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Authoritarianism accepted: Contextualizing EU and Russian involvement in the Balkans¹

Abstract. *The relationship between Brussels, Moscow and Belgrade has never been straightforward and is best exemplified by the EU and Russia each seeking to consolidate their influence in the Balkans. Back in the 1990s, the Brussels authorities helped the Milošević regime to stay in power until such time as it was deemed a viable solution to oust it, whereas the Russians invariably chose to side with their fellow Serbs. More recently, the EU's position vis-à-vis the increasing authoritarianism in the Western Balkans acted*

¹ This lecture draws on the material presented in the following publications: B. Radeljić, *Europe and the Collapse of Yugoslavia: The Role of Non-State Actors and European Diplomacy*, I.B. Tauris, New York, 2012; B. Radeljić, *Kosovo in the Official Rhetoric of the European Union and Russia*, in L.I. Mehmeti, B. Radeljić (eds), *Kosovo and Serbia: Contested Options and Shared Consequences*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 2016, pp. 63–84; B. Radeljić, *Serbia's Delayed Transformation: Illiberal Practices, External Approvals and the Politics of Opportunity*, „East European & Balkan Studies” 1(41)/2017, pp. 129–157; B. Radeljić, *Russia's Involvement in the Kosovo Case: Defending Serbian Interests or Securing its Own Influence in Europe?*, „Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia” 2(6)/2017, pp. 273–300; B. Radeljić, *Tolerating Semi-Authoritarianism? Contextualizing the EU's Relationship with Serbia and Kosovo*, in J. Džankić, S. Keil, M. Kmezić (eds), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019, pp. 157–180.

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as confirmation that, provided these leaders were receptive to Brussels' demands, a whole range of their detrimental policies at home would be of secondary concern. Russia, given its own *modus operandi*, has found the given setting extremely favorable to further its own influence in the Balkans. An opportune case in point is that of Kosovo's independence status, which Russia rejects, whilst enabling her at the same time to discredit the Brussels leadership for the failure to come up with a common position and durable solution in the fragile region.

Keywords: EU, Russia, Kosovo's independence, (semi-)authoritarianism, regime change

1. The role of the EU

In the late 1980s, when the collapse of the Yugoslav federation turned from being a possibility into a probability, the then European Community and the present European Union decided to leave the initiative to local actors. In fact, both Washington and Brussels opted for preventive diplomacy – an approach that „revealed one of the weaknesses that subsequently hindered the mediations – the inability of the intervening states and the international organizations to speak in a single voice and convey a clear message to the disputing parties.”² In short, as far as the American position is concerned, the US had no clear standpoint with regard to the Yugoslav crisis. One author assesses „Washington's historic policy of supporting Yugoslav unity” as having become even more evident once Lawrence Eagleburger, Deputy Secretary of State, „had reconfirmed the US view that Yugoslavia should remain united” while considering Serbian President Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006), „a reasonable man with whom Washington could do business.”³ However, this rhetoric changed in the late 1980s, as soon as doing business with the Serbs no longer seemed possible.⁴ Finally, in November 1990, *The New York Times* reported the opinion of US intelligence that the Yugoslav experiment had failed and „that federated Yugoslavia [would] break apart, most probably in the next 18 months, and that civil war in that multinational Balkan country [was] highly likely.”⁵

With regard to the European position, what is interesting is the Community's apparent unawareness of these circumstances. It was the US who informed the

² S. Touval, *Mediation in the Yugoslav Wars: The Critical Years, 1990–95*, Palgrave, New York, 2002, p. 15.

³ L.J. Cohen, *Broken Bonds: Yugoslavia's Disintegration and Balkan Politics in Transition*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1995, pp. 215–216.

⁴ This switch was due to the American reaction to two internationally recognized events: first, with the end of the Cold War, Yugoslavia's geopolitical importance diminished and, second, the State Department agreed to focus more on human rights violations, particularly in Kosovo. See P. Shoup, *The Disintegration of Yugoslavia and Western Foreign Policy in the 1980s*, in L.J. Cohen, J. Dragović-Soso (eds), *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN, 2007, pp. 338–339.

⁵ D. Binder, *Evolution in Europe; Yugoslavia Seen Breaking up Soon*, “The New York Times” 28 November 1990, p. 7.

Europeans about the worsening situation in Yugoslavia. As Warren Zimmermann, the last American ambassador to Yugoslavia put it, „the Europeans simply couldn't believe that Yugoslavia was in serious trouble. There had been too many cries of wolf in the decade after Tito's death in 1980, when practically everybody had predicted that the country would fall apart. When it didn't, Europeans blinded themselves to the cataclysm that was now imminent ... their approach to Yugoslavia was without any of the urgency with which they acted fourteen months later, when the breakup they said couldn't happen was upon them.”⁶

Soon after the outbreak of full-scale fighting and the consequent recognition of the republics of Slovenia and Croatia as independent states in January 1992, the then European Community concluded that „responsibility for the conflict lay mainly with Serbia and Montenegro.”⁷ As a matter of protest, Community officials (except for those from Greece) did not attend the ceremony proclaiming the establishment of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) – a new state comprised of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro.⁸ Still, this did not mean that the Europeans had any clear idea as to the impact of their future moves.⁹ For example, the economic sanctions, although severely affecting the local citizenry, actually helped to further consolidate the regime of Slobodan Milošević. His government benefited from a black market economy and a range of media outlets which kept accusing the West, as well as the democratic opposition, of being anti-Serbian. Moreover, when Milan Panić, who was elected prime minister in mid-1992, requested Western support for the emerging democratic force necessary to oust Milošević and prevent additional violence, his efforts were ignored.¹⁰ This, together with the approach adopted by the EU's representatives in late 1996 not to respect the opposition Zajedno [Together] alliance's municipal victories, but to instead side with Milošević's decision to annul the results and call for elections to be repeated, were interpreted as the West's intention to assist Milošević, whom they perceived as being central to the whole

⁶ W. Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and Its Destroyers – America's Last Ambassador Tells What Happened and Why*, Times Books, New York 1996, p. 65.

