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Serbia Belongs in the West

By Marko Attila Hoare, 20th November 2006

Adolf Hitler is alleged to have said that “the Serb nation represents the backbone of the Balkans”. The importance of Serbia has been recognised by saner strategists than Hitler, both before and after him, though mistaken conclusions have more often than not followed from this recognition. A failure of policy toward Serbia in the 1990s almost cost the Western alliance dear: Western collaboration with the Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic led to the latter’s decimation of Bosnia-Herzegovina; the intervention of Al Qaeda and Iran in the Bosnian war; the worst crisis in British-US relations since Suez; and Milosevic’s attempted ethnic-cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians, leading to the near-creation of a Palestinian problem in the heart of Europe. The latter was averted only by NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, which exposed dangerous weaknesses in the

alliance. Today Serbia, which has recently been denied entry into NATO's 'Partnership for Peace' programme, represents an anomaly; an underachiever in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, as the states to its north, east and south march ahead of it into NATO and the EU. Serbia suffers from a bad reputation in the eyes of Western public opinion, while many Serbs remain resentful of Western policy toward Serbia since the 1990s. Yet the Western alliance needs Serbia, and Serbia needs the Western alliance, and it is imperative that we extend maximum support to Serbia and its people in the years to come, if this anomaly is to be erased and the integration of the Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions completed.

The cardinal error made by Western statesmen with regard to Serbia in the early 1990s, and at a more moderate level in the 2000s, has been in believing that friendship with Serbia, and Serbia's good relations with the Western alliance, require appeasing the nationalism espoused murderously by Milosevic, and more peacefully but in an almost equally retrograde manner by his backward-looking successor at Serbia's helm, Vojislav Kostunica. On the contrary: Serbia's estrangement from the West, and all the suffering of Serbia and the Serbs - Serbia's economic collapse, the expulsion of the Serb population from parts of Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, the NATO bombardment of Serbia and destruction of its bridges and factories - all were the direct and natural result of Milosevic's policies, which in turn were only made possible by the encouragement of the Western alliance. The Western alliance refused to defend Milosevic's Croatian and Bosnian victims, enforced an arms embargo against them, attempted to negotiate their dismemberment, rescued Serb forces from defeat more than once, turned over UN safe areas to the Bosnian Serb forces, and awarded the latter half of Bosnia. The survival of the Milosevic regime; the spread of his ethnic-cleansing tactics to Kosovo; and the NATO bombardment of Serbia - all were the logical results of the prior, erroneous Western strategy.

How many Serb lives would have been saved if the Western alliance had only halted Milosevic in mid-1991, before the war got going? This is a question we should never stop asking ourselves, as the lesson is never properly learned: it is in the interests of Serbia and its people that the

Western alliance encourages them in a positive direction, not that it encourages the worst Serbian elements. Since the fall of Milosevic in 2000, the EU continued to prop up the unworkable union between Serbia and Montenegro, with the EU's Javier Solana negotiating a new union treaty between Serbia and Montenegro in 2002, forcing a moratorium on Montenegrin independence and needlessly sapping the energies of both states for a further four years. When Montenegro held a referendum on independence earlier this year, the EU malevolently insisted that for independence to be recognised, the Montenegrin electorate would have to vote in favour by a majority of 55%. Yet the Montenegrins passed the threshold and voted for independence, and Montenegro and Serbia can now finally enjoy healthy, normal, good-neighbourly relations; just as Serbia can today enjoy healthy, normal, good-neighbourly relations with Croatia and Slovenia that were not possible in the failed state of Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, before Serbia can settle down to becoming a normal European state with stable relations with its neighbours, the question of the Albanian-majority province of Kosovo remains to be settled; formally part of Serbia, it is heading for independence under international auspices. Last month (October), the Serbian government held a referendum on a new Serbian constitution, whose explicit and stated purpose was to reinforce the Serbian claim to Kosovo. As if the enormous suffering inflicted on the Serbian people by their leaders' pursuit of unrealisable, anachronistic nationalist-expansionist goals in the 1990s were not enough, the present leaders of Serbia have chosen to wage yet another quixotic, 'patriotic' campaign that was doomed to defeat before it started, sapping the energies of the Serbian citizenry and deceiving them that Kosovo can be 'saved' for Serbia, paving the way for inevitable future demoralisation, instead of confronting them right away with the 'bitter' truth: that Kosovo will inevitably become independent in the near future; that there is nothing Serbia can (or should) do to stop this; and that the nation's energies should be put to more positive use. The new constitution treats Kosovo's autonomy as little more than an administrative convenience; far from representing an attempt at compromise with the Albanian majority, the constitution would mark a massive step back from the autonomy it enjoyed in the former Yugoslavia; indeed, the

constitution even retains the name 'Kosovo and Metohija' for the province, which the Albanian population rejects.

