

# The Russian “Return” to the Western Balkans

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## **Introduction:**

### **The Western Balkans in Russian Geopolitical Thinking**

After the demise of communism in Russia, Marxism-Leninism was in some sense replaced with geopolitical thinking. Meanwhile, Russian geopolitics is much more than an academic debate separate from public interest, but plays a crucial role in official foreign and security policy. Most of the current reflections on geopolitics in Russia hinge on the notion – accepted or actively advocated by the political elite as well as the public – that the country is “condemned to be a superpower” and that “Russia without an empire would be unthinkable”. On this premise Moscow has defined its interests in the southern periphery of Russia as well as within and outside the Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS. In doing so, Russia’s way of dealing with geopolitics focuses, in particular, on certain “areas of influence”, “spheres of interest” (often emphasized by adding the adjective “vital”), “buffer zones”, “geopolitical regions” as well as competitors for natural resources and transport corridors.

In the context of such approaches, the Western Balkans plays a significant role. From Moscow’s point of view, it is – albeit its small territorial size – one of several theatres of a geopolitical struggle between Russia and its allies (and in particular, Serbia) on the one hand and the U.S. and NATO with their allies on the other. This is no new configuration; it was already obvious during the Yugoslav break-up wars in the first half of the 1990s and gained special momentum in view of NATO’s Kosovo campaign against rump Yugoslavia in 1999, when most of the Russian media and politicians (and even “democratic”-minded, not to mention nationalists and communists) were furious. Many demanded immediate

weapons shipments and/or the deployment of Russian military advisors to Yugoslavia, and some predicted even a “Third World War”.<sup>1</sup>

Nartov’s quite popular textbook on geopolitics for universities, whose fourth edition was published in Moscow in 2007, gives a good survey of the predominant Russian views on the Balkans, which are called “one of the most important geopolitical and strategic priorities” [of the Kremlin]. The volume condemns “the West” for its alleged attempts to “interfere in the domestic affairs of the Slavic peoples”. Russia “has to play a leading role in the Balkan game” and to “spoil plans of the Atlantists to impose solutions in the realm of security, which would rule out Moscow’s presence there, upon the Serbs and Bulgars”. And Moscow should “achieve, that decisions about the fate of the Slavic peoples are made by the UN Security Council [...] and not the U.S., Germany or England”.<sup>2</sup> Nartov calls the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo literally “guests” (gosti), the Serbs of the region “masters” (khozyaeva). For him, it is beyond discussion that Albania wants to “annex Kosovo” and that “the Albanians” intend to “tear away” their ethnical territories from Macedonia. Nartov gives recommendations as well: “From a geopolitical viewpoint, it is most reasonable to support Serbia, because this grants presence on the Balkans and an essential [Russian] role there. A strong Serbia acts as a counterbalance to the rising influence of Turkey in the Black Sea, in Bulgaria and on the Balkans”.<sup>3</sup>

## **Russia and the Serbian Parliamentary Elections in May 2008**

From the Russian point of view, Serbian politicians like Zoran Djindjić, Boris Tadić, and Liberal Democratic Party leader Čedomir Jovanović are “theirs”, whereas Slobodan Milošević, Vojislav Šešelj, Vojislav Ko-

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Malek, *Rußland und der Kosovo-Krieg*. Erich Reiter (Ed.): *Der Krieg um das Kosovo 1998/99*. Mainz 2000, pp. 145-155.

<sup>2</sup> The reason for this is obvious – Russia as a permanent member of the Security Council has the power of veto.

<sup>3</sup> N. A. Nartov and V. N Nartov (eds.), *Geopolitika*. Moskva 2007, pp. 308-311.

štunica, and Tomislav Nikolić are “ours”. Nikolić, for example, recently said: “I admit that I like the Russians. This nation is very close to me”.<sup>4</sup>

*Kommersant*, probably Russia’s best daily newspaper, shortly before the elections featured the headline “Russia may receive the majority in the Serbian parliament”,<sup>5</sup> meaning that parties with a “pro-Russian” orientation could prevail over forces, considered as “anti-Russian”. And this really occurred on election day, 11 May 2008: The Radicals got 29.1%, Koštunica’s Democratic Party of Serbia, or DSS, 11.3 and the Socialists 7.9%. This gave them the control of 128 out of the 250 MPs. Nevertheless, many Russian politicians and media outlets had to try very hard to hide their disappointment, because Tadić’s coalition “For a European Serbia” won a relative majority with 38.7% and 102 seats.