⁷ European Commission, *XXVI General Report on the Activities of the European Communities in 1992*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 1993, p. 283.

⁸ D. Bethlehem, M. Weller (eds), *The Yugoslav Crisis in International Law*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. xxxv.

⁹ See, for example, M.J. Brenner, *EC: Confidence Lost*, „Foreign Policy” 91/1993, pp. 24–43, here p. 31.

¹⁰ In his memoirs, Panić explained: „I pledged to give the West everything it wanted, but the diplomats, too savvy and cynical by half, could not help looking the gift horse in the mouth ... [T]he Europeans wanted to talk with Milosevic. He was still seen as the region's only true power broker ... All [the West's] working with Milosevic did was undercut my position and undermine the political groups in Serbia dedicated to the dictator's overthrow.” M. Panić (with K.C. Murphy), *Prime Minister for Peace: My Struggle for Serbian Democracy*, Rowan & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2015, p. 78.

process, to stay in power.¹¹ Later, with the progress of the Kosovo crisis and the 1999 NATO intervention, the West started to promote narrative suggesting that the time had come to get rid of Milošević.¹² In contrast to previous years, substantial foreign aid was allocated to the democratic opposition, which seemed to have become more united, accompanied as it were by a simultaneous decline in popular support for the regime.¹³

So, throughout the whole decade, self-interest led the West to opportunistically support the Milošević regime at the expense of using its influence to apply pressure on the regime to change the detrimental policies that it employed at home. However, once Milošević was overthrown in October 2000, the West welcomed the new democratic forces. Although initially cooperative, the coalition leadership faced several internal conflicts, with various members trying to promote their separate visions for the country's future. The new prime minister, Zoran Djindjić (Democratic Party), was of the opinion that Serbia had no alternative but to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and extradite war criminals (including Milošević). He also backed the need for a rapid resolution to the status of Kosovo, so that EU integration could properly move forward. In contrast, the newly elected president, Vojislav Koštunica (Democratic Party of Serbia), believed that Serbia actually had to look for an alternative solution capable of letting it preserve the province of Kosovo as its constituent part.¹⁴ The politics of alternatives or other opportunities, as well as an ever-present struggle with the processes of democratization and Europeanization,¹⁵ provided enough space for

¹¹ M. Spoerri, *Engineering Revolution: The Paradox of Democracy Promotion in Serbia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2015, pp. 46–47.

¹² For example, *TIME* reported on the CIA's strategy: „Agency computer hackers will try to disrupt Milosevic's private financial transactions and electronically drain his overseas bank accounts. (Intelligence officials suspect he has money socked away in Switzerland, Cyprus, Greece, Russia and China.) The CIA also hopes to funnel cash secretly to opposition groups inside Yugoslavia as well as recruit dissidents within the Belgrade government and the Yugoslav military ... [Secretary of State] Albright met with the German, French, British and Italian foreign ministers in New York City last week to plot how each country might exploit its ties with dissident elements in Serbia.” D. Waller, *Tearing Down Milosevic: Washington Resorts to a Bag of Tricks to Try to Get Yugoslavia A New Leader*, “*TIME*” 5 July 1999, <http://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/1999/07/05/milosevic.html>.

¹³ M. Spoerri, *Engineering Revolution...*, pp. 55–120.

¹⁴ For an analysis of the obvious discord between Djindjić and Koštunica, see O. Kesić, *An Airplane with Eighteen Pilots: Serbia after Milošević*, in S.P. Ramet, V. Pavlaković (eds), *Serbia since 1989: Politics and Society under Milošević and after*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA, 2005, pp. 95–121; V. Pešić, *State Capture and Widespread Corruption in Serbia*, “CEPS Working Document” 262/2007, <http://aei.pitt.edu/11664/1/1478.pdf>.

¹⁵ On different democratization and Europeanization challenges, see J. Dawson, *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Politics*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2014; S. Economides, J. Ker-Lindsay, *Pre-Accession Europeanization: The Case of Serbia and Kosovo*, „*Journal of Common Market Studies*” 5(53)/2015, pp. 1027–1044; I. Erdei, *IKEA in Serbia: Debates on Modernity, Culture and Democracy in Pre-Accession Period*, in T. Petrović (ed),

an opposition – many of whom sided with and played important roles under the Milošević regime, but were never afterwards subjected to a lustration¹⁶ – to become organized and challenge the political elite.

2. The role of Russia

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the newly established Russian Federation was arguably preoccupied with its own economic and political consolidation, as well as its regional and global identity, which together were of crucial relevance in influencing foreign policy choices.¹⁷ Aware of the three possible arrangements for Europe in the 1990s – one Europe (offering a pan-European economic, political and security system), European Union-Russian balance (with the understanding that the former Warsaw Pact states would seek membership in the EU at some point), and the new project for US hegemony (largely corresponding to NATO's expansion and, in fact, inclusion of the former Warsaw Pact states among its members),¹⁸ Russia needed a substantial external engagement.

