agency cooperation and exchange of information;
- ◆ Establishing a long-term bilateral military cooperation with the U.S. Army based on SOFA Agreement of 2012, to ensure permanent presence of the U.S military base in Kosovo, regardless of KFOR presence and mandate;
- ◆ International support for internal security reform and defense institution-building for onset of the Kosovo's Armed Forces, by accelerating bilateral cooperation in the field of defense and security with NATO member states;
- ◆ Strengthening the anti-corruption legal framework and financial transparency in Kosovo's political system at both a central and local level, specifically with institutions responsible for requesting, receiving, analyzing and disseminating to the competent authorities, disclosures of information which concern potential money laundering and illegal financing;
- ◆ Amending the Visa Policy legislation for Kosovo, by stipulating substantial changes on the list of Visa-Exempt category;
- ◆ Pursue a lessons-learned institutional cooperation with Scandinavian and Baltic countries regarding the Hybrid Warfare experiences, such as Finnish Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Latvia's Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, and Estonia's Cyber Center of Excellence;
- ◆ Tailored cooperation with Civil Society Organizations and law-enforcement agencies to raise awareness of fake-news deriving from Russian-sponsored media outlets;
- ◆ Ensure ongoing dialogue with the business community in Kosovo regarding potential threats and the intentions of Russian proxies based in Serbia and the region;

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