## **Asylum for Milošević’s Family Members in Russia and the “Anchorman Scandal”**

Milošević’s widow, Mirjana Marković, and their son Marko Milošević entered a Moscow police station in March 2005 and made a formal request for political asylum. The Russian Federal Migration Service admitted at the beginning of February 2008 that both have been granted asylum despite the fact that they were (and are) on Interpol’s wanted list. Serbia’s Justice Ministry said in a statement later this month that it has formally asked Russia to extradite Marković and her son. Belgrade previously issued international arrest warrants for the two, who are wanted for fraud in connection with an alleged cigarette-smuggling ring that operated during the 1990s. On 28 February 2008, Russian news agency Interfax quoted a spokesman for the Russian Migration Service as saying

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<sup>4</sup> Renate Flottau, „Dann wird es Krieg in Europa geben!“ (Interview). Spiegel Online, 23 May 2008, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,553871,00.html> (accessed 24 May 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Zygar, Serbia Tied with St. George’s Ribbon. Russia may receive the majority in the Serbian parliament. *Kommersant*, 12 May 2008, [http://www.kommersant.com/p890573/Russian-Serbian\\_relations](http://www.kommersant.com/p890573/Russian-Serbian_relations) (accessed 20 May 2008).

that “we will not extradite them. They were granted refugee status in Russia”.<sup>6</sup>

Konstantin Syomin, anchor of the “Vesti Plus” nightly news program of the “Rossiya” TV channel, commented at the occasions of clashes in Belgrade after the declaration of independence of Kosovo on 17 February 2008, referring to the killing of Serbian Prime Minister Djindjić in 2003: “The people of Belgrade surely remember today other demonstrations when they went berserk to overthrow good old Slobodan Milošević. How the nation, stupefied by liberal promises, lamented the dead Western puppet Zoran Djindjić – a man who destroyed the legendary Serbian army and intelligence services, who sold the heroes of Serbian resistance to [the International Tribunal in] The Hague in exchange for abstract economic aid and who got for all that a well-deserved bullet”.<sup>7</sup> The Serbian Foreign Ministry demanded an apology, calling Syomin’s comments “offensive”, “absolutely unacceptable” and “justifying the murder of a democratically elected prime minister”.<sup>8</sup> – “Rossiya” is a *de facto* government-controlled channel, and its news content is strictly censored by the Kremlin. There is no doubt that Syomin only frankly stated what a formidable part of the Russian political elite thinks. However, the affair did not lead to any noticeable deterioration of Russian-Serbian relations: Obviously, both sides proceeded from the assumption that only “the West” would benefit from a persistent dispute between them, so they decided to brush this scandal under the carpet as soon as possible.

## **Kosovo’s Independence and Serbian-Russian Relations**

Radical Party leader Nikolić demanded in December 2007 the setup of a Russian military base in Serbia. He continued that his country is not

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<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL Newline, Vol. 12, No. 41, Part II, 29 February 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, Kremlin Continues to Blast the West Over Kosova. Eurasia Daily Monitor (The Jamestown Foundation), 27 February 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Ministarstvo spoljnih poslova Republike Srbije: Srbija protestovala zbog izjava na ruskoj televiziji, Beograd, 23. februara 2008, [http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Srpski/ Press frame16.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Srpski/Pressframe16.htm) (accessed 24 May 2008)

strong enough to fight NATO troops that have been deployed in Kosovo since 1999.<sup>9</sup> Nikolić was echoed by Bishop Artemije of Raško-Prizren, who stated in February 2008 that a Russian military presence in Serbia would be “necessary” in order to prevent Kosovo’s independence. Furthermore, he called upon “Russia and other countries” to “send their volunteers to help us in our righteous fight”.<sup>10</sup> – On the occasion of this statement, only very few Western European and North American observers and media outlets brought back to the mind of the public that Russian “volunteers” had joined Serbian paramilitary forces in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo already in the 1990s.