In the Yugoslav case, Russian representatives attended the ceremony proclaiming the establishment of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. Such a decision reflected what Yuliy Vorontsov, Russian representative to the UN, would describe as Russia's overall ambition – „to strengthen the traditional links

Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies, Brill, Leiden 2014, pp. 114–134; M. Mladenov, B. Stahl, *Signaling Right and Turning Left: The Response to EU-Conditionality in Serbia*, in S. Keil, Z. Arkan (eds), *The EU and Member State Building: European Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans*, Routledge, Oxon, 2015, pp. 122–139; J. Stojanović, *EU Political Conditionality towards Serbia: Membership Prospects vs. Domestic Constraints*, in A. Elbasani (ed), *European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans: Europeanization or Business as Usual?* Routledge, Oxon 2013, pp. 54–69; M. Stojić, *Party Responses to the EU in the Western Balkans: Transformation, Opposition or Defiance?*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2017; J. Subotić, *Explaining Difficult States: The Problems of Europeanization in Serbia*, „East European Politics and Societies” 4(24)/2010, pp. 595–616; A. Taylor, A. Geddes, C. Lees, *The European Union and South East Europe: The Dynamics of Europeanisation and Multi-level Governance*, Routledge, Oxon 2013.

¹⁶ For a good overview of the lustration dilemma, see V. Rakić-Vodinielić, *An Unsuccessful Attempt of Lustration in Serbia*, in V. Dvoráková, A. Milardović (eds), *Lustration and Consolidation of Democracy and the Rule of Law in Central and Eastern Europe*, Political Science Research Centre, Zagreb 2007, pp. 169–182.

¹⁷ See, for example, R.H. Donaldson, J.L. Noguee, V. Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, Routledge, New York 2014; D. Lemke, *Great Powers in the Post-Cold War World: A Power Transition Perspective*, in T.V. Paul, J.J. Wirtz, M. Fortmann (eds), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2004, pp. 52–75.

¹⁸ For more details on these arrangements, see P. Gowan, *The Euro-Atlantic Origins of NATO's Attack on Yugoslavia*, in T. Ali (ed), *Masters of the Universe? NATO's Balkan Crusade*, Verso, London 2000, pp. 3–45.

of friendship and cooperation with the Yugoslav peoples, to restore peace to their land and to guarantee their freedom and independence.”¹⁹ With the outbreak of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian authorities kept condemning the fighting, warning the parties of its possible escalation, and advocating punishment for those responsible.²⁰ In addition, within the Contact Group, established in 1994 to deal with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russian representatives strongly opposed the intentions of their Western colleagues (from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States). They were „opposed to any use of force against the Serbs, fearing repercussions at home amongst nationalist politicians,” who kept criticizing President Boris Yeltsin for „kowtowing to the West rather than coming to the aid of Serbs, with whom Russians share the Orthodox religion and a Slavic heritage.”²¹ Of course, supporting the Serbian side during the Yugoslav crisis, and often rejecting Western foreign policy initiatives was not an easy task, especially when it turned out that many provocations and violent acts were actually products of the regime of Slobodan Milošević.²² One author argues that Russia’s confrontational position in the Balkans made some other policy choices, in fact, more probable. Its decision not to accuse the Serbs of their wrongdoings, essentially helped solidify the decision to pursue a NATO-led military intervention; still, this does not mean that a different approach might have prevented this action, although it may have made the Serbs aware of their unfavorable position and forced them to give up sooner.²³

Regarding the Kosovo case, the dominant view in Russia was that Kosovo had to be approached as a Serbian internal issue and therefore Serbian sovereignty was not supposed to be challenged – an approach going hand in hand with Russia’s

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council, *Security Council Provisional Verbatim Record*, 30 May 1992 (S/PV.3082). Still, as concluded in the literature assessing the first half of the 1990s, „securing Russia’s influence in the Balkans had been subordinated to the larger aim of establishing cooperative relations with the western democracies.” D. Averre, *From Pristina to Tskhinvali: The Legacy of Operation Allied Force in Russia’s Relations with the West*, „International Affairs” 3(85)/2009, pp. 575–591, here p. 577.

²⁰ They stressed that „Russia ha[d] pursued an unwavering course of putting an end to war crimes and cannot remain indifferent to the flagrant mass violations of international humanitarian law in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Murder, rape and ‘ethnic cleansing’ must cease immediately, and the guilty – whatever their affiliation – must be duly punished.” United Nations Security Council, “Security Council Provisional Verbatim Record” 22 February 1993, S/PV.3175.

²¹ C.J. Williams, *Balkans: The Mediators Differ in their Approach Following Serbs’ Rejection of Last-Chance Peace Deal*, „Los Angeles Times” 30 July 1994.

²² A. Braun, *Russian Policy towards Central Europe and the Balkans*, in R.E. Kanet, A.V. Kozhemiakin (eds), *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 1997, pp. 49–77, here p. 62. See also R.H. Donaldson, J.L. Noguee, V. Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia*, 245–249; J. Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2009, pp. 19–20.

²³ C. Torun, *Explaining Change in Russian Foreign Policy: The Role of Ideas in Post-Soviet Russia’s Conduct towards the West*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2009, pp. 109–110.

domestic secessionist concerns, mainly in Chechnya.²⁴ In Russia, the negative reaction to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia came from the country's political elites as well as from other sectors of Russian society, with some of their members labelling the aggression as „‘barbaric,’ ‘genocidal’ and ‘Hitlerite.’”²⁵ Representatives of the Russian Democratic Left, while strongly rejecting the so-called humanitarian aspect of NATO strikes and the idea that such an approach could help establish democracy, insisted on there being economic and geo-political reasons for the intervention, which in its form represented „the beginning of a new epoch in world history – the beginning of the [Western] recolonization of the world.”²⁶ From a different perspective, former and then members of the military – impossible to ignore due to the size of this electorate – kept expressing their anti-Western feelings and, in fact, became even more pro-nationalist, thus managing to secure additional influence in Russian foreign policy. As a matter of protest, the Russian leadership declined the invitation to attend the 50th anniversary NATO summit. Still, such a decision did not mean that Russia was going to take any substantial action, even though President Yeltsin had stipulated at the very beginning of the bombing that „[i]n the event that the military conflict worsens, Russia retains the right to take adequate measures, including military ones, to defend itself and the overall security of Europe.”²⁷

