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What is at stake in the struggle for Serbia?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 24th February 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- 1. With the world divided over the recognition of Kosovo's independence, and so many states opposed that are hostile to the West, it is imperative that we do not fail in Kosovo.**
- 2. Moscow is exploiting the Kosovo issue in order to split the EU and derail its expansion.**
- 3. The political struggle taking place in Serbia today is less a struggle for Kosovo, than a struggle between pro-Western democrats on the one hand and those who want to turn Serbia into an authoritarian-nationalist state on the Putin-Lukashenka model on the other.**

4. The Western alliance must stand by democratic Serbia without appeasing the nationalists.

5. We must take steps to strengthen and reintegrate both Kosovo and Bosnia while continuing to draw Serbia into the EU orbit.

‘The list of countries refusing to recognise Kosovo’s sovereignty reads like a global A-Z of separatist strife.’ So says [Reuters](#). Indeed, the division of the world, between states that are and states that are not recognising Kosovo’s independence is very largely a division between the majority of democratic countries on the one hand, and those that *either* themselves fear ‘separatist’ threats to their own territorial integrity, *or* that are politically hostile to the West. Russia falls into the second camp. Having itself promoted the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, and of Transnistria from Moldova, Russia cannot seriously be described as ‘fearing separatism’. Russian President Vladimir Putin has deliberately manufactured an international crisis over the Kosovo issue with the express intention of disrupting the expansion of the EU and NATO and of splitting the ranks of their existing members. This has been openly stated by Moscow’s ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, who has [threatened force in the event that the EU adopts a common policy over Kosovo](#): ‘If the EU works out a single position or if NATO steps beyond its mandate in Kosovo, these organizations will be in conflict with the U.N., and then I think we will also begin operating under the assumption that in order to be respected, one needs to use force.’

Venezuela’s [Hugo Chavez](#) naturally opposes recognition: ‘We do not recognize the independence of Kosovo’, he said; ‘This cannot be accepted. It’s a very dangerous precedent for the entire world’. The parliament of Belarus has [condemned](#) Kosovo’s declaration of independence; Belarus’s despot Alexander Lukashenka [lamenting](#) the fact that opponents of Kosovo’s independence ‘betrayed our fraternal Slavic nation’ in 1999 and failed to defend Serbia from NATO. Sri Lanka’s ambassador to the UN, Dayan Jayatilleka, [criticised Serbia](#) for having failed to stand its ground

against NATO in the Kosovo War: ‘Never withdraw the armed forces from any part of [your] territory in which they are challenged, and never permit a foreign presence on [your] soil.’ (Sri Lanka is fighting a brutal war against its Tamil population). The chorus of voices raised internationally against Kosova’s independence is a chorus of demagogues, despots and xenophobes.

Within the EU, the mature democracies that make up the core of the alliance have been largely united in their readiness to recognise Kosova’s independence. Opposition has come from those whose experience of democracy is more recent and which themselves have nationalistic reasons for opposing recognition: Spain and Greece were dictatorships as recently as the mid-1970s; Slovakia and Romania as recently as 1989. Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus all have strong recent histories of xenophobic bigotry and intolerance. While Spain is in most respects a mature democracy, it is in a sense the exception that proves the rule; its historic fear of Catalan and Basque separation, manifested most brutally by Francisco Franco and the Spanish fascists in the 1930s and after, is guiding its Kosova policy.

In this international context, in which enemies of the West are seeking to attack us over Kosova and profit from our divisions, and with EU ranks suffering from dissention on the part of those members not fully assimilated to post-nationalist European values, it is absolutely essential that our resolution does not waver. Given existing British and US commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, some might be tempted to say that we cannot afford a major commitment in the Balkans. In fact, we cannot afford not to make such a commitment. The danger is that if Russia and Serbia succeed in embarrassing us over Kosova, both our credibility in the eyes of the world and EU unity itself could be jeopardised.

