

# Helsinki bulletin



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## RUSSIA AND SERBIA



REUTERS

### RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN SERBIA

Serbia's diopter often blows up Russia's interest in it. Moscow's last foreign policy document touches on Serbia only twice. It mentions it once when stating that together with Armenia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Cuba and Syria, Serbia is among the countries "the Russian Federation has supported steadily" and, therefore, expects from them "concrete economic compensation, including privileged import, investment, transit, etc. regimes in accordance to /each country's/ international isolation." It refers to Serbia for the second time when suggesting, "Cooperation with Serbia in the domain of thermal energy should

be activated, primarily in the realization of the South Stream construction project and implementation of the Military-Technical Agreement.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, one should not underestimate the significance Moscow attaches to its "Serbia-wise position" in the Balkans. Skeptical about EU's integration capacity in the long run and hoping to see EU's core /around Berlin/ crystallize differently, Russia has been cooperating with the countries of "old Europe" and in parallel

<sup>1</sup> NIN, 23. avgust.2012

focusing on the “problematic rest,” Europe’s periphery: the Balkans. It tries its best to be present where it should be present – in this periphery – when the expected EU enlargement begins. So it endeavors to keep its political, and even more economic, standing in Serbia, the country customarily confused about its identity and thorn between the tradition and the modernity.

Incapable of coping with modern times, Serbia has been a knotty partner to the West and Moscow alike. There have been ups and downs in Kremlin’s “success chart” in Belgrade. Russia has dragged on the financial support Serbia needed badly. Instead of “yet another loan” all Serbia’s governments hoped to get easily from Russia, they got “long-term” visions.

According to some observers in the West, “Serbia is the main goal of Russia’s policy for the Western Balkans” considering Moscow’s strategy for hindering democratic transformation in the Balkans and in East Europe.<sup>2</sup> By keeping Serbia away from EU and NATO can safeguard the pivot of its influence in the region with reliance on the unsettled Kosovo issue.

## RUSSIA AND KOSOVO

Kosovo has been the crucial link in the chain of Serbia’s cooperation with Moscow and its plan to undermine and, if possible, prevent its independence. As for Russia, a UNSC member-state, tarrying resolution of the Kosovo problem and turning it into yet another “frozen conflict” – like Pridnestrovie or Karabakh – would ensure its “Balkan role” in the longer run. The commentary the Voice of Russia aired on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Republika Srpska – this broadcaster sees as capable of coordinating the process of unification of Serb ethnicity

2 [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39920&cash=b22a66e254427ded96233bfc56e6243a](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39920&cash=b22a66e254427ded96233bfc56e6243a).

– testifies of the potential “field of action” for Russia in this region:

“...It /Republika Srpska/ is concerned with Serbs in Kosovo, maintains close relations with Serbia and helps it /Serbia/ to pull through...The International Institute of Middle East and Balkan Studies in Ljubljana takes that the Banjaluka-Belgrade-Moscow triangle that will secure safe action to Serbs has already been established.”<sup>3</sup>

Commenting on the significance of Republika Srpska, the Voice of Russia continues, “This Serb victory in Bosnia-Herzegovina is worthy of respect given Serb losses elsewhere – in Croatia, Kosovo and Montenegro. They have strengthened their statehood in Bosnia-Herzegovina only. Today’s Serbia is in a deplorable state due to the policies of former governments: it has lost national compass and feeling of patriotism, it has false goals, it is economically devastated and it has an impotent army that behaves like a servant rather than a master in its own home. Today, only Republika Srpska respects its own people and has become a pivot of Serbhood in the Balkans...Republika Srpska is no longer concerned with its survival only but makes plans for a wider platform: it tries to find answers to the problems plaguing all Serbs, from Kosovo, through Montenegro to Croatia; it plans joint actions for protection of Serbs in the Balkans; it invites all Serbs in the region to unite in a common policy and for a common goal. Republika Srpska is ready to help Serbia to become stronger and more independent...Milorad Dodik works for the protection of the Serb people regardless of the countries of their domicile.”<sup>4</sup>

Moscow and Belgrade established close cooperation on the issue of Kosovo. In 2004 and at the request of Vojislav Kostunica cabinet Russia

3 [http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012\\_09\\_28/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_09_28/)

[republika-srpska-kao-faktor-stabilnosti-na-balkanu/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_09_28/republika-srpska-kao-faktor-stabilnosti-na-balkanu/).