As the war came to an end, Russia decided to send troops to the Pristina international airport on 12 June, occupying it before the arrival of the previously authorized NATO troops – a dramatic move caused by the marginal Russian presence within the new setting.²⁸ Despite its peaceful outcome, this incident clearly confirmed not only the Russian leadership's concerns about the future position of the Serbian population in Kosovo under foreign supervision, but also dilemmas about its own reputation at home and within the international system. As argued by Vladimir Baranovsky, “the Kosovo phenomenon” managed to influence Russia's understanding of its own position and its relations with the rest of the world. The fact that NATO nevertheless decided to get involved militarily in FRY – an approach strongly opposed by the Russians – was understood as a „manifestation of

²⁴ J. Hughes, *Russia and the Secession of Kosovo: Power, Norms and the Failure of Multilateralism*, „Europe-Asia Studies” 5(65)/2013, pp. 992–1016, here p. 998.

²⁵ A.S. Tuminez, *Russian Nationalism since 1856: Ideology and the Making of Foreign Policy*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2000, p. 280.

²⁶ A. V. Buzgalin, Is NATO a Killer Cop? A View from the Russian Democratic Left, “Oliveworks 1999” <http://www.thing.net/~oliveworks/buzgalin.html>.

²⁷ Yeltsin cited in “CNN”, *Yeltsin to Meet with Aides on Response to Bombings*, 24 March 1999, <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9903/24/kosovo.reax.02/index.html>. For more details about the position of the Yeltsin leadership during the Kosovo crisis, see M. Smith, *Russian Policy during the Kosovo Conflict*, in S. Badsey, P. Latawski (eds), *Britain, NATO and the Lessons of the Balkan Conflicts, 1991–1999*, Frank Cass, London 2004, pp. 139–152.

²⁸ L.F. Szászdi, *Russian Civil-Military Relations and the Origins of the Second Chechen War*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 2008, pp. 190–199.

insulting disregard towards Russia and as one more attempt to disassociate it from crucial European issues. The air strikes against Yugoslavia, as viewed by Russia, were the most convincing justification for its negativity with respect to the prospect of establishing a NATO-centred Europe.”²⁹ As assessed by Oleg Levitin in 2000, who was directly involved in Moscow’s Balkan policies throughout the 1990s, Kosovo became „closely intertwined with issues that are vital to Moscow – issues of European security and relations with the West,” implying that it would stay on the Russian foreign policy agenda in years to come.³⁰ So, with all this in mind, it was not difficult to foresee the continuation of standpoint differences between the West and Russia in the post-bombing period, now primarily focused on the future status of Kosovo.

3. Kosovo as a cornerstone

Once the 1999 NATO-led intervention had terminated, the European Union saw the region as impoverished and in need of substantial assistance.³¹ The Russian position, although challenged by the country’s marginal involvement in a post-conflict NATO-dominated context, continued to confirm the previously offered arguments about the overall wrongdoing of the West. Vladimir Putin, soon after being elected President of Russia in March 2000, approved the document *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, which amongst other interests and priorities, stipulated the following: „Russia will give an all-out assistance to the attainment of a just settlement of the situation in the Balkans, one based on the coordinated decisions of the world community. It is of fundamental importance to preserve the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and to oppose the partition of this State, something that is fraught with the threat of emergence of a pan-Balkan conflict with unpredictable consequences.”³² Serbia’s new president, Vojislav Koštunica, did not hide appreciation for the Russian approach; during his visit to Moscow in late October 2000, Koštunica welcomed Russia’s interest in the region, stating that „[t]he Russian presence must be felt in all the intersecting strategic geopolitical influences in the Balkans,” so that a greater balance of Euro-

²⁹ V. Baranovsky, *Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?*, “International Affairs” 3(76)/2000, pp. 443–458, here p. 455. In addition, see O. Antonenko, *Russia, NATO and European Security after Kosovo*, „Survival” 4(41)/1999, pp. 124–144.

³⁰ O. Levitin, *Inside Moscow’s Kosovo Muddle*, „Survival” 1(42)/2000, pp. 130–140, here p. 131.

³¹ B. Radeljić, *Europe and the Post-Yugoslav Space: From Intervention to Integration*, in B. Radeljić (ed.), *Europe and the Post-Yugoslav Space*, Ashgate, Farnham 2013, pp. 1–32, here p. 24.

³² Russian Federation, *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 28 June 2000, <http://www.bits.de/EURA/aura10.html>.

pean, Russian and US forces can be achieved.³³ In return, some months later, Putin visited Belgrade, reconfirming Russia's support for the territorial integrity of Serbia.

Aware of the problems and in order to find a durable solution, the international community welcomed the „standards before status” approach, inaugurated by the third UN Mission in Kosovo chief, Michael Steiner of Germany, in 2003.³⁴ Although the „standards before status” policy covered a variety of issues, ranging from the establishment of democratic institutions and rule of law to the development of market economy and dialogue with Belgrade authorities, its essence „was that it required Kosovo's institutions of self-government to demonstrate that they were willing and able to protect the rights of all of Kosovo's ethnic communities, and had the capacity to act in a civilized way.”³⁵ However, the advocacy of „standards before status” was fully eroded and, in fact, abandoned after the riots in mid-March 2004, involving more than 50,000 ethnic Albanian extremists that gathered to attack Serbs and Roma.³⁶ In the newly established grey zone, the Standards Implementation Plan was introduced, placing a particular focus on the economy, rule of law and dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Thus, the international community, while positioned between the two opposing sides, understood that any substantial progress with regard to human rights could not be made any time soon, but also that lack of status and Kosovo's security were affecting the entire Balkan region. As one author correctly explained, following the termination of the 1999 war, the international community continuously grappled with the Kosovo dilemma, suggesting that although Kosovo's status was absolutely crucial for a durable solution and the stability of the Balkans, tackling the status question in itself undoubtedly represented a risk to stability: „If the international community tackles the status issue without adequate preparation, deadlock at best and confrontation at worst might be the result. If it waited for too long the unstable elements on the ground, in particular the impatience of the Kosovar population, the persistent economic crisis and the still tense relations between the ethnic communities might well lead to a new crisis.”³⁷

³³ Koštunica cited in Smith, *Russian Policy during the Kosovo Conflict*, p. 148.

