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Russia's Foreign Policy in Kosovo

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ABIT HOXHA, MAY 12 2012

When NATO began its 1999 air campaign in Kosovo without U.N. Security Council approval, Russians perceived this as part of 'NATO's drive for unilateral security in Europe' (Blank 2000). The Russian Federation feared that this military campaign signalled U.S. and European domination in the international system, but also a breach of the norm of sovereignty in international relations. This is the moment when tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation started to rise and the impact is still long term, affecting Kosovo's foreign relations

With the most recent mediation of the European Union between Kosovo and Serbia, in February, Kosovo is in a much better situation in negotiating and being represented in regional initiatives. This shows that 'the carrot and the stick' game played by the EU in Serbia is working well and that Serbia has no choice but to move incrementally towards the EU. In the constructive relationship between Serbia and the EU, Kosovo plays a very important role, as Serbia cannot join the EU without resolving the issue of Kosovo.

The Russian position over Kosovo hasn't changed at all, even after such agreements with Serbia have been reached. This shows that Russian policy towards Kosovo is not only to support Serbia but to (mis)use Serbia for its own great power ambitions in international relations. The Russian position seeks to continue blocking any decision in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and not only to block Kosovo as entity but to demonstrate its veto power against the other permanent members of the UNSC.

Russia seeks to play the role of 'watchdog' of International Law in international affairs. It wants to be seen as the antidote to the failures of international law in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a barrier to a wave of democracy-promotion and the Arab Spring. Kosovo plays a very important role in shaping Russian foreign policy, as it was the first international intervention carried out without authorisation from the UN, and despite a Russian absence in the UNSC.

In November 2011, Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's ambassador to NATO, announced at the NATO headquarters that about 21 000[i] (quoting Serb sources only) Kosovo Serbs are seeking to get Russian citizenship. However, this policy changed slightly after a series of senior governmental meetings dealing with this issue, as reported in a briefing by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of: 'We will continue to help secure through politico-diplomatic means the legitimate rights and interests of the Serbs living in Kosovo[ii]'. By doing this, Russia shows how it uses Serbia as its own stick, to flex its power, while at the same time guaranteeing Kosovo Serbs' well-being according to the Foreign Policy Concept 'to provide comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad[iii]'

When he visited Kosovo Serbs in 2011, Rogozin posted on his Twitter account that 'Local Serbs have lived [in Kosovo] isolated from Serbia for a long time and trust no one but Russians.'[iv] He was representing Putin whilst meeting with the Kosovo Serbs, and did not meet anyone from the Kosovo Government. This also shows how Russia's policy in Kosovo has developed, and how states use ethnic minorities to exert influence in the international system. If Rogozin was really interested in settling issues between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, he would at least have met with both sides.

Even today when Kosovo and Serbia agree day-to-day on many things, including the Integrated Border Management and regional representation of Kosovo, Russia still doesn't agree. From the Russian point of view, no human right or

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any other legal right is more important than the concept of 'sovereignty and territorial integrity' of Serbia as prescribed by the UNSC Resolution 1244.[v]

During UN Security Council meetings, Russia has held very strong positions against Kosovo. With such a stance, Russia opposes not only Kosovo but also the US, the UK and other EU states which support its independence. Kosovo is only represented in the UN by the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), and can only speak through the SRSG.

In fact, not only does Russia oppose all progress that has happened in Kosovo, but it has also tried to physically stop the Foreign Minister of Kosovo, Hoxhaj, from speaking in the UN media corner. While Hoxhaj was addressing the media, Churkin, the Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN, told Hoxhaj: 'You are not able to talk here at all without UNMIK person, I'm sorry sir.' [vi] Hoxhaj smiled and replied: 'Ok, then you can ask UNMIK to come here' and Churkin admitted later that 'it was just a friendly reminder.' [vii] This anecdote shows how Russia is even *physically* opposing Kosovo's diplomatic representation on the international stage, not purely because of Kosovo, but because the United States supports it. This is also illustrated by Rogozin's view of global relations, as exemplified in his Twitter post: 'The world is ruled by fear and interests. Everything else is propaganda'. [viii]

Russian foreign policy in the Balkans can be seen as part of the traditional international relations approach of deterrence. Eventually, Serbia's stand on Kosovo will change in an incremental manner and this, by definition, will have an impact on Russia's policy towards Kosovo. However, Russia will still maintain a high-profile denial of Kosovo's independence, attempting to stop Kosovo by any means from accessing the international stage.

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[i] <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-reviews-kosovo-serbs-request-for-citizenship>

[ii] http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/188d4badea45d06d4425795a00577257!OpenDocument

[iii] <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>

[iv] <https://twitter.com/#!/Rogozin/status/149453041471471617/photo/1>

[v] <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/docu/u990610a.htm>

[vi] http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xl4v85_ambasadori-rus-churkin-pengon-ministrin-hoxhaj-ne-konferencen-per-media_news

[vii] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCtjTRuScIg>

[viii] <http://twitter.com/#!/DRogozin/status/143347218001301505>