Western credibility was already slightly dented by the [Serb attack](#) on Kosova’s border crossings with Serbia, against which sufficient precautions were not taken. Northern Kosova, with its artificial Serb majority manufactured by ethnic cleansing, has long been an unhealed sore, and is an area where Serb obstructionists can cause problems for us if we do not resolve the problem promptly. An informally partitioned Kosova, such as

exists at present, will not simply be another Cyprus - an annoying problem whose resolution can be postponed indefinitely at minor but bearable cost to Western interests. Serbia in northern Kosova, unlike Turkey in northern Cyprus, is not ready to rest content with a quiet, *de facto* partition. The Serbian government minister for Kosova, Slobodan Samardzic, has [stated openly](#) that the attack on the border crossings was 'in accordance with general [Serbian] government policies.' In other words, Belgrade intends to use northern Kosova as a weapon with which to destabilise the whole of Kosova and the stability of the Western Balkans in general. Indeed, some of the Serbs who attacked the border were in all probability agents of the Serbian Interior Ministry.

Belgrade will undoubtedly make life difficult for newly independent Kosova. Ultimately, however, Serbia is not strong enough to overturn the new order in Kosova. This raises the question of what the Serbian government is hoping to achieve by engaging in a struggle it cannot possibly win. A lot of commentators in the West like to stereotype the Serbian people as irrationally and spontaneously nationalist, and their politicians and statesmen as simply expressions of this characteristic. According to such a model, the attack on the Kosova border, as well as Thursday's demonstration and rioting in Belgrade, simply reflected atavistic Serb nationalism, which reacted to the recognition of Kosova like a bull to a red rag.

In reality, three things about Thursday's demonstration are apparent. The first is that a demonstration of that size does not take place spontaneously; it was the result of careful planning and organisation by the Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and his supporters and allies, above all Tomislav Nikolic's extreme-right Serbian Radical Party. Workers and schoolchildren were given the day off and bussed into Belgrade from all over the country to participate. The second point to note is that, this being the case, a demonstration that enjoyed the full logistical support of the Serbian state but still numbered only 150-200,000 is actually a fairly sorry affair. Milosevic's regime in its prime was capable of mobilising demonstrations several times larger, reaching up to and above one million people. And the third point to note is that the demonstration rapidly spawned a riot in which,

not only the US embassy was attacked but also the Croatian and Bosnian embassies, McDonald's restaurants and several shops, some of which were looted in the process. In other words, this was a demonstration of the state-organised [hooligan fringe](#) of Serbian society, to which the ordinary citizens and celebrities who attended merely added a respectable veneer.

'The "dangerous class", the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.' - Karl Marx

During the Kosovo War of 1999, I lived for more than a month in an ordinary Belgrade suburb, solely in the company of the native people of Belgrade and without any contact with other foreigners. Several times, during and immediately after this war, I crossed the Serbian international border. During this period, on *not one single occasion* did I, as a Briton, experience so much as a curse or a rude word from any Serbian citizen or border guard, despite the fact that my country's airforce was bombing their country. One border guard even said to his colleague, in front of me, that what NATO was doing had nothing to do with me, but was the fault of higher powers. The Serbian people, for the most part, are not hooligans and do not engage in random acts of mob violence and destruction. Why should yesterday's demonstrators have attacked McDonald's restaurants, when during the Kosovo War the local management of these restaurants patriotically (as they saw it) supported the Serbian defence against NATO? McDonald's posters in 1999 Belgrade displayed the colours of the Serbian flag and promised a share of their profits to a fund for military invalids. Those who view themselves as engaged in a righteous act of national self-defence (as most Serbian people, however misguidedly, genuinely did in 1999), do not degrade themselves with acts of rioting and looting. One rioter was burned to death in the attack on the US embassy; this wave of violence, which has already produced [dozens of injuries](#) in recent days, is already violent in comparison with the revolution that overthrew Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000.