³⁴ B. Radeljić, *Official Discrepancies: Kosovo Independence and Western European Rhetoric*, „Perspectives on European Politics and Society” 4(15)/2014, pp. 431–444.

³⁵ A. Ante, *State Building and Development: Two Sides of the Same Coin? Exploring the Case of Kosovo*, Disserta Verlag, Hamburg 2010, p. 150.

³⁶ For a detailed account of the riots, see Human Rights Watch, *Failure to Protect: Anti-Minority Violence in Kosovo*, March 2004, 16(6D), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/kosovo0704/7.htm>. In addition, see CARE International, *What Difference Has Peacebuilding Made? A Study of the Effectiveness of Peacebuilding in Preventing Violence: Lessons Learned from the March 2004 Riots in Kosovo*, CDA-Collaborative Learning Projects, Cambridge, MA, 2006.

³⁷ S. Lehne, *Has the 'Hour of Europe' Come to Last? The EU's Strategy for the Balkans*, in J. Batt (ed.), *The Western Balkans: Moving on*, Institute for Security Studies, Paris, 2004, pp. 111–124, here p. 116.

The late 2005 Vienna talks were launched with an aim to resolve the final status of Kosovo. Led by UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari and involving members of the Contact Group, the talks were expected to find the solution within UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which – although protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the FRY – at this point, could have been interpreted in two ways: „Either it applied to the interim period of UN administration or it applied beyond that, constraining options for a final status agreement on Kosovo.”³⁸ However, once the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian representatives started travelling to Vienna, it did not take long to realize that all of them attended the rounds having a plan A in mind only, suggesting that one side would have to accommodate the other. In contrast to their Western counterparts, the Russians tried to make it clear that they would not support any outcome that would go against the Serbs. Moreover, at one point during the process, while being concerned about certain issues being ignored, Moscow felt it necessary to restate its approach: „A priority objective is to provide for practical application of standards with a view to ensuring respect for fundamental rights and freedoms of all ethnic groups in the region. We insist that the settlement process should evolve in strict compliance with Security Council resolution 1244... We consider it necessary that negotiations on the future status of Kosovo be preceded by a decision of the UN Security Council based on the results of the Council’s review of the progress in the application of the standards. At the same time, it would be counterproductive to set any deadlines for the negotiations on the status. It is a matter of principal importance to assume that the decision on Kosovo will be of a universal character. It will set a precedent. Any speculation about the uniqueness of the Kosovo case is just an attempt to circumvent international legal rules, which distracts from reality. What is worse is that attempts of that kind generate distrust of the international community as it creates an impression of double standards being applied to the settlement of crises in various regions worldwide and of rules being enforced arbitrarily, depending on each individual case.”³⁹

During the final round, held in March 2007, the Serbian leadership (clearly backed by the Russian government) rejected the settlement proposal as unacceptable – an expected reaction given the impression that its acceptance would imply Kosovo gradually achieving its independence. Following the failure of the Vienna talks, Ahtisaari produced a report elaborating his views. He acknowledged that even though „both parties have reaffirmed their categorical, diametrically opposed

³⁸ M. Weller, *The Vienna Negotiations on the Final Status for Kosovo*, “International Affairs” 4(84)/2008, pp. 659–681, here p. 662. The same understanding of the text of Resolution 1244 can be found in C.J. Borgen, *Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination, Secession and Recognition*, “ASIL Insights” 29 February 2008, <http://www.asil.org/insights/volume/12/issue/2/kosovos-declaration-independence-self-determination-secession-and>.

³⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, *Position of Russia at the 61st United Nations General Assembly*, September 2006, http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/d8fa85a26fca4ee4c32571ef00254b31!OpenDocument.

positions: Belgrade demands Kosovo's autonomy within Serbia, while Pristina will accept nothing short of independence", there was nevertheless a pressing urgency to resolve Kosovo's status. The Special Envoy was forced to conclude that „[r]eintegration into Serbia is not a viable option" and that „[c]ontinued international administration is not sustainable." He then went on to recommend that „Kosovo's status should be independence, supervised by the international community."⁴⁰ However, by the end of 2007, the status of Kosovo had not yet been resolved. This led the Kosovo Albanians, despite acknowledging that divisions characterizing external rhetoric were capable of prolonging stagnation in terms of Kosovo's final status, to make a move themselves in the hope of gaining international approval and recognition.

4. Official rhetoric and authoritarian practices after Kosovo's proclamation of independence

On 17 February 2008, the Kosovo Albanian leadership adopted a resolution proclaiming independence from the Republic of Serbia.⁴¹ The response of the European Union and its Member States was a far cry from the one witnessed on 15 January 1992, when both the then European Community and its twelve members recognized Slovenia and Croatia as independent states. This time around, five EU members (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) decided not to recognize the newly self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo.