Paradoxically, since the principal purpose of the new constitution is to reaffirm Serbia's claim to Kosovo, the ethnic Albanian majority was barred from voting in the referendum, while other ethnic groups in the province were permitted to do so. This act of racial discrimination was committed not because there was a danger that many Albanians might vote against the constitution (almost all Albanians in Kosovo refuse to vote in Serbian elections), but because the referendum would only be valid with a turnout of more than 50%, and this threshold could not have been reached if the Albanians were counted among the electorate. Indeed, in the referendum on the constitution, as so often in the past, the Serbian people proved themselves to have a healthier consciousness than their elected leaders, for even without counting the Albanians, the Serbian government barely scraped past the 50% threshold - and this right at the close of voting after a two-day ballot and a quite unprecedented level of propaganda from all sections of the political elite and media pressurising - indeed morally blackmailing - Serbian citizens to vote, including door-to-door canvassing and mass text-messaging; saturation media coverage of 'patriotic' examples of the elderly, invalids, priests and others voting; as well as 'patriotic' television programmes about the medieval Battle of Kosovo; and so on. The Serbian people have belied their unjustified negative stereotype of being irrationally and madly nationalist, and showed little enthusiasm for this new nationalistic misadventure. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that the Serbian people have voted for Kosovo's independence. This may be put down merely to fatigue, but it is an entirely justified fatigue.

This is the crux of the matter: not for the first time, the Serbian people are lions led by donkeys, something that has to be realised if Serbia is to achieve its rightful place as a member of the Western alliance. During the wars of the 1990s, the Western media was frequently filled with offensive, racist stereotypes about the Serbs and other former Yugoslavs. Serbs often felt that they were unfairly singled out for this treatment, which in fact was meted out to Croats, Bosnian Muslims and others as well; nevertheless they had every

right to feel aggrieved that the war was often portrayed as a natural expression of their own supposedly barbarous, genocidal nature - as if Western nations, such as the British, Americans and French, have not been guilty of equal or greater crimes in the past (they have been). In fact, if anything there is an inverse relationship between the overwhelmingly decent, civilised, kind and gentle character of the Serbian people and the monstrosity of the crimes committed in their name in the 1990s: to this day many, perhaps most Serbs simply cannot comprehend that other Serbs - in particular their own politicians and soldiers - could be guilty of such crimes against others. This does not, of course, excuse the wide sections of the Serbian intelligentsia and educated middle classes that were knowingly complicit in Milosevic's crimes, but it may help to explain the viewpoint of the man on the street. The people of Serbia have their share of prejudices, as do the people of any other country, but they are no more prejudiced than most, though they may be more naive.

The people of Serbia naturally, therefore, belong in the West, and there is a shared history to which Western leaders can appeal when approaching Serbia. Serbs often like to think that 'they' were on the Allied side in World War II; what is important here is the belief rather than the reality. Only a tiny proportion of Serbia's population supported the native fascist movement of Dimitrije Ljotic in the 1930s; Serbian public opinion was predominantly pro-Allied; anti-Semitism was much less prevalent than in many other European countries; there was widespread popular Serbian opposition to Yugoslavia's signing of an alliance with Nazi Germany in 1941; and a powerful rebellion broke out against the Nazis in Serbia in 1941. On the other hand, Serbian statesmen drew Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia into the Nazi orbit in the 1930s and early '40s; following occupation by Germany, large sections of the Serbian elite readily collaborated with the Nazis and were praised for their zeal in combating the Communist-led Serbian resistance by Hitler himself; quisling Serbia under Prime Minister Milan Nedic enjoyed considerable autonomy under Nazi rule, with its own armed forces and concentration camps; the Nedic regime, and Ljotic's fascists, were viciously anti-Semitic and eagerly collaborated in the Holocaust, quite apart from their enormous mass-murder of anti-fascist Serbs. The reality is that Serbs fought

on both sides in World War II. Yet most Serbs feel proud to think that they, their fathers and grandfathers fought prominently on the side of the British and Americans. Despite the war with NATO in 1999, there is a shared anti-fascist heritage to which Western statesmen can appeal.