This rioting and looting was not just the action of a few troublemakers; it is an expression of the new climate of violence and intimidation that the Kostunica regime and its allies in the Serbian Radical Party and other extreme right-wing and nationalist groups are deliberately encouraging. Hence the deliberate failure of the police to restrain the rioters or to protect the embassies. Former Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic **said** of the police: ‘I am sure they were told to let thugs smash all embassies on their way and then to deal with the aftermath.’ He said that Kostunica’s supporters ‘are now in a position to freely spit on everything that sounds and looks even remotely European... This is the decline of democracy in Serbia.’ Serbian Minister of the Economy Mladjan Dinkic **condemned** the ‘political parties that are justifying hooliganism, and are abusing the misery of the Serbian nation for political gains.’ Dinkic is an ally of Serbia’s pro-European President Boris Tadic. Significantly, the Croatian and Bosnian embassies were also attacked, even though Bosnia has no plans to recognise Kosova while Croatia has been fairly reticent about it: the vandals were venting chauvinistic rage - against symbols of the West and against Serbia’s ‘enemies’ in general - that reflects the new climate, and that has little specifically to do with Kosova. The Radicals, who provide the backbone to this nationalist coalition, are **bona fide fascists**: direct and conscious political heirs of the Nazi-collaborationist Chetniks of World War II; friends of France’s Jean-Marie Le Pen; and organisers of paramilitary forces directly involved in the mass-murder and ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia in the 1990s.

The target is not ultimately the US and its allies, or even the Kosova Albanians, but domestic opponents. **Thugs attacked** the headquarters in several cities of the Liberal Democratic Party in Serbia, which accepts Kosova’s right to self-determination, as well as the homes of its leaders. According to Liberal Democrat sources, government minister Velimir Ilic **threatened** that Liberal Democrat leader Cedomir Jovanovic should feel ‘lucky if he stays alive until March, but that it will not be easy.’ Serbia’s organs of law and order have failed to respond to the attacks on the Liberal Democrats. Aleksandar Vucic, Secretary General of the Radicals, **said** the victims were themselves to blame: ‘parties which recognize

Kosovo's independence were responsible for the riots.' Serbia's leading independent media station, B92, is also under threat. According to its director, [Veran Matic](#): 'The threats escalated in the last couple of days through e-mails and on different internet forums where some people openly make plans for burning the B92 building. This building is state property and B92 is only a tenant. The last threat came as a video on Youtube in which someone calls for the assassination of our journalists. The B92 shop in the centre of Belgrade was destroyed during the protest last Sunday.' Ilic personally [threatened](#): 'Those people at B92 and other media had better be careful how they talk about those young people [the rioters].' When rebuked by Snezana Markovic, Minister for Youth and Sport, Ilic threatened her too: 'Madam, you have been in sports for two months, and I have been for twenty years. Be careful, the sportspeople will come to you.'

Over the past week, reporters, photographers and TV crews have been frequently attacked and injured by masked assailants. Meanwhile Ivica Dacic, the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia, [said](#) he would call for a ban on all political parties and non-governmental organisations which recognise Kosovo's independence. He singled out in particular the human-rights activist Natasa Kandic.

Although it is the media, human-rights activists and the Liberal Democrats that are on the receiving end of the violence, the ultimate target is the section of the Serbian political establishment grouped around pro-European President Tadic and his Democratic Party, which shares power in Serbia's coalition government with Kostunica's supporters. Tadic defeated the Radical leader Tomislav Nikolic in the presidential election earlier this month, and has been falling out with his erstwhile ally, Prime Minister Kostunica, who failed to support him against Nikolic, while Kostunica's own popular support has been dwindling. The nationalists grouped around Nikolic and Kostunica were therefore faced with a political eclipse. They are using the Kosova crisis to regain the upper hand in their power-struggle with Tadic. The latter is the prisoner of his own contradictory policy: pro-European but supportive of the nationalist position over Kosova, he has found himself outflanked by the chauvinistic eruption that Kostunica is

fostering. Serbian Defence Minister Dragan Sutanovic, a member of Tadic's Democratic Party, [said](#) that yesterday was 'one of Belgrade's saddest days' on account of the violence. But it is a tragedy for which Tadic and the Democratic Party are in large part responsible: by failing to challenge the nationalist consensus over Kosova, they have left themselves and democratic Serbia defenceless against an assault of this kind. For all his undoubted pro-European sympathies, Tadic has played the role of a Serbian [Hindenburg](#). This may not save him: on the day of the Belgrade demonstration, Russian state television [lauded the assassination](#) of his predecessor, Serbian Prime Minister and Democratic Party leader Zoran Djindjic, describing him as a 'puppet of the West' who 'received the bullet he deserved'.