4 [http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012\\_09\\_28/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_09_28/)

[republika-srpska-kao-faktor-stabilnosti-na-balkanu/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_09_28/republika-srpska-kao-faktor-stabilnosti-na-balkanu/).

promised to help Serbia in UN in its campaign against recognition of Kosovo independence. Russia's advocacy for Serbia's cause implied harmonized foreign policy steps by the two parties. However, in 2010, during Boris Tadic's presidency, Belgrade eschewed harmonization when it withdrew its draft Kosovo resolution – emphasizing that “unilateral secession cannot be an acceptable method for the resolution of territorial disputes” - in UN General Assembly.

Moscow was taken aback. Its relations with the government in Belgrade, formed around the “pro-European” Democratic Party, became chilly. According to the Voice of Russia, Boris Tadic was the most responsible for such an unexpected turn. “Not a single person in Serbia is unaware of all the things Boris Tadic is to blame. Gentle and warmhearted to the eye, he was a resolute decision-maker and brought Serbia to the verge of destruction, to actual dissolution (Kosovo, Vojvodina, South Serbia),” quoted the commentary of the Voice of Russia.<sup>5</sup>

However, the blow struck against official relations did not disturb the relations between Russia and the “mainstream Serbia” represented by nationally oriented political groupings. This “mainstream Serbia” worships Putin and despises “traitors” among Belgrade authorities. Even President Tomislav Nikolic admitted how thing stand by saying to Putin, “I wouldn't have won the election only if I had Vladimir Putin running for Serbia's presidency.”<sup>6</sup>

Alexander Putin - Russian ambassador advocating Russia's cause with missionary fervor but also with sternness of a delegated apparatchik - spared no effort to save “close, brotherly relations between two Eastern Orthodox nations” when Democratic Party tried to channel Serbia towards the West. He was a diplomat who never

withheld his criticism of the government he was accredited with. He admonished Belgrade relentlessly as if he thought the greater part of Serbia understood him better than its own government. He was called “Serb Ambassador to Serbia.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2009, commenting on the criticism of the Serbia-Russia agreement on the sale of NIS (Oil Industry of Serbia) that benefited Russia, Konuzin told the press that some members of the Serbian government “opposed the development of Russia-Serbia relations.” The Ambassador's high-toned question, “Are there any Serbs here?” posed to the participants in the panel discussion on security issues in the heart of Belgrade probably raised even more controversy. Konuzin was annoyed by the debate focusing on global security and Russia's pretension in the Balkans rather than on barricades at Brnjak and Jarinje border crossing stations in Kosovo North.

Before leaving Belgrade (2012) Konuzin said, “I am leaving you closely tied to Russia.” This is how he summed up his activities in Belgrade – he was satisfied because the Russia-Serbia “train of closeness” was back on track.<sup>8</sup>

Democratic Party, a driving force of the pro-West policy, lost the elections. Its leader, Boris Tadic, was defeated by Tomislav Nikolic, leader of Serb Progressive Party /SNS/, in the presidential race. The newly elected President Nikolic and his party are deeply inclined to Russia. The Socialists that used to be in coalition with the Democrats joined Progressists after the elections. Moscow was working and mediating behind the scenes. Having visited Moscow, Ivica Dacic, leader of Socialist Party of Serbia /SPS/, decided to break up with Tadic and make a coalition with SNS. He had also paid a visit to Moscow before his party formed the government with DS in 2008 and

5 [http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012\\_12\\_22/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_12_22/)

*Promene-na-političkoj-sceni-Srbije/.*

6 <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/15447> .