Once again, Serbian elite consciousness today is more retrograde than that of the populace. Under Kostunica, Serbia last autumn passed a law rehabilitating the ‘ideological opponents of Communism’ of the period since 6 April 1941 - the date of the Nazi invasion, four and a half years before the Communists even took power in Serbia. As the Serbian historian Olivera Milosavljevic writes in her recently published study of Serbian collaboration with the Nazis, this law is specifically intended to rehabilitate the pro-Nazi Serb followers of Nedic and Ljotic (not, it should be said, the less ideological, more opportunistic Nazi collaborators of the Chetnik movement, who were already covered by an earlier law). The popular and instinctive pride felt by most Serbs in their belief that ‘the Serbs’ fought on the Allied side is thus betrayed by the ideological affinity of Kostunica’s conservative nationalist regime and its intellectual supporters with the wartime pro-Nazi quislings. Yet the raw popular material exists for Serbian membership of NATO.

In meeting the arguments that Serbia’s abandonment of Kosovo and membership of NATO would be ‘unpatriotic’, it is best to recall who the really unpatriotic forces in Serbia are. In any country, murdering the sitting Prime Minister and a retired President should be considered treason, yet this is precisely what the supporters of the fallen Milosevic regime, widely now supporting Kostunica, are guilty of. The murder of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic by former members of Milosevic’s special forces in 2003 was a particularly heinous crime against the Serbian nation, as Djindjic was the best leader Serbia has produced since 1972; a genuine friend of the West who knew which way the wind was blowing, and under whom Serbia’s integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions would be farther along than it is today. Serbia’s failure to join the Partnership for Peace was linked to its failure to arrest war-criminals indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in particular the Bosnian Serb mass-murderer

Ratko Mladic; Djindjic was murdered precisely because he intended to cooperate with the Tribunal; a Tribunal that has, despite its undeniable and serious flaws, already done much to purge Bosnia-Hercegovina of those responsible for the war and genocide.

Today, the murderers of Serbia's elected head of government are still exercising their malign influence over the Serbian body politic, with the complicity of the current government. Marko Kljajevic, the judge presiding over the murder trial, was recently forced to resign following the arrest of his brother, which Kljajevic believed was intended to put pressure on him. As he recalls: "Not a single state organ - I'm thinking above all of the government and the responsible ministers - gave me support; furthermore, they treated me as an enemy." The arrest of Kljajevic's brother took place on the day Kljajevic was interrogating Milorad Ulemek Legija, a mafia chieftain and former member of Milosevic's special forces, who is already convicted of the murder of former Serbian President Ivan Stambolic. Patriotic arguments should, therefore, favour the supporters of Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration, and damn those who are holding Serbia back. Above all else, naked self-interest demands that Serbia join NATO, for otherwise Serbia will eventually be faced with the prospect of all its neighbours - including, ultimately, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Macedonia, Albania and even an independent Kosovo - being inside the military alliance while Serbia alone remains outside, and that is not a position in which any sensible patriot would wish his or her country to be.

There remains the question of how Serbia can be brought to accept the *de jure* loss of the province of Kosovo that has already been lost *de facto*. Serbian insistence that Kosovo remain part of Serbia is never linked to any realistic model for what this would mean in practice, because no such model can be envisaged: if Serbian troops or police were to return to Serbia, it would mean war and bloodshed; but without Serbian forces, Kosovo will effectively be independent, with or without formal international recognition. The endless attempts by Serbian politicians and pundits to convince themselves that Kosovo is not lost are due in part to the belief that there is no way to admit the loss without appearing 'unpatriotic'. Yet this is mistaken,

something for which the precedent of Charles de Gaulle, the great French patriot and war-hero, may serve as an example. De Gaulle presided over the granting of independence in 1962 to Algeria, which had up till then been considered by the French not a colony but an integral part of the French Republic, much as Kosovo is considered by Serbs to be part of Serbia. Yet de Gaulle realised it was in France's patriotic interest to let Algeria go, though in doing so he had to survive several assassination attempts and suppress coup attempts by French fascist elements opposed to Algerian independence. Today, only the most extreme Frenchmen would consider de Gaulle a 'traitor'; many more consider him a hero; and it is a precedent that the more far-seeing Serbian statesmen should bear in mind.

