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The Balkans: Keep the bear out and wipe the slate clean

By Marko Attila Hoare, 6th October 2007

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Stability in the Balkans is being undermined by malevolent Russian obstruction of the recognition of Kosovo's independence. Despite Balkan stability being a vital interest of the Western alliance, Western leaders have lacked resolve in opposing this obstruction.

2. Serbian expansionism was the principal cause of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, that were highly damaging to the Western alliance. By appeasing Russia over Kosovo, we have helped to resuscitate an anti-Western Serbian nationalism that was all but defeated.

3. There is no workable alternative to an independent Kosovo. Delaying Kosovo's independence out of deference to Russia's (manipulated) feelings threatens to destabilise the fragile peace in the Balkans.

4. Alienating the nearly two-million-strong Muslim population of Kosovo by allowing the country to remain indefinitely in legal limbo is a recipe for disaster.

5. The Balkans will become a secure bastion of the democratic world when Kosovo is safely independent, Bosnia is restored as a functioning state, Serbian expansionism is definitely rendered impossible and Russian meddling definitely ended.

We are today faced with the prospect of a Balkan Yalta. If Munich' conjures the image of an unnecessary and self-destructive capitulation before the demands of a mortal enemy, 'Yalta' suggests less cowardice than opportunism: the reaching of a deal with a dangerous rival with whom one does not want to fall out, at the expense of third parties. In reference to a conference between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin in February 1945, 'Yalta' is shorthand for the readiness of the Western Allies to acquiesce in Stalin's carving out of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, as the price for keeping him on board in the war against the Axis. The disgrace of that tacit agreement, about which many people in Poland and other East European countries justifiably still feel bitter, is arguably mitigated by the force of circumstances: the Western Allies simply could not defeat the Nazis and keep the Soviets out of Eastern Europe at the same time.

But one wonders what historians will make of the West's apparent readiness today, to permit Stalin's heir to put his foot in the Balkan door that should long since have been firmly closed in his face, permitting him to derail EU expansion and place under his umbrella an area that not even Stalin had controlled - while we receive nothing whatever in return, not even his goodwill. It is time to reverse this dangerous trend: there should be no Russian meddling no division of the Balkans into spheres of influence.

The whole of the Balkans rightfully belongs in the Western democratic world, ideally in both the EU and NATO. This is scarcely ambitious: with Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece all within both institutions, the states of the western Balkans are now wholly surrounded by EU and NATO members. The incorporation of Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania in the Euro-Atlantic institutions should be merely a question of filling in a hole in the jig-saw, a step that is important if this part of Europe is to prosper and function as an integrated whole. The last thing that Europe, let alone the Balkans needs is a return to the bloodshed that accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Yet by permitting Russia to pose as Serbia's ally and obstruct indefinitely a resolution of the Kosovo question, the EU is pulling the stake from out of the heart of the vampire of Great Serbian nationalism and breathing life back into the body, threatening to raise from the dead the monster that endangered the Western alliance more than any other threat during the 1990s. Only this time, the monster would have a still more dangerous monster at its back, in the form of Vladimir Putin's tyrannical, aggressive and volatile Russian regime. With Russia's encouragement and in the face of EU vacillation, Serbian politicians have threatened to resort to force in the event of any recognition of Kosovo's independence. This could wreck the painfully achieved peace in the Balkans and plunge the region back into violence at a time when we are faced with very real threats elsewhere. No good whatsoever can come from kowtowing to the Serbian and Russian troublemakers: neither has any means - or any real interest - in punishing us if we stand up to them. But by acquiescing in the troublemakers' obstruction, we are perpetuating instability in a region with large and impoverished Muslim populations - a recipe for disaster.

The wars in the former Yugoslavia of the 1990s were the result of the aggressive expansionism of the Serbia of Slobodan Milosevic, fired by ultra-nationalism and catalysed by the West's failure to resist it. British policy-makers, in particular, massively overestimated Serbian military capability, and saw no national interest in resisting Serbian expansionism John Major's

Conservative government preferred to pursue a 'negotiated settlement' that appeased Milosevic. This demonstrated a chronic lack of vision: Balkan stability was a vital European interest, and there could be no Balkan stability while an aggressive regional predator was permitted to expand unpunished.