Looking at different EU reports, a number of them have pointed to the existence of some serious problems or lack of standards, which clearly question the functioning of Kosovo as a new state. For example, back in late 2008, the European Commission's annual progress report made the assessment that the Kosovo Constitution is „in line with European standards, which require stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities", but then observed that „there is still a lack of capacity to implement and upgrade human rights standards in Kosovo."⁴² A year later, the situation was similarly assessed, but this time, the EU's report offered two reasons as to why it could be very difficult for Kosovo to secure progress in the area of human rights:

⁴⁰ United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo's Future Status*, 26 March 2007, S/2007/168.

⁴¹ For an analysis of the Kosovo Constitution, see J. Marko, *The New Kosovo Constitution in a Regional Comparative Perspective*, „Review of Central and East European Law" 4(33)/2008, pp. 437–450; M. Spornbauer, *EU Peacebuilding in Kosovo and Afghanistan: Legality and Accountability*, Brill, Leiden, 2014, pp. 47–83; Judge J. Tunheim, *Rule of Law and the Kosovo Constitution*, „Minnesota Journal of International Law" 2(18)/2009, pp. 371–379.

⁴² European Commission, *Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99) 2008 Progress Report*, 5 November 2008, SEC(2008)2697, pp. 8, 17.

firstly, „Kosovo’s cooperation with human rights bodies is limited since Kosovo is not a member of the UN nor of the Council of Europe. Consequently, Kosovo’s citizens do not have the possibility to lodge a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights against Kosovo’s authorities” and, secondly, „[s]ome municipal human rights units are not operational, in particular in Kosovo Serb majority municipalities, which are reluctant to cooperate with the central authorities.”⁴³ Thus, what the Europeans tried to do here is suggest how important international recognition of Kosovo’s independence was, putting it almost as a precondition for regulation and human rights improvements. In addition, they cited the lack of participation of the Kosovo Serbs as a general obstacle to progress.

The position of the Russian Federation was in stark contrast to the one adopted by the dominant Western powers. Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted immediately, stating that the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) “violat[ed] the sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia, the Charter of the United Nations, UNSCR 1244, the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, Kosovo’s Constitutional Framework and the high-level Contact Group accords”, and warning the international community of „the risk of an escalation of tension and inter-ethnic violence in the province and of new conflict in the Balkans.”⁴⁴ Similar messages were delivered by individual statesmen, ranging from Putin, for whom „[t]he precedent of Kosovo is a terrible precedent, which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations”⁴⁵ to Russia’s next president, Dmitry Medvedev, who, after his visit to Belgrade when he supported Serbia’s determination to fight against Kosovo’s independence,⁴⁶ went as far as to state that „[f]or the EU, Kosovo is almost what Iraq is to the United States, [being] the latest example of the undermining of international law.”⁴⁷

The Russian rhetoric in the immediate post-UDI period turned out to be relevant for all sides concerned. While the Serbs perceived it as extremely favorable for their own position, both the Kosovo Albanians and Brussels administration continued to feel challenged. A new round of official visits and statements underlined this stance. For example, in mid-May 2009, while welcoming a new ambassador from Serbia to Russia, Medvedev stressed: „We intend to continue to coordinate

⁴³ European Commission, *Kosovo (under UNSCR 1244/99) 2009 Progress Report*, 14 October 2009, SEC(2009)1340, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, *Statement by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Kosovo*, 17 February 2008, http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b-43256999005bcbb3/041c5af46913d38ac32573f30027b380!OpenDocument.

⁴⁵ “The Sunday Morning Herald”, *Putin Calls Kosovo Independence ‘Terrible Precedent’*, 23 February 2008.

⁴⁶ „Aljazeera”, *Medvedev Pledges Support for Serbia: Candidate Likely to be Russia’s Next President Vows to Fight Kosovo Independence*, 25 February 2008, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2008/02/2008525124618498728.html>.

⁴⁷ “ABC News”, *Russia’s Medvedev Condemns Western ‘Paternalism’*, 15 July 2008, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-07-16/russias-medvedev-condemns-western-paternalism/439974?-section=world>.

our foreign policy moves in future, including the ones related to the solving of the issue with Kosovo.”⁴⁸ Soon after, this approach was additionally clarified; in an interview to a Belgrade daily, the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandr Konuzin, stated that „Russia’s stand is rather simple – we are ready to back whatever position Serbia takes,” but also made clear that „the EU is not an alternative to relations with Russia. We ourselves are actively forging relations with the EU as she is our most important economic and political partner. We’re trying to find forms of cooperation between Serbia, Russia and the EU that would be beneficial to all three sides.”⁴⁹ Still, it was Medvedev’s visit to Belgrade in October 2009 that offered a clearer picture about Russian intentions and long-term involvement in the region. In his analysis, Aleksandar Fatić rightly observes that „[t]he visit marked a sharp turn..., with the new and more assertive rhetoric suggesting Russia’s willingness to engage in ‘infighting’ the Western military and energy security interests.”⁵⁰ For both Medvedev and Konuzin, it was important to assure the Serbs that „Kosovo echoes in the hearts of all Russians with the same pain as it does in your hearts.”⁵¹ In terms of further clarification of the Russian position, it did not take long before Konuzin decided to warn the Serbian leadership that it could not be in NATO and count on endless Russian support – a standpoint sending a signal that NATO membership would affect the previously guaranteed support.⁵² Later, when Putin visited Serbia in March 2011, he stated that, in addition to confirming Russia’s willingness to support its South Slavic brothers in energy and financial spheres, Russia would also support Serbia’s Kosovo policy, observing that it was „not necessary to elaborate on the reasons for this, as they are deeply rooted in the two countries’ long history of relations and their closeness.”⁵³

The Russian policy of amity and cooperation with Serbia did not only serve the case of the latter in front of the international community, but also the case of the Russian leadership, which hoped to strengthen its relevance in European politics. As Andrew Konitzer correctly observed in 2010, „Russia’s ‘defense’ of Kosovo bought critical time for Serbia to mount a diplomatic offensive which has contributed to the current impasse over the province’s future status while avoiding

⁴⁸ “Sofia News Agency”, *Medvedev: Serbia Is Russia’s Key Partner in Southeast Europe*, 29 May 2009, http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=104112.