Unfortunately, the murdered Djindjic was the closest Serbia had to a de Gaulle, and today the Serbian government is encouraging the formation of a separate Serb entity in northern Kosovo, in an attempt - probably out of bloody-mindedness rather than a sincere belief in its possibility - to partition the province and thereby retain at least part. The insanity of attempting in Kosovo a repeat of the very strategy that brought the Serbs disaster in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina should hardly need pointing out; the strategy failed in the early 1990s when Serbia appeared militarily strongest and the Western alliance was at its most accommodating, and it has no chance of succeeding now. The first and, so far, only European statesman to partition Kosovo was Adolf Hitler in 1941, though it has more recently been advocated by the late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and by American Professor Noam Chomsky. Yet advocates of partition seem unaware of the fact that we are no longer living in an age when imperial statesmen can simply redraw the borders of states on the basis of 'gentlemen's agreements' irrespective of the will of the populations concerned, as was still possible before World War I and, to a lesser extent, in the interwar period. Furthermore, were Kosovo to be partitioned to 'satisfy' the aspirations of its Serb minority, the Albanians could legitimately demand that areas of southern Serbia proper, where considerable numbers of Albanians live and where an armed Albanian insurgency indeed broke out in the early 2000s, be annexed to the new Kosovar state. Attempts at ethnic partition can only create further problems for Serbia.

Kosovo is *not* simply a Serbian territory that happens to have a local Albanian majority; it was a constitutive element of the former Yugoslav Federation before it joined Serbia in 1945, which it did on the basis of a decision of its own, Kosovar representative body. Kosovo is a ‘historical’ Serbian territory in the sense that it was part of medieval Serbia, but this is not an argument that it is in Serbia’s interest to stress, as medieval Serbia did not include Vojvodina - ‘historically’ part of medieval Hungary and never of Serbia before the twentieth century, but a territory incomparably more valuable to Serbia than Kosovo. It is also sometimes argued that Kosovo is an inseparable part of the Serbian national identity, but this is another red herring: the alleged Serbian fixation with the territory of Kosovo is a twentieth-century construct; a questionnaire carried out in Serbia in 1904, before the modern Serbian acquisition of Kosovo, found that only 45% of respondents listed Kosovo, along with Macedonia, as an unredeemed Serbian land.

Many Serbs feel that the principle of national self-determination is today being applied only at the expense of the Serbs, never in their favour, but this is simply not the case. Kosovo is moving toward independence today because it is a constitutional-legal entity in its own right; because it has a large population of nearly two million (roughly six times the size of Iceland or Malta) that overwhelmingly favours independence; because it already passed out of Serbia’s hands *de facto* in 1999; and because any solution short of independence for a united Kosovo would lead to an Albanian rebellion that would massively destabilise the Balkans - and the simple truth is that Western statesmen are aware that the Albanians today have a much greater capacity to destabilise the Balkans than the Serbs, if their national aspirations are not met.

Some commentators have sought to draw a parallel between Kosovo and the Serb Republic (*‘Republika Srpska’*) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, arguing that if the former is entitled to independence, then so is the latter. But this is a false parallel: the territory of the Serb Republic was only roughly 50% ethnic-Serb before the ethnic-cleansing campaigns of 1992-95; any redefinition of its status would have to take into account the wishes of the Muslim and Croat

refugees from its territory and their descendants; with this proviso, it is highly questionable whether a legitimate, functioning majority could be mustered in favour of the Serb Republic's independence, leaving aside the insurmountable international legal barriers and ethical objections to partitioning Bosnia-Herzegovina. Furthermore, Bosnian Serbs have for centuries viewed Bosnia-Herzegovina as their homeland, a fact testified to by the writings of many of the most famous names of Bosnian Serb political and literary history: Vaso Pelagic, Petar Kocic, Nikola Stojanovic, Rodoljub Colakovic and others - all Serbs and Bosnian patriots at once. The retention of the Serb Republic within Bosnia-Herzegovina cannot be described as a violation of Bosnian Serb national rights; indeed, it was the Bosnian Serbs, more than the Muslims or Croats, who spearheaded the establishment of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a modern state in the first place.