Russia has harshly condemned the declaration of independence of Kosovo and its subsequent recognition by several countries. Moscow’s permanent representative to NATO, nationalist hardliner Dmitri Rogozin, told the press that European politicians may have been bribed by ethnic Albanian drug dealers to recognize Kosovo.<sup>11</sup> And so far, there is no reason to doubt Moscow’s assurance that it will under no circumstances recognize its independence. Yet in mid-May 2008, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called for a “resumption of talks” about a determination of Kosovo’s status between Prishtina and Belgrade.<sup>12</sup> Russia and China block Kosovo’s admission to the UN and insist that any decision about its status must be approved by the Security Council. Moscow even wanted the Council to nullify Prishtina’s independence declaration.

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<sup>9</sup> Serb radical wants Russia military base. UPI, 18 December 2007, [http://www.upi.com/NewsTrack/Top\\_News/2007/12/18/serb\\_radical\\_wants\\_russia\\_military\\_base/4356/](http://www.upi.com/NewsTrack/Top_News/2007/12/18/serb_radical_wants_russia_military_base/4356/) (accessed 19 May 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Kosovo bishop claims for Russia’s military presence in Serbia. Interfax, 14 February 2008, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=4277> (accessed 1 March 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Rogozin: narkomafiya Kosova mogla sponsirovat protsess priznaniya kraya. RIA Novosti, 22 February 2008, <http://www.rian.ru/world/20080222/99873528.html> (accessed 24 May 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Rossiya, Indiya i Kitay vystupayut za peregovory mezhdou Belgradom i Prishtinoy – Lavrov. ITAR-TASS, 15 May 2008, <http://www.itar-tass.ru/news/?id=37004> (accessed 24 May 2008).

## Kosovo as a “Precedent” for Separatist State Entities in the CIS?

The United States and EU countries which support Kosovo’s independence stress that the matter is a “unique case”, while Moscow initially insisted that it would entitle Russia to recognize and officially protect post-Soviet secessionist state entities, in particular the so-called “Dniestr Republic” (Moldova), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia) and Nagorno Karabakh (Azerbaijan). The Russian Foreign Ministry at the beginning of March 2008 sent a note to the Executive Committee of the CIS informing it that it is lifting trade, financial, and transportation sanctions against Abkhazia. In April President Vladimir Putin instructed the Russian Government to draft measures to provide “specific support for the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”<sup>13</sup> and to establish cooperation with the bodies of the *de facto* state power in these regions in trade, the economy, social affairs, science, engineering, information, culture, and education. And in the aftermath of its military campaign against Georgia in August 2008, Moscow officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “independent states”.

From the pragmatic Russian point of view, there are, apparently, two kinds of separatists – “ours” and “theirs”. Moscow supports the first and condemns and goes after the last. On the one hand, Moscow pledged to “wiped out”, “destroy”, “erase” etc. its own separatists in Chechnya and posed as defender of territorial integrity under international law with regard to Serbia; and on the other hand, Russia supports the seizure of territories from Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.

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<sup>13</sup> Russia Lifts Sanctions from Abkhazia. Kommersant, 7 March 2008, [http://www.kommersant.com/p864557/unrecognized\\_states/](http://www.kommersant.com/p864557/unrecognized_states/) (accessed 8 March 2008). – The CIS member states had imposed sanctions on Abkhazia in 1996. Several Russian media outlets took the abolishment of these “sanctions” as a response to Kosovo’s independence declaration. However, they have never been effective; it was always a matter of common knowledge that Abkhazia’s economy almost totally relied on Russia. For example, the separatists use the Russian rouble as their currency. Therefore Moscow’s withdrawal from the CIS “sanctions” had only symbolic, but no practical meaning.

## **Some Aspects of Russian Economic Expansion into the Balkans**

### **The Oil Pipeline Burgas – Alexandropolis**

On 15 March 2007 Russia, Bulgaria, and Greece signed an intergovernmental agreement to build the Trans-Balkan oil pipeline Burgas–Alexandropolis. It is designed to carry Russian and Russian-delivered Caspian oil from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, bypassing the overcongested Turkish Straits. If carried out, it would become the first-ever Russian-controlled pipeline on EU and NATO territory.