7 [http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012\\_09\\_17/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_09_17/)

*Aleksandra-Konuzina-za-pocasnog-građanina-Srbije/.*

8 Večernje novosti, September 15, 2012.

denied Russia's influence afterwards. But this time he made no bones about Moscow's insistence on a coalition with the Progressists.<sup>9</sup>

Moscow had many reasons to put across the message Konuzin gave voice to – Serbs, you are back on the right course and must be careful now. “I would like to wish Serbs to resume trust in their own power; to be inspired by the heroes of their history, to get united and build a new Serbia, to look after every inch of the territory they have inherited from their ancestors... Russia will always be your closest friend,” said Konuzin.<sup>10</sup>

Asked about his overt “sympathy” for SNS and SPS, and the chances for the new government to pursue “the policy that will bring Serbia even closer to Russia,” Konuzin explained that he had cherished relations with all the parties friendly to Russia. “And such parties make up a great majority over here,” he added. Commenting on the newly formed government, Konuzin said, “Judging by what officials of the ruling coalition are saying and the steps the Serb leadership is taking now, our two countries will really become closer to each other and enter a qualitatively new era of bilateral relations.” He confirmed Russia's interests in the Balkans, explaining this by the “dictate of geography and history.”<sup>11</sup>

## NEW REGIME AND RUSSIA

First steps taken by the new regime in Belgrade testified that the “Russian course” was restored. In five months of his presidency, Nikolic traveled to see Putin twice, before and after Putin's inauguration. “I am proud that I will be presiding over Serbia in a manner that benefits the interests of Serbia and Russia,” Nikolic told Putin

<sup>9</sup> Danas, September 15-16, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> “I Cannot Be More Serb than You,” Vreme, September 13, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

during their first meeting in May 2012, shortly after his election. In Moscow the two of them attended the congress of United Russia, a sister party of SNS. Russophilia of the Serbian President is nothing new. But at the photos with Putin Nikolic seemed to be deeply moved. “I thank Russia for its support to Serbia, especially when it comes to the safeguard of its sovereignty in Kosovo and Metohija. I am confident that the cooperation between Serbia and Russia would spiral in no time. I would like you to know that Serbia is Russia's partner in the Balkans...Serbia loves you. And you deserved this love by the manner you rule Russia,” Tomislav Nikolic said to Putin.<sup>12</sup>

Nikolic did not deny Belgrade's former pro-European policy; on the contrary, he told Putin, “Serbia is on its way towards EU. That's a long way to go, and its final destination is uncertain.” His resolute denial of any political bargain over Kosovo could have been finally music to Moscow's ears. Nikolic said that to his knowledge EU did not precondition Serbia's accession with recognition of Kosovo. “Should it /precondition/, we would not accept even at the cost of terminating all negotiations,” he said. Referring to NATO he said, “A parliamentary resolution obliges Serbia to military neutrality, so Serbia will not join NATO.” “This is what I openly promised to citizens of Serbia over the election campaign, and I won the election,” he emphasized.<sup>13</sup>

On the same occasion Vladimir Putin admitted that he was also thinking about Kosovo. “In our view, a UN decision must be carried out, which means the Resolution 1244.”<sup>14</sup> As he put it, Russia considers Serbia not only its traditional but also a major partner in the Balkans. “We consider Serbs our spiritual brothers, and that makes

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/15447>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/15447>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

the foundation of our bilateral relations, today and tomorrow. Welcome,” said Putin.<sup>15</sup>