Furthermore, were any part of Bosnia-Herzegovina to be annexed to Serbia, it would only encourage the very retrograde nationalists responsible for Serbia's current woes in the first place. Pace Serbia's past misguided expansionist strategies, it is in Serbia's national interest not to expand territorially; even if successful, expansion destabilises the body politic, weakens democracy and encourages further expansion, usually leading to disaster - as the Serbs should know better than anybody. This rule is true for all European states, not just Serbia. Insofar as not all Serbs are free to join Serbia, this is something that applies equally to members of other Balkan nationalities. The Bosnian Croats are not being permitted to join Croatia; nor the Albanian minorities in Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece to join Albania. Serbia has within its borders a large Hungarian minority in Vojvodina - territorially adjacent to Hungary - and a considerable Muslim minority in the Sanjak region. Nobody is - nor should they be - suggesting that these minorities secede and join Hungary and Bosnia-Herzegovina respectively.

The Serbs' sense of grievance at 'territorial dismemberment' at the West's hands is not because they have really been territorially dismembered, but because the Serbs have been wrongly encouraged by their leaders and intellectuals to believe that many of the lands of their neighbours are in fact

‘theirs’, even where the population is non-Serb, so that they feel they have lost much more than they really have. Yet the Serbs are far from being the first nation, in the Balkans or the wider Europe, to have to come to terms with the ‘loss’ of large territories they consider ‘theirs’. In the twentieth century alone, Croatia has ‘lost’, or failed to acquire parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vojvodina and Montenegro; Bulgaria has ‘lost’, or failed to acquire, large territories currently in the Republic of Macedonia and Greece; Greece has ‘lost’, or failed to acquire, parts of Anatolia, Eastern Thrace, southern Albania and Cyprus; Romania has ‘lost’, or failed to acquire Moldova, northern Bukovina and southern Dobruja; Albania has ‘lost’, or failed to acquire Kosovo and large Albanian-inhabited parts of its neighbours (an independent Kosovo will not join Albania, but will be to it something similar to what Montenegro is to Serbia, Moldova to Romania and Cyprus to Greece).

Hungary’s huge territorial losses to Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Austria following World War I, including millions of ethnic Hungarians, make Serbia’s recent ‘losses’ seem small by comparison. Further afield, France in modern times ‘lost’ Belgium and the Rhineland, along with its self-proclaimed ‘natural border’ on the Rhine, and more recently the aforementioned Algeria; Germany ‘lost’ Austria and the Sudetenland (along with vast and more straightforwardly German territories in present-day Poland and Russia); and Poland ‘lost’ large areas of present-day Ukraine and Belarus. The Serbian experience of territorial ‘loss’ is the rule, not the exception, and coming to terms with such ‘loss’ is part of what being a modern, civilised European nation is all about. Yet the paradox of this is that membership of the EU is the means by which the Serbs will achieve the ‘historic goal’ that has consistently eluded them: the unification of all Serbs, if not in a single state, then at least in a single union.

It is not Serbian leaders alone who must make an effort if Serbia is to become the fully functioning member of the Western alliance that it deserves to be: there is much that Europe and the US can and should do to help it. We should be absolutely firm that Serbia needs to arrest war-criminals, root out organised crime, respect the unity and reintegration of Bosnia-Herzegovina

and accept the independence of Kosovo - these are the *sine qua non* for any improvement in Serbia's international standing. But we should be ready to step in with massively increased financial assistance, and greatly accelerate Serbia's integration into the EU and NATO, in support of a Serbian government that, however unwillingly, makes genuine progress over these issues. Serbia may be faced with huge bills for reparations to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia following legal proceedings by these states against it at the International Court of Justice; though in principle Serbia should pay, it cannot reasonably afford to do so, and a Serbian acceptance of the legitimacy of any such verdict should be rewarded with international payment of these bills. Serbia should be encouraged to restore the tarnished reputation of its armed forces by participating in international peace-keeping missions; the former Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic, when in power, offered troops for Afghanistan; this was a public-spirited move that heralds the way forward. Above all, through public campaigns and diplomatic initiatives, Serbia should be made to feel welcome in the West; but these should be aimed at the Serbian population and the genuinely pro-Western section of the political classes, not at self-serving nationalist politicians who may use our goodwill to extract concessions at the expense of both the Serbian people and neighbouring states. With proper support and encouragement - but without concessions to its retrograde nationalists, and not at the expense of its neighbours - Serbia can act as a mainstay of Balkan stability, instead of as a sink-hole.

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