Nor could Europe simply turn its back on the newly independent states of the former Yugoslavia, and behave as if their destabilisation and dismemberment did not matter. The West's protracted failure to halt the war in Bosnia, its series of dishonourable and rejected peace-plans, discredited the Western alliance and brought Anglo-American relations to their worst state since Suez. The cycle of violence only came to an end with the more resolute policy of Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac NATO military action in Kosovo, followed by the overthrow of Milosevic and his deportation to the Hague, has made possible the regional peace and progress of recent years. The big lesson to draw from this is that attempting to appease Serbian nationalism simply does not work.

There is no possible solution to the Kosovo question that would satisfy both the Serbs and the Kosovars. The Kosovars will not agree to remain part of Serbia on any basis whatsoever, and Serbia will not accept Kosovo's independence. Partition has been mooted by some commentators - including the late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and the controversial American linguist Noam Chomsky. There is even a precedent for partition - it was carried out in World War II by Adolf Hitler, who divided Kosovo between Serbia and Albania, with a slice also going to Bulgaria. But today this, too, remains unacceptable to at least one of the parties, as well as wholly at odds with Western interests: partition would create a dangerous precedent vis-a-vis Bosnia and Macedonia, and further encourage Serbian expansionism. Furthermore, were Serbia to be allowed to annex the northern part of Kosovo, with its artificial Serb majority recently created by ethnic cleansing, the Kosovars might reasonably claim the right to receive the Albanian-majority enclaves in southern Serbia-proper as a *quid pro quo* - further complicating the territorial dispute.

In practice, therefore, there are only two Western options for Kosovo: either

the recognition of its independence within its existing borders, or indefinite procrastination and perpetuation of the status quo. The latter option becomes less attractive as time goes by: it risks, sooner or later, an explosion on the part of the frustrated Albanians the present author was recently told during a visit to Kosovo, by an eminent Kosovo Albanian statesman, that the Albanians are preparing for war in the event of the expected Western capitulation and renewed Serbian assault. Furthermore, perpetuation of the existing non-solution encourages Serbia to attempt provocative acts in what it still claims is its territory it hinders regional recovery and Euro-Atlantic reintegration and it maintains a legal grey zone in a Muslim-inhabited territory that could eventually become a nesting place for Islamist terrorists. Procrastination, therefore, guarantees catastrophe in the long run.

The other option - recognition of Kosovo's independence - has been criticised on legalistic grounds. It is claimed that recognition would violate Serbia's territorial integrity, and that it would have to bypass the UN, since Russia would undoubtedly veto any UN resolution in favour of recognition. Yet neither objection holds water. The idea that Kosovo is simply a part of Serbia, in the way that Devon, for example, is part of England - is a myth. Kosovo was a constitutive member of the defunct Yugoslav Federation in its own right it joined the Republic of Serbia only in 1945, and by a decision of its own, Kosovar, representative body. As a distinct entity within Yugoslavia and Serbia, Kosovo possessed most of the trappings of statehood, including a presidency, government, parliament, constitution, flag and territorial defence. By the 1970s, it had de facto already achieved independence from Serbia.

Nor is Serbia's 'historical claim' to Kosovo a good one: the country had been part of Serbia in the Middle Ages for about two and a half centuries, but was then separate from it for nearly half a millennium. The Serbian claim to Kosovo on the basis of medieval history is rather less good than the Arab claim to most of Spain. Kosovo was already predominantly ethnic-Albanian in 1912, when it was seized by modern Serbia for the first time in a naked act of conquest. There is absolutely no reason why the international community should interpret Serbia as possessing an inalienable right to Kosovo.