In an interview with Russian “Regnum” news agency Nikolic said that Serbia should join EU but not at any cost. “Nothing should be accepted at any cost. The territory of Kosovo and Metohija is the cost we shall never pay,” he said. Asked about the priorities of Serb-Russian cooperation, Nikolic replied, “Economic relations are top priorities.” He also said that Serbia could be a “bridge over” EU-Russia cooperation and that Russia could build hydroelectric power plants in Serbia and cooperate with Serbia in the domain of gas production. For its part, as he put it, Serbia can supply Russia with “almost all types of products.” Asked about his opinion of Euro-Asian union and Serbia’s possible cooperation with it, Nikolic said that Belgrade should first “get better informed about the principles on which this alliance rests.” However, he added, “Serbia must join all economic alliance worldwide, which suit it, especially the alliances formed with Russia’s participation.” “But Serbia will not join any military alliance.”<sup>16</sup>

Not everyone in Russia seemed convinced by Serbia’s shift towards Russia manifested over this visit. The Voice of Russia reported that participants in the round table assembling Russian and other experts in Russia-Serbia relations debated “whether Belgrade steers towards Russia.”<sup>17</sup> The participants were not exactly impressed by Nikolic’s visit. Over the past years Serbia’s strategy followed one course only: the course to Brussels and the West, although it was transmitting SOS to the East, to Russia in the first place, whenever it came to Kosovo, concluded the participants.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1535250.html#ixz1vuvRmNIJ>.

<sup>17</sup> [http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012\\_09\\_01/Kud-plovi-srpski-brod-prvi-deo/](http://serbian.ruvr.ru/2012_09_01/Kud-plovi-srpski-brod-prvi-deo/)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

“All in all, Serbia was heading towards the West but turning to Russia whenever in dire straits. That’s not a candid policy and such a policy did no good to Serbia. The time has come for changes. According to all analyses, Russia played a major role in Serbia’s post-election period, and for the first time crushed the West’s monopolistic influence on forming of ruling coalitions in Serbia. This is evident in intensive communication between Belgrade and Moscow over past weeks – from humanitarian aid, through security issues and strategic partnership in Serbia’s energetics, to political issues. So, we already witness changes but these changes will not be dramatic – and probably need not be. It is better to steer Serbia’s strategic boat slowly but surely, towards stronger and more intensive cooperation with the Russian Federation,” remarked a participant.”<sup>19</sup>

Addressing the round table Jelena Ponomaryova, expert in Balkanology, said, “Are political relations between Serbia and Russia compatible with Serbia’s membership of EU? Hardly so. I wouldn’t say Serbia has changed and really transformed its course. This is all more about a minor correction. European clerks are now dictating Serbia’s agenda. After his inauguration President Nikolic met with European Commissioner for Enlargement Fule and the two discussed what it was Serbia should do to be treated favorably by EU. And over his meeting with Ashton Nikolic explicitly said that Serbia had no future other than EU...And there is yet another factor we need to take into consideration: former US ambassador to Serbia, William Montgomery, was the main political adviser to Nikolic during the election campaign. Moreover, Americans played an active role in the process of formation of the Serbian cabinet. In early July Philip Gordon, US deputy secretary of state for Europe and Euro-Asia, paid a visit to Belgrade and met with all key players at Serbia’s political

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

scene. All this indicates that the West has been lobbying for itself in the region. In my view, Russia should have been more active in Serbia before its government was formed – serious agreements are usually made before people are actually appointed.”<sup>20</sup>

She concluded, nevertheless, that Serbia has been and still is Russia’s major historical ally. In this context, neither can Serbia distance itself from Russia nor the other way round. “I think that Serbia tries to have a polyvector policy and that the Russian vector is among the main ones. Belgrade will do its best to develop good relations with Russia. But given that good is a rather slippery term, we need to see actual acts.”<sup>21</sup>