⁴⁹ “Večernje Novosti”, *Ambassador Underlines Russian Backing*, 12 June 2009, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2009&mm=06&dd=12&nav_id=59780.

⁵⁰ A. Fatić, *A Strategy Based on Doubt: Russia Courts Southeast Europe*, „Contemporary Security Policy” 3(31)/2010, pp. 441–464, here p. 441.

⁵¹ “Fonet”, *Russian Envoy: Kosovo in Russia’s Heart*, 29 November 2009, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2009&mm=11&dd=29&nav_id=63375.

⁵² “B92”, *Serbia Can’t Have both NATO and Kosovo*, 5 February 2010, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2010&mm=02&dd=05&nav_id=65001.

⁵³ “B92”, *Putin: Russia Remains Serbia’s Ally*, 23 March 2011, http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2011&mm=03&dd=23&nav_id=73400.

head-on confrontation with major Western actors.”⁵⁴ When considering long-term prospects, however, should Serbia’s accession to NATO take place, „the web of interests which currently complements Russia and Serbia’s ‘historical friendship’ will transform into mutually exclusive choices which will either destroy the Russian-Serbian partnership or undermine Serbia’s prospects for EU membership.”⁵⁵ Since then, while Serbia has secured a full EU candidate status (2012) and signed the so-called Brussels agreement with Kosovo (2013), assessed as „a landmark deal” by the EU representatives,⁵⁶ Russia attacked and violated the sovereignty of Ukraine – an action that opened numerous questions about Moscow’s Kosovo-related argument insisting on the preservation of territorial integrity of Serbia.

5. What about (semi-)authoritarianism?

In the Balkans, authoritarian practice is on the rise. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was established in 2008 by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, the former deputy president and general secretary respectively of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party, whose leader, Vojislav Šešelj, was on trial at the Hague tribunal at the time. It is worth remembering that Vučić was in charge of the Ministry of Information in the late 1990s when Slobodan Milošević was in power: „[He] was the hatchet man for the media who defended the vast ethnic cleansing by paramilitary police of more than 60% of the 90% majority Albanians living in the Serbian province of Kosovo.”⁵⁷ Back then, newspapers were regularly fined or, even worse, closed, so that the public would primarily gather information from the state-controlled media or other media working in favor of the ruling elite. As soon as the former Radicals turned into Progressivists, they started to place an emphasis on their apparently new profile and, even more so, on expected outcomes, including military neutrality, greater social justice, worldwide cooperation and EU membership.⁵⁸ The reasoning behind all this is that they would appear to differ significantly from their previous affiliation.

In Kosovo, following its proclamation of independence, the process of political elite renewal proved complicated, if not impossible. This certainly pertains to individuals such as Hashim Thaçi and Ramush Haradinaj, both of whom were

⁵⁴ A. Konitzer, *Serbia between East and West: Bratstvo, Balancing, and Business on Europe’s Frontier*, “NCEEER Working Paper” 2010, http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/2010_824-22t_Konitzer.pdf.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ European Union, *Serbia and Kosovo Reach Landmark Deal*, 19 April 2013, http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2013/190413__eu-facilitated_dialogue_en.htm.

⁵⁷ E. Pond, *Serbia Reinvents Itself*, “Survival” 4(55)/2013, pp. 7–30, here p. 7.

⁵⁸ “B92,” *Osnivanje Srpske napredne stranke*, 21 October 2008, http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy.2008&mm.10&dd.21&nav_category.11&nav_id.324499.

involved in various crimes during the Kosovo war as members of the paramilitary Kosovo Liberation Army,⁵⁹ but who then came to occupy the positions of president and prime minister respectively. Accordingly, the Kosovo leadership has been responsible for Kosovo getting the lowest democracy score in the Western Balkan region and its system being described as „a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime.”⁶⁰ In the case of Kosovo, the media has also been affected by pressures, resulting in self-censorship and pro-government bias. For example, in one of its annual reports, the European Commission remarked that „[p]ublic statements by politicians about high-level corruption and war crimes cases have decreased, in particular after an open discussion in the structured dialogue on the rule of law. Harassment of judges and prosecutors in the media and the absence of an effective response from the relevant institutions continue to be a serious concern.”⁶¹ In the following assessments, the Brussels authorities noted not only their awareness of the intimidation of journalists accompanied by „serious physical assaults” of which „26 cases of attacks, threats and obstruction are under investigation”, but also their skepticism regarding any substantial progress: „The legislative and institutional framework in this area remains fragmented and ineffective. Journalists’ right to conscientious objection and the public’s right to reply and correction remain unregulated.”⁶² Most recently, an experienced journalist, after being beaten in front of her home in Pristina because of investigative reporting, stated that „[t]he public lynching of journalists is becoming a normality in Kosovo.”⁶³

Nevertheless, both Brussels and Moscow have welcomed Serbian and Kosovo Albanian leaders, regardless of their previous affiliations; by accepting highly problematic individuals as state representatives at the forefront of the so-called democratization and Europeanization initiatives, the EU (more surprisingly than Russia) has sent a clear message that semi-authoritarian practices would be acceptable as long as the direct interests of the EU or its individual member states – in the region as well as from the region – are not threatened. At the same time, given their previous political engagement, Serbian and Kosovo Albanian leaders have clearly understood what works with domestic and international audiences, and the majority of the media has served to promote their performance and baby-steps

⁵⁹ D. Marty, *Inhuman Treatment of People and Illicit Trafficking in Human Organs in Kosovo**, Council of Europe, 12 December 2010, http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeD-ocs/2010/20101218_ajdoc462010provamended.pdf.