UN Resolution 1244, that ended the Kosovo War on 10 June 1999, committed UN members to recognising the 'sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia', a state that no longer exists, having since dissolved into two separate states - Serbia and Montenegro. Since the international community permitted Montenegro and Serbia to declare their independence, in disregard of the 'sovereignty and territorial integrity of the [former] Federal Republic of Yugoslavia', there is no obligation upon us to transfer this respect for 'territorial integrity' onto one of the Federal Republic's successor states.

As for recognition bypassing the UN, it is a bit late in the day to have qualms of this kind: the original NATO intervention to expel Serbian forces from Kosovo, in 1999, was carried out without UN authorisation, in order to bypass the Russian veto. That the European democracies should have been ready to bypass the relatively cooperative pre-Putin Russia in 1999, but are now unwilling to offend the sensibilities of the aggressive and unreasonable Putin regime, can at best be interpreted as a display of weakness in the face of bluster at worst, it may reflect the desire of some of our European allies for an accommodation with Moscow at the expense of both Western interests and the unity of the Western alliance.

Russia's interest in Serbia is purely opportunistic. For all the ignorant talk of the supposed traditional Serbo-Russian friendship, the two states have been opponents more often than friends. Serbia emerged as an independent state in 1878, at a time when Russia was promoting Bulgaria as its Balkan protégé, even to the point of trying to assign parts of present-day Serbia proper to a projected Great Bulgaria. The disgusted Serbian ruler Milan Obrenovic turned to Austria-Hungary in response, and Serbia was an Austro-Hungarian ally for two decades until 1903, when ultra-nationalists seized power and realigned the country with Russia.

The new, brief Serbo-Russian friendship brought catastrophe to both countries, as well as to Europe it was largely responsible for the outbreak of World War I. This resulted in military defeat for both Russia and Serbia the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and Serbia's conquest by Germany and its

allies and the death of one-fifth of the Serbian population. Rescued from defeat by Britain and France, Serbia intervened against the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. The new Serbian-dominated state of Yugoslavia was one of the most bitterly anti-Soviet states in inter-war Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union in turn viewed Belgrade as an enemy, and backed the national movements of the non-Serb Yugoslav peoples, particularly the Croats.

The Soviet Union raised not a finger to oppose the Nazi conquest of Yugoslavia in 1941, even breaking off relations with the exiled Yugoslav government in order to appease Hitler. The Soviet Union nevertheless liberated Serbia in autumn 1944 the campaign was notable for the mass rape of Serbian women by Soviet soldiers. In 1948, Stalin expelled the new Yugoslav Communist regime from the Communist bloc Yugoslavia was probably saved from Soviet invasion only by Stalin's fear of Western intervention and his preoccupation with the Korean War. Yugoslavia's independence from the Communist bloc was then sustained by US credits and loans thanks to this independence, the Warsaw Pact was kept back from the Mediterranean coast during the Cold War.

Thus, even at the height of Soviet power, Serbia was outside of the Soviet sphere. Reference to the Russians' supposed bonds with their 'Slavic Orthodox brothers' provided a convenient excuse for Western inaction during the Bosnian war - despite the fact that the Croats and Bosnian Muslims were just as Slavic as the Serbs, while the atheistic former Communists at the head of the Russian state were scarcely burdened by an excess of Orthodox Christian sentiment.

Russia therefore has no genuine interest in Serbia, either geo-strategic or emotional. Moscow's encouragement of Serbia's intransigence over Kosovo is motivated either by a desire to win concessions elsewhere, or by a desire to obstruct NATO and EU expansion, or simply by a desire to throw Russia's weight around. In pushing Serbia into an unwinnable confrontation with the Western alliance, Russia's behaviour resembles nothing so much as that of a sadistic pub-bully, who provokes a younger and more naive apprentice-bully to get into a fight over an imagined slight - such as a spilt beer - with a

stronger opponent, so that he can enjoy the fracas and the inevitable beating of his dupe from the sidelines.