The Serbia-Russia summit in May (2012) took place before Putin was inaugurated the president for the third time. Nevertheless, Nikolic and Putin discussed the avenues for a better cooperation between the two countries, especially economic. Putin said that there were many tasks to be accomplished in this area, the tasks that were not simple, and added, “I hope the cooperation between Serbia and Russia would facilitate not only what each of our two country has to do but also the solution to the problems facing the leadership of Serbia.” He also said he looked forward to forming of Serbia’s new government. And, as he put it, he was satisfied with the growth of the trade of goods and services, and the level of “Russia’s overall investment in Serbia’s economy, totaling one billion and 400 million US dollars.”<sup>22</sup>

“All in all, that’s far from being a bad indicator,” concluded Putin, adding, “Two years ago we offered Serbia a 200-million-dollar loan and are now ready to pay the second, 800-million-dollar installment. This is the loan for infra-structural projects. We are ready to support their

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/15447>

implementation. We are waiting for concrete proposals from our partners in Serbia, the proposals that will be technically and economically sustainable. Please, dear Mr. President, give impetus to the work of the newly established administrative structures.”<sup>23</sup>

Nikolic promised that Serbia would submit good project proposals and thus realize the Russian loan that had been discussed for several years. “As we prepared for the elections we developed many project proposals for joint investment with Russia,” said Nikolic, underpinning that Russians and Serbs were brotherly nations. “States and nations are usually tied by economic interests. But ties between Serbia and Russia exceed by far economic interests. A better and a safer life for Russians means a better and a safer life for Serbs,” he said.<sup>24</sup>

On this occasion Putin invited Nikolic to pay him an official visit after his inauguration ceremony – “at any time that suits Nikolic.” Nikolic will always be “welcome in Russia.” “Russia’s leadership and general public are aware of his attitude towards Russia and appreciate it,”<sup>25</sup> said the Russian leader. For his part, Nikolic promised that the new government would be “tasked with the establishment of a close cooperation with the government of Russia without delay.”<sup>26</sup>

The two presidents met for the second time in Sochi, in September 2012. They summarized the outcomes of their agreements, the actual effects of which, as they put it, would be visible only in early 2013.

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

## EFFECTUATION OF THE "RUSSIAN POLICY"

The SNS-SPS coalition government and Premier Ivica Dacic on the one hand, and their Russian counterparts on the other, focused on mending bilateral relations, the Democrats' cabinet had impaired. Relations with Moscow were restored among governmental priorities. Belgrade stuck to the development of a polycentric cooperation – probably contrary to the expectations of Russian Balkanology strategists – and Tomislav Nikolic said in Rome in the autumn of 2012, "I've always wanted Serbia to be a bridge between the East and the West. Not using the advantages of such a good position would be wrong. We want Serbia to continue its course towards Europe, but it would do it no harm to simultaneously develop economic cooperation with the countries outside EU."<sup>27</sup>

The general public in Serbia was pleased with the news about resumption of the South Stream project. Newspaper headlines were euphoric – "A Big Russian Company Interested in Buying the Smederevo Steelworks and the Agreement Is at Hand, Said Ivica Dacic,"<sup>28</sup> "A Higher Quota for Steel Products Export to Russia Is an Option,"<sup>29</sup> or "Serbian and Russian Governments Sign a Gas Agreement." There were also headlines such as "The Russian Billion Is at Hand," "Loans to Be Taken from Creditors Offering Best Conditions – Russia and China, Best Creditors so far,"<sup>30</sup> "One Billion to Serbia – 300 Million This Year and 700 Million in 2013,"<sup>31</sup> etc.

"In the previous period we have probably treated Russian investors differently. But now we are ready to offer them whatever they want, from agriculture to energetics, and under the

<sup>27</sup> Beta, October 8, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Vecernje Novosti, September 27, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Blic, October 1, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Vecernje Novosti, October 20, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Vecernje Novosti, October 27, 2012.

same conditions as to other investors," said a commentary run in the Politika daily. Papers went even more euphoric over the announced Serbia-Russia cooperation in the production of light armored vehicles and heavy artillery, running banners such as "Building Tanks with Bachuska!"<sup>32</sup> "Serbia and Russia to Construct Armored Vehicles for Africa too!"<sup>33</sup> or "Bachuska Brings Good News."<sup>34</sup>

