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Serbia and regional stability

LSE Ideas

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Serbian foreign policy, embodied in the formula "Kosovo and EU" is aimed at stabilising the region and resolving the problems that Serbia has on its way to gaining EU membership. In other words, it means the informal acceptance of Kosovo as a special Serbian neighbour and progress in the EU integration process.

On the issue of Kosovo, the only realistically obtainable objectives for Belgrade are better status for Serbs in Kosovo, saving its reputation and maintaining and increasing the influence in the region. Kosovo's independence seems to be an irreversible process to most Serbian citizens. However, the Serbian government wants to negotiate with Kosovo in order to get to a compromise solution. The same logic was used with the Hague process for achieving the temporary delay of resolving the Kosovo issue and making tangible progress in the EU integration process. Belgrade has no other option but to try to get what is realistic, given the cards it has been dealt. Three cards that Serbia currently has, and is ready to use, are: the dialogue with Priština; regional stability; and the policy of re-committing the big powers to the region.



'Handle with care'

The dialogue with Priština

Although the current Serbian policy toward Kosovo sounds like a hawkish defence of Serbia's 2006 Constitution, the reality is different. All statehood attributes will be resolved through 'technical negotiations' without crossing Serbian 'red lines' (including state symbols or status questions). Belgrade is constantly proposing new solutions for resolving the 'technical issues' with Priština in order to ensure the candidate status and negotiation date for Serbia in order to cross the Serbian 'Rubicon' toward the EU. People in Serbia are aware that Kosovo is not under Serbian control and street riots are constrained to [small radical groups](#). Only people in Northern Kosovo feel [abandoned and furious](#). Even Štefan Fule, European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy stated that Serbia could not be a full EU member until the Kosovo problem is [solved](#).

Serbia's 'four pillars' foreign policy (with the EU, U.S., Russia, and China) is also aiming to slow down the process of further recognition of Kosovo throughout the world. Perhaps these two extremes seem contradictory, but the aim is clear: getting legitimacy and support for the current EU and Kosovo formulae. Belgrade needs international as well as domestic support. In order to gain legitimacy with its own people, the Serbian government needs the votes of those who are most affected by the policies advocated by Serbian minister of foreign affairs and the chief of the Serbian negotiation team on Kosovo.

EU support for Serbia is crucial in order to solve the Kosovo problem and stabilise and lead the region toward the EU. The European goal of Balkan pacification is constantly questionable and Belgrade is trying to present itself as a paragon of stability in order to seek European approval and possibly gain more weight in resolving regional issues. Serbia still has influence over pro-Serbian forces in neighbouring countries, and authorities in Belgrade could be tempted to use that influence in the region in order to slow down the integration process of Bosnia and Herzegovina or [Montenegro](#). However, no one in Belgrade is ready for such moves since this could backfire on Serbia. It is more realistic therefore, to see it as a tactical manoeuvre by Serbia, trying to take advantage of two concurrent feelings: a sense of Serbian guilt after recent wars and the compunction that Europe feels after failing to solve that problem in its 'own back yard'.

Regional and international powers

The triangular relations between Croatia, Serbia and Kosovo should be interpreted in the same vein, especially seen in the light of the up-coming election campaigns in Croatia and Serbia. After Priština's ban of Serbian goods (Serbia would lose 250 million Euros annually due to the [embargo](#)), Croatia openly offered itself to fill the vacuum, potentially taking advantage of Kosovo's market of two million people. Reactions from Belgrade toward Zagreb were not subtle at all however. Even though this was not the only cause of tension, one of the aims of Serbia's tough reaction was to indicate how Serbia's role and Serbian-Croatian relations are important for regional stability. Nowadays, when the 'extra-EU' region is much smaller (Croatia will be an EU member as of July 2013), the role and importance of Belgrade in stabilising the region is even bigger.

The further and deeper involvement of the Russian Federation in the region is another Serbian tactic to attract EU attention. Serbia is the locus of Russian influence in the region and traditionally good relations with Moscow have been deepened further in the past few years. By involving the Russian Federation in the region, Serbia is trying to be a filter for the European-Russian competition for influence and Russia's attempts to protect its interests in the Balkans. Using the European and U.S. distraction from the Balkans and acting as a link between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, Belgrade is trying to gain weight in regional affairs, echoing its Cold War role.

Possible stronger military cooperation between these two countries might cause some concerns in the EU and U.S., and the region as well. Serbia is planning to buy a new fleet next year and there is a possibility that Serbia will go for Russian MiG-29s or SU-30s because of a very good credit option that Russia offers. However, it is inevitably more of a political question than financial, even if the tender is planned for next year. On the other hand, Serbia and Russia signed a deal to set up the humanitarian center for emergencies in Niš by 2012. By building such a centre at the north-south transportation link in south-eastern Europe, Belgrade hopes for it to make an impact on the West to speed up their EU integration process. Slowing down the process of Serbian integration into the EU would open an opportunity for Moscow to continue slowly building pressure on Belgrade and to continue increasing its influence in the region.

The overarching issue is that Kosovo is not an isolated problem. If Kosovo's secession finds fertile ground in the region, further balkanisation is highly possible. It is more than justified to fear the possibility that at least three other 'Kosovo's' (Preševo, Bujanovac i Medveđa, Sandžak i Vojvodina) might arise in Serbia and who knows how many of them in the region. If the interests and national dignity of Serbia are further questioned, Serbian authorities could be tempted to make moves such as demanding to see Northern Kosovo as part of the Serbia or destabilising Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia could even support bigger schisms in Montenegro between Serbs and Montenegrins.

Belgrade's role, interests and calculations as well as European efforts to help Serbia in resolving the Kosovo issue are crucial for the regional stability and further EU integration of Western Balkan. Unless current Serbian formula "EU and Kosovo" is not crowned with the EU candidate status and stabile situation on the Northern Kosovo in next few months, the dialog with Priština could be further delayed and Serbian EU integration slowed. Possible failure of current Serbian formula could slightly open the door for policies that are not so regional stability oriented or for actions (such as integration of the Northern Kosovo into Serbia) with self-isolationistic consequences.

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