⁶⁰ Freedom House, *Kosovo 2015*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/kosovo>.

⁶¹ European Commission, *Kosovo* 2014 Progress Report*, 8 October 2014, COM(2014)700, p. 13.

⁶² European Commission, *Kosovo* 2015 Progress Report*, 10 November 2015, SWD(2015)215, p. 22.

⁶³ „Balkan Insight”, *Former Journalist Brutally Assaulted in Kosovo*, 13 May 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/former-journalist-brutally-assaulted-in-kosovo-05-13-2017-2>.

towards EU accession. Accordingly, multiparty elections are held (although they suffer serious irregularities which cast a shadow on the democratic process), the rights of citizens are theoretically recognized (although not always in practice), civil society and non-governmental organizations exist and manage to conduct research and communicate their findings (usually thanks to foreign financial assistance), media reporting goes on, with the Internet being loaded with critical thinking, etc. Alongside this, and in the context of semi-authoritarianism, „incumbent governments and parties are in no danger of losing their hold on power, not because they are popular but because they know how to play the democracy game and still retain control.”⁶⁴ Moreover, the apparent readiness of the two regimes to pursue economic reforms and market liberalization is far more attractive to foreign ears than getting involved in discussions over local intentions to minimize any competition for power and the suppression of the opposition. The studies on semi-authoritarian regimes also make reference to the pursuit of economic reforms and the reduction of government control in the context of international pressure: “[S]emi-authoritarian regimes can undergo market liberalization with little political liberalization or separation of economic elites from political elites. The linkage between economic liberalization and democratization is complex, and it is dangerous to assume that the former always encourages the latter.”⁶⁵

By turning a blind eye, the EU has contributed to authoritarian practices in the Balkans. Corruption is the cancer of the post-Yugoslav space. Apart from Slovenia, which ranks fairly OK in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, other states in the region are struggling.⁶⁶ Croatia is a good example that an EU member state can score pretty badly. But, then, even some members of the EU’s foreign policy mission in Kosovo were accused of corruption and malpractice, and that the EU was turning a blind eye.⁶⁷ Whatever the level of support for the EU in the region, its involvement has revealed hypocrisy towards its own core principles and values, such as the rule of law and human rights. Many revered intellectuals, who firmly advocated EU accession in the past, are now disenchanted with the EU’s lack of reaction to the elite’s alleged undermining of democratic principles.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ M. Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2003, p. 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁶⁶ Transparency International, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017#table.

⁶⁷ „Guardian”, *EU Accused Over Its Kosovo Mission: Corruption Has Grown Exponentially*, 6 November 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/06/eu-accused-over-kosovo-mission-failings>.

⁶⁸ See, for example, IRI, *Crises in Europe and EU Leave Serbs Turning toward Russia*, 21 December 2015, <http://www.iri.org/resource/iri's-center-insights-poll-crises-europe-and-eu-leave-serbs-turning-toward-russia>; M. Lazarević, S. Marić, *Serbia and the EU: A Value-Based EU Still Has Its Appeal*, “EUforum,” 17 June 2016, <http://euforum.nl/en/serbia-and-theeu-a-value-based-eu-still-has-its-appeal>.

The result is that the voices underpinning the pro-EU agenda in public appearances have rapidly diminished, so it has become quite difficult to find those who would publicly confront the anti-EU forces. However, should the regime change become a priority, the Brussels administration would most likely start applying pressure on the elites, labelling their domestic policies as detrimental and not in accordance with the EU's agenda. At this point, their (semi-)authoritarian behavior would become unacceptable and the West could claim the need to come up with a new approach so as to allow Serbia and Kosovo (or for that matter, any state in the region) to genuinely pursue processes of democratization and Europeanization.

While the Brussels authorities have regularly suggested that they expect a lot in terms of regional developments (primarily in the case of the Kosovo status question, but also in terms of Serbia's questionable ambition to position itself between the East and the West), the EU has also sent signals that Russian-like (semi-)authoritarianism is of secondary concern. Aware of the expected dynamics, the regimes have used every opportunity to further reinforce their power and links with other regions and regimes (not only Russian, but also Chinese and Turkish). Simultaneously, the Russian leadership has generally favored the Serbian authorities and their often-disputed policies (as it did throughout the whole decade preceding the Kosovo crisis). Even more importantly, it felt the urge, for its own relevance, to contradict the NATO intervention and the post-interventionist Western discourse and policy choices. By doing so, the presence as well as influence of Russia increased and developed yet further owing to the obvious fatigue faced by the Brussels administration to come up with a common EU position regarding the Kosovo status. This was as a direct result of the ever-popular secessionist debates within some of its member states (this, despite there being no objection at the time to the previous NATO action – Spain being a case in point). This created an additional incentive for the Russian leadership to insist on the rightness of its own uncompromised view – thus reinforcing its place in European affairs. The argument that Russia has been primarily concerned with the strengthening of its own position, and that the involvement in the Kosovo question was expected to serve such an ambition, can be even better understood by looking at some recent discrepancies characterizing the official Russian stance when confronted with the principle of territorial integrity. Russia's strong insistence on the principle of territorial integrity in the case of Serbia (so that Kosovo would remain its constituent unit), was in contrast to her utter disregard for such a sensitive principle in the case of Ukraine in 2014. She not only supported its disintegration but also annexed Crimea suggesting that Russia's loud advocacy of territorial integrity was largely an instrument which helped it secure an even stronger place in European affairs.