### **The South Stream Gas Pipeline**

The South Stream project was announced on 23 June 2007, when Alexander Medvedev, senior manager of the Kremlin-controlled Russian gas monopoly Gazprom, and Paolo Scaroni, CEO of Italian energy company Eni, signed a memorandum of understanding about the construction of this pipeline. On 18 January 2008, Bulgaria joined South Stream. A week later, Serbia did the same.<sup>14</sup> President Putin said after the signing ceremony: “With the signing of these agreements Serbia becomes a key transit junction in the emerging system providing energy supplies from Russia [...] to the whole European continent”.<sup>15</sup> On 25 February 2008, Chairman of Gazprom Management Committee Alexei Miller and Srbijagas Director Saša Ilić signed in Belgrade an agreement on cooperation for the construction of a gas pipeline to carry natural gas across the territory of Serbia.<sup>16</sup> At the same day, Russia and Hungary agreed to

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<sup>14</sup> Serbia, Russia sign energy cooperation agreement. Government of the Republic of Serbia, 25 January 2008, <http://www.srbija.sr.gov.yu/vesti/vest.php?id=42603> (accessed 24 May 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Brian Whitmore, Russia: Gazprom’s Advance Into Europe Continues. RFE/RL Features Article, 25 January 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Agreement on cooperation between Serbia and Russia in oil and gas industries signed. Government of the Republic of Serbia, 25 February 2008, <http://www.srbija.sr.gov.yu/vesti/vest.php?id=43573&q=gazprom> (accessed 24 May 2008).

set up an equally owned joint company to build and operate the Hungarian section of the pipeline. On 29 April 2008, Russia and Greece signed an intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the construction and operation of the Greek section of South Stream.

All these deals were heavy blows to the ambitions of some EU member countries and their oil and gas companies to build the so-called Nabucco pipeline, which would bring gas from the Caspian Basin and the Middle East via Turkey to Europe. The exact route of the South Stream pipeline is not disclosed yet, but it is obvious that it is a political project to counter Nabucco and to expand Russian economic and political presence in the region. The Nabucco project was conceived to allow the EU to reduce its dependence on Russia, which already supplies a quarter of the bloc's natural gas. However, the initiative has been dogged by logistical delays, lack of political will and disputes over financing.

### **The Gazprom-NIS-Deal**

On 25 January 2008, Gazprom Neft, Gazprom's oil arm, signed an agreement on the acquisition terms for a controlling stake (51%) in the Serbian state-owned oil company Naftna Industrija Srbije, or NIS. The Russian side expects to close the deal by the end of 2008. However, pro-European critics in Belgrade said that the agreement sells off NIS for a fraction of its market value to pay back a "political debt" to Russia for its support over Kosovo. Nevertheless, two days before the parliamentary elections in May 2008 the Serbian cabinet unanimously voted to conclude an agreement on oil and gas with Russia to allow Gazprom to acquire NIS.

### **Montenegro in Deripaska's Pocket?**

Montenegro attracts more foreign investment per capita than any other country in Europe, well over 1.000 US Dollars for each of its 650 000



people.<sup>17</sup> A sizeable share of it comes from Russia. Pro-Kremlin tycoon Oleg Deripaska has bought the aluminium factory KAP in the capital Podgorica, which is the biggest single contributor to the GDP of the country, and the bauxite mines of Nikšić. In 2007, Deripaska purchased 30 % of the Austrian company Strabag, a co-owner of Montenegro's road construction company Crnagoraput. His attempt to buy the coal-mine in Pljevlja and the only coal-fired power station of the country, which produces one-third of its energy, almost generated a political crisis as the acquisition would have placed Deripaska in control of about 40 percent of Montenegro's economy.

## **Conclusion and Outlook**

In the context of Russian post-Soviet geopolitical approaches, the Western Balkans plays a quite significant role. Russia has since the beginning of the 1990s never left any doubt that it considers rump Yugoslavia and then Serbia as its main partner. Moscow capitalizes on strong pro-Russian sentiments in Serbia's political elite and society and supports Belgrade in any significant issue, above all with regard to Kosovo. Russian state-controlled energy companies and pro-Kremlin oligarchs are very active in the Balkans, intending to expand Moscow's economic and political influence in the region and beyond.

Russia's stance on the Balkans will certainly not change in the foreseeable future. The EU so far lacks a clear-cut strategy to deal with this challenge – especially in the sphere of energy politics, where Moscow does its best to maintain and, if possible, to enhance the Union's dependence on Russian energy resources.

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<sup>17</sup> Oana Lungescu, Russians prompt boom in Montenegro. BBC News, 21 February 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7255240.stm> (accessed 24 May 2008).