Public opinion polls confirmed Russia's absolute prestige among citizens of Serbia. The "top list of friendly states" did not change when compared with 2011 – Russia topped the list, followed by Greece and China.<sup>35</sup>

General Leonid Ivashov, demobilized officer in charge of moral-political education in the Cold War era and close friend of Belgrade-seated nationalistic media, paid yet another visit to Serbia. "My advice to Serbs is not to rush to EU," he said. "My advice is that you should first carefully examine the case of Greece that used to be more prosperous before joining EU...Serbs must decide for themselves whether they are ready to trade the place that is sacred to them. For, trading Kosovo would be the same as if we, Russians, decided to bargain our miracle icon of the Virgin Mary. Global constellation is changing. The Kosovo problem should be frozen, therefore, and all negotiations on its recognition ended immediately...Russia is getting stronger and stronger, while the entire world is coming together to confront the aggressive ideas of US and NATO," he said.<sup>36</sup>

All this indicates that Kosovo is the bedrock of the Russia-Serbia policy (apart from the profit Russia made on Serbia's energetics and other domains of economy). Moscow wanted to test

<sup>32</sup> Vecernje Novosti, December 2, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Blic, November 29, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Kurir, November 29, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Danas, October 18, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Pecat, 242/2012.

Belgrade's tenacity in preventing international recognition of Kosovo's independence. The visit Dmitry Rogozin paid to Belgrade in November 2012 should be perceived in this context.

Rogozin is a vice-premier of Russia in charge of military industry. His visit was formally focused on the military cooperation. However, there was a reason more for his visit. "Russia got a reliable and serious partner in Serbia's new authorities. We stand by you, Putin stands by you, and what we need is a strong Serbia standing for its interests. We have money to invest in your country and are willing to. And I believe we will not have a 'marriage' of convenience but shall marry for love," said Rogozin.<sup>37</sup> "I expect Serbia to become a stronger state once our agreements are implemented, and so much stronger that everyone would have to think twice before using arms against it," he emphasized.<sup>38</sup>

The talks with Rogozin explored the avenues for production of military equipment in the territory of Serbia. The two parties agreed that in some segments Serbia was capacitated for the production of arms and military machinery for competitive markets. Serbia's First Vice-Premier Vucic said that a new plant would be constructed in Velika Plana by the end of the year and would be producing, together with Russia, armed transporters and self-propelled artillery "Nora" for the Army of Serbia and for export to Kenya and Bangladesh.

Rogozin said the People's Assembly of Serbia would soon decide to send its delegation to the parliamentary assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization /ODKB/ that would accord Serbia a permanent observer status. The Treaty assembles most of ex-Soviet republics, published the Russian Word.<sup>39</sup> The Russian Word, the gov-

<sup>37</sup> Vecernje Novosti, November 29, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> [http://ruskarec.ru/articles/2012/12/13/razmisljanje\\_o\\_onom\\_uslovu\\_18743.html](http://ruskarec.ru/articles/2012/12/13/razmisljanje_o_onom_uslovu_18743.html) ).

ernmental mouthpiece, elaborated on what Rogozin had in mind by referring to Kosovo:

"If what Rogozin meant to put across were just such 'advices' that would have been a geopolitical sensation to say the least. But there was no sensation at all. What the Russian Vice-Premier actually had in mind was, 'If recognition of Kosovo conditions your accession to EU, you should think twice about that condition. This is a brazen condition, but it is upon you to accept it or not. As for Russia, it will support any decision you make...The advice to Serbia to 'think twice' is a subtle message rather than an appeal to Serbia to give up Kosovo...His /Rogozin's/ statements were not populist, meant to please some people in Serbia. In an interview with RTS he clearly messaged, 'Let me put it strait – we are close friends but Russia is not your lawyer. All we advocate for is justice and the truth, and the truth is that Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia. In this, we are standing for the international law...As it seems Rogozin let the Serbian public and authorities know that Russia could not exert pressure on Serbia and channel its domestic and foreign policy. Moscow will be forced to orient its activities towards the decisions made by the Serb leadership, whatever they are. By this he underpinned what Sergey Lavrov said four years ago, 'Russian cannot be more Serbs and Serbs themselves.' Russia made yet another signal to the Serb leadership that obviously tries to keep a foot in both camps: it wants Serbia to become an EU member-state without having to recognize Kosovo's independence. Be it as it may, the Serbian government will have to make up its mind. No expert could predict the decision it would make. It could be said, therefore, that the Russian Vice-Premier's statement was the right one and corresponds to geopolitical realities."<sup>40</sup>

The article motivated interpretations by analysts in Belgrade. Professor Predrag Simic observed

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

that Rogozin had made no bones about what Serbia could expect from Russia. “It means that it can expect the South Stream and a credit, but cannot expect Nicolai the Second to return from the grave and go to war against the West just to save Serbia. The Russia of today would never do such a thing. Expectations over here are rather unrealistic,” said Simic, adding, “The Russian Vice-Premier was quite precise, clear and fair in letting Serbian politicians know what their realistic expectations from Russia could be.”<sup>41</sup>

Historian Dragan Petrovic of the Institute of International Relations wrote, “For the past four years and a half – ever since the fall of Kostunica’s second cabinet – Russia has been facing the official Belgrade’s tactics in the fundamental issue of Kosovo and Metohija... This is why Rogozin had to put across a clear-cut message on the matter.” According to Petrovic, Russia had expected the new government to make a “political breakthrough” and discontinue the policy of the former cabinet but its expectation were in vain.<sup>42</sup> Predrag Simic also takes that Moscow believes Serbia has an alternative to EU, given that Russia works on the establishment of Euro-Asian Union.

It remains unclear to what extent did Russia contribute to Serbia’s negative answer at the

<sup>41</sup> Politika, November 30, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

close of the eight round of negotiations with Prishtina. Namely, in the past months Belgrade seemed not to consult Moscow about the talks with Prishtina. However, in the days preceding the decision Tomislav Nikolic phoned President Putin, and only a day after Serbia turned down the “Brussels paper” Premier Ivica Dacic paid a visit to Russia. Russian Premier Dmitry Medvedev’s statement on the occasion – “Solving of the Kosovo problem is Serbia’s privilege” – did not answer the dilemma. Ivica Dacic’s explanation about Russia “being very angry for having learned post festum some developments in Serbia’s foreign policy” (referring to 2010 when Tadic and Catherine Ashton agreed on moving the Kosovo issue from UN to EU)<sup>43</sup> indicates that Moscow learned about the finale of the eight round when everything was over.

What Moscow messaged to the Serbian public was its obvious dissatisfaction with political effects of the “Russian turnabout” in Serbia’s policy. Russia is quite realistic about how things stand between Serbia, Russia and Russia’s rivals in the West. It did not give up the cooperation with Serbia, on the contrary. It did not give up its ambitions in the long run as well. But it protected itself from possible surprises in 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Politika, April 12, 2013.

## CONCLUSION

The Serbian government needs to define state and national interests and, in this context, relations between Serbia and Russia. Russia plays an important role in Serbia’s overall political, economic and cultural ties with other countries, but this role should in no way place Serbia in a back seat when it comes to Russia’s interests, to obstructing NATO enlargement in the Western Balkans in the first place. This would disadvantage Serbia’s position in the region and contribute to international distrust in Serbia’s intentions.

Russia’s should play a responsible role considering its strong presence in the Balkans, especially in Serbia, Republika Srpska, Montenegro and other neighboring countries. The West should not bypass Russia as its partner in the Balkans. This would only fuel Russia’s frustration and backfire on the region.