Serbia is appealing to the UN Security Council over the US's support for Kosovo: a move that is doomed to failure, but that nevertheless is painfully reminiscent of Milosevic's provocative stunts during the 1990s, such as sending a 'fact-finding mission' to the US to investigate 'human-rights abuses' during the Los Angeles riots. Just when Serbia should be devoting its efforts to EU membership and regional cooperation, Russian stirring is pushing it into yet another quixotic nationalistic adventure.

Russia has nothing to lose from this fight it is others - Serbia, Kosovo and the Western alliance - that will pay the price. In the absence of a more resolute stance from Kosovo's friends - above all the US, Britain and France - some of the newer and less sophisticated EU members, above all Slovakia, Romania and Cyprus, are openly supporting Serbia. Unless Britain provides a clear and uncompromising leadership over Kosovo, insisting on Kosovo's prompt recognition regardless of any Serbian or Russian objections, EU disunity is likely to increase. So too is Russian belligerence. In recent months, the Putin regime has launched a sustained campaign to destabilise Estonia, a NATO and EU member systematically harassed the ambassadors of Britain and other EU states in Moscow and buzzed Britain with its air-force. Further Western vacillation over the Kosovo issue is an open invitation to Putin to continue with this behaviour.

So far as Serbia is concerned, Western leaders have long perceived a dilemma: how to get Serbia on board without appeasing Serbian misbehaviour. It has been argued, for example, that we must supposedly temper our insistence on Serbia's arrest of war-criminals with care not to push Serbia too hard, lest Serbia turn away from Europe and from reform and retreat into anti-Western isolation. In short, we must supposedly balance the stick and the carrot in guiding Serbia toward European integration. Practice has shown this to be a false dichotomy: lenience toward Serbia over Kosovo, war-criminals and other issues has only indicated to Belgrade that bad behaviour pays, resulting in more bad behaviour that sets Serbia's

progress toward EU integration back still further. Lenience encourages the hard-line, pro-Russian Serbian nationalists grouped around Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, who argue that resistance and obstruction pay dividends.

There is no possibility here of a quid pro quo: Serbian nationalism is an irrational force, and its proponents do not honour 'gentlemen's agreements' of the kind favoured by conservative British diplomats. Kostunica is an old-style Serbian nationalist who supported the Serbian campaign of expansionism in the 1990s, and whose power rests on the Milosevic-era military-police apparatus he will respond to concessions by seeking more concessions, with the ultimate goal being the overturning of the existing Balkan order his Democratic Party of Serbia openly aspires to Serbia's virtual annexation of Bosnia's Serb Republic. So long as Kostunica and other nationalists hold power in Serbia, Western policy may use the carrot to back up the stick, but cannot use it to replace the stick.

Appeasing the Serbian anti-Western nationalists meanwhile damages the standing of the West's friends, such as President Boris Tadic, who would in all likelihood prefer to be rid of Kosovo and the war-criminals and to pursue European integration unhindered, but cannot appear to be seen as soft on the struggle over 'national' issues as long as it appears worth fighting. In favouring a pro-EU policy irrespective of what happens with Kosovo, and rejecting the dead-end alternative of a pro-Russian course, it is Tadic and not Kostunica who reflects Serbian popular opinion. According to a recent poll published by the Serbian office for European integration, 71% of respondents said that Serbia should not end relations with the EU, even if the EU does recognise Kosovo unilaterally. Far from the Serbian people being gripped by nationalist fervour over Kosovo, it is Russian interference and Western weakness that are sustaining a Serbian nationalist policy in the face of popular indifference.

The Western alliance has an alternative to the stick-and-carrot game with Serbia: to dispense with it entirely and simply wipe the slate clean. The current unsatisfactory order in the Balkans, involving an unresolved Kosovo question and a crippled, non-functioning Bosnian 'state', is the result of

Western policies that have been lacking in vision as to where our long-term interests lie. Our interests are served by stability and normality, not by making tactical concessions to local expansionists that tide us over in the short term but prepare the ground for further instability in the long term. Stability and normality require stable states. A Kosovo denied independence, and a Serbia preoccupied with an unwinnable struggle to retain Kosovo, will not be stable states.