The nationalist-fascist coalition behind Nikolic and Kostunica is therefore trying to achieve through mob violence and intimidation what its members have failed to achieve through the polls. Its ultimate goal is the establishment of a Putin- or Lukashenka-style authoritarian-nationalist regime in Serbia, under which the media will be controlled, journalists and human-rights activists assassinated when necessary, and the economy [colonised by Russia](#). Serbia's suspension of diplomatic relations with Western states that are recognising Kosova conveniently burns the bridges to the democratic West and creates the isolation that the nationalists crave. This is not what most Serbian people want. It is one thing to be unhappy about the loss of Kosova, but to favour turning Serbia into an isolated, impoverished Cuban- or North-Korean-style satrapy of Russia, under a repressive regime that condones mob rule and murders dissidents, is quite another. The opinion of the majority of Serbians is probably best represented by Tadic: angry about losing Kosova, they nevertheless do not want this issue to stand in the way of Serbia's European integration. The Serb-nationalist commentator at the inappropriately named website [Antiwar.com](#), Nebojsa Malic, a supporter of Nikolic and of the late Milosevic, [wrote bitterly](#) that Tadic's election victory proved that the Serbian people were insufficiently warlike, and would not want war in response to the loss of Kosova: 'After all, what are the Serbs going to do, fight? They've just shown they don't have the guts.' Which is one way of describing a healthy Serbian popular aversion to renewed war and isolation. But as in Italy in the early 1920s and Germany in the early

1930s, a violent, determined minority is entirely capable of intimidating and crushing a passive majority.

This brings us back to where we began: the alignment of forces in the world for and against Kosova's independence. On the one side stands most of the democratic world; on the other, an unholy alliance of authoritarian regimes that are either hostile to the West, or that want to be free to crush their subject nationalities without fear of outside interference. The conflict within Serbia is essentially the same struggle in miniature. In this context, to abandon democratic Serbia - both the mainstream pro-European democrats under Tadic and the brave independent journalists and human rights activists - would be to hand a victory to our enemies globally.

We must stand by democratic Serbia. This means continuing to work with all pro-European elements towards Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration, while pressing them to confront more resolutely the chauvinistic poison. Tadic must be pressed to come down off the fence, to break completely with Kostunica and the nationalists and to repudiate publicly their destabilisation of Kosova and intimidation of domestic opponents. *Not one inch of ground* should be conceded to the nationalist-fascist coalition, in Kosova, Bosnia or anywhere else. Milorad Dodik, Prime Minister of Bosnia's Serb Republic (Republika Srpska - RS), [spoke](#) at yesterday's demonstration in Belgrade and aligned himself with the nationalists, stating that Serbia, and not Bosnia, was the RS's 'fatherland'. This appears to mark the beginning of his campaign to [break up Bosnia](#) and unite the RS with Serbia to form a Great Serbia. It is high time that we completed the reintegration into a unified Bosnia of the RS - the product of a genocide that the International Court of Justice, European Court of Human Rights and the UN's war-crimes tribunal in the Hague have all recognised. This would serve the dual purpose of reducing the nationalist ability for mischief-making in the Balkans and strengthening Bosnia as a pillar of the European order. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement should be signed with Serbia as soon as possible - to punish Serbia with further isolation would only play into the hands of the nationalist-fascist coalition that *wants* isolation. Above all, we must take the necessary steps to secure fully the Kosova-Serbia border, prevent the entry of

Serbian government personnel and other trouble-makers, and rapidly reintegrate northern Kosova with the rest of the country.

This is a battle that, provided the leaders of Europe and the US are resolute, we cannot lose. It will not be won overnight; as with the overthrow of Milosevic, the defeat of the new crop of Serbian fascists may require years of patient promotion of a democratic alternative. But if our will falters and we do lose, the consequences could be catastrophic, not just for the Balkans, but for Europe and the world.

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