Nor will Bosnia-Herzegovina ever be viable, under its existing constitutional order. Bosnia-Herzegovina is currently divided into two entities, one of which - the Bosnian Federation - is further divided into semi-autonomous cantons. Both Bosnia-Herzegovina itself and the Bosnian Federation are governed by presidencies that rotate between their constituent nationalities. This ramshackle Bosnian constitutional order is the unfortunate by-product of the incompetent Western policy of the 1990s, which belatedly brought about an end to the Bosnian war in 1995 while setting up a Bosnian Serb entity encompassing half of the country. Contemporary Bosnia is literally collapsing under the weight of its bureaucracy and constitutional mess, and permanently paralysed by infighting between Serb, Croat and Muslim nationalist politicians.

Weak Bosnia, like unrecognised Kosovo, represents a permanent temptation to Serbian nationalist politicians, as well as an undigestible element for EU expansion. Europe has been fortunate that, since 2000, Croatia has been headed by responsible politicians who have refrained from joining with Serbia to destabilise Bosnia, but so long as the situation in Bosnia remains unresolved, a future change in Croatian policy for the worse cannot be ruled out. Meanwhile, the failure of the Serb authorities - both in Serbia and in Bosnia's Serb Republic - to arrest war-criminals is complicating and poisoning Serbia's relationship with its natural partners in the West.

We should wipe the slate clean. This means remove all the remaining sources of Balkan insecurity and discontent, by recognising Kosovo's independence, reintegrating Bosnia and, in return, declaring that Serbia will no longer be pressurised over war-criminals, or other issues relating to the wars of the

1990s. There is justice in this: the Dayton Peace Accord committed the Bosnian Muslims and Croats to recognising the Serb Republic in Bosnia, but the Serbs were required to commit themselves to arrest war-criminals. Since the Bosnian Serb leaders have failed, indeed refused, to arrest their two principal war-crimes indictees, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, there is no longer any obligation on the part of the other Bosnians or the international community to continue to recognise the existence of the Serb Republic.

The latter is not an entity, like Kosovo, with a justifiable claim to national self-determination in its own right its territory was about 50% non-Serb prior to the ethnic-cleansing campaigns of the 1990s its whole eastern half had a Muslim majority. Two international courts - the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) - have declared Bosnian Serb forces were guilty of genocide at Srebrenica. The Serb Republic, the product of this genocide, should be steadily transformed into a purely administrative entity within a unitary Bosnian republic its architects, Karadzic and Mladic, who appear to have escaped justice, will learn that they have done so at the price of the Serb Republic's de facto existence.

The Serb Republic could continue to exist on paper, retaining the Serb flag and other Serb symbols as a concession to Bosnian Serb national sentiment. Experience shows that it is precisely over such symbols that nationalism mobilises, and we should do well to defuse potential Serb resistance to Bosnian reintegration by avoiding giving offence in the purely symbolic realm. But de facto power would be transferred to the Bosnian central government, creating a stable and viable Bosnian state for the first time since 1990. Karadzic and Mladic can remain on interpol lists and subject to arrest, should they ever resurface, but Serbia's path to EU integration will no longer be hindered by this issue. The ICTY has proved itself to be extremely arbitrary and inefficient it has failed either to prosecute the real architects of the war or to achieve justice in any recognisable form, and it cannot be made into a shibboleth at the expense of Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration but nor can the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly the Muslims as the principal victims of Serbian war-crimes, be expected to swallow this without

a major concession in return. The reintegration of Bosnia-Herzegovina is precisely the right concession.

With the independence of Kosovo and the virtual dissolution of the Serb Republic, Serbia can be deemed to have paid its debts to society. With a strong, unified Bosnian state and an independent Kosovo as its neighbours, expansionism will no longer be an option for Serbia, for which the path toward the EU will be the only one left. And with all Balkan disputes resolved, there will no longer be any basis for Russian meddling in the region. The Balkans can then assume their rightful role as a pillar of European stability and security.

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