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## COMPARATIVE GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF "HOTSPOTS" IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

*Nebojša Vuković*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia have experienced internal challenges to their own unity and coherence for a long time. This work represents the analysis of these challenges, which can be defined, geopolitically speaking, as "hotspots". Relying on the observations of Russian political scientists, the author of this work analysed the so-called "crisis potential" in four "hotspots" in the Russian Federation. In the Republic of Serbia, five areas are marked that emit instability and jeopardise (or can jeopardise) its unity, peace and prosperity. Certain similarities are found between the compared "hotspots", and differences as well. The region of North Caucasus is marked as the most dangerous "hotspot" in the Russian Federation, which has not been completely solved yet by the Russian federal authorities, due to the constant terrorist attacks. The purpose of the attacks is to extort from Russia the withdrawal from the area and create conditions for the political independence. The author found a geopolitical analogy to the North Caucasus "hotspot" (Chechnya) in the Republic of Serbia on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. In the conclusion, it is stated that, at present, disparate geopolitical processes are taking place in the two countries – the Federal Centre is strengthening in the Russian Federation and the Federal Subjects are losing their attributes of statehood, whereas in the Republic of Serbia, the centrifugal tendencies are gaining prominence that can completely fragment it.

**Key words:** geopolitics, "hotspots", separatism, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Serbia

### Introduction

Owing to the combined action of the external geopolitical pressure and the internal socio-political contradictions at the beginning of the 1990s, two federative formations, the USSR and the SFRY, disintegrated into many "new" states. As independent states, the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation inherited a complex internal structure. According to the 1993 Constitution, the Russian Federation had 89 political-legal subjects (currently it has 83 subjects), whereas Serbia, as a republic, has had two autonomous provinces within its territory (and it used to be a part of the former two-member federation FRY/SM). Both countries feature ethno-religious diversity, with the undisputed numerical domination of Orthodox-Slav population, i.e. Russians in the Russian

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<sup>1</sup>Correspondence to: [vukovic@neobee.net](mailto:vukovic@neobee.net)

Federation (approximately 80%) and Serbs in the Republic of Serbia (more than 80% excluding Kosovo and Metohija where a complete census has not been carried out since 1981). Despite the relative ethnic homogeneity, both countries have faced internal geopolitical challenges (separatism, irredentism, statist movements), to their own territorial integrity and sovereignty in the last two decades. These challenges resulted from a combination of several factors, such as socialist heritage of “political-administrative feudalism”, growing international and interreligious tensions, awakened awareness among different ethnic groups (minorities) about their civilizational, national and religious identity, social misery and strong interference of foreign geopolitical “agents” (USA, EU, Turkey) that continuously insist on laxer and looser legal-political order of both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. Most often, these challenges have represented building blocks of wider geopolitical projects of redesigning the world map (programmes of so-called Great Albania, Great Hungary, Green Transversal, Great Turan or the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus). Their realization would significantly reduce the territory and the quality of the geo-strategic position of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. Almost as a rule, the “hotspots” occur on the peripheries of the two countries, in areas where both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia are the most vulnerable and most susceptible to destabilization in terms of ethno-religious structure and demographic and social trends. Furthermore, it is a case of the areas which are generally important in terms of communication and infrastructure – they are crossed by transport lines, gas and oil pipelines that are not only of regional but also of (sub)continental importance. In spite of the variety of occurring challenges mentioned above, as well as geographical, political, economical, cultural and religious specificities of the areas where the challenges manifest, it is possible to define the concept of “hotspots” – the regions in which the local political elite or just a fraction of it, with the minor or major participation of the local population, (non)violently questions the existing constitutional order of the country in which it lives by demanding greater independence (autonomy), (con)federal unit status or secession.

### **“Hotspots” in the Russian Federation**

In Russian professional community, texts on potential internal challenges to the unity of the Russian Federation appeared immediately after its independence. One of the most striking observations was the analysis of a Russian political scientist Alexei Salmin – “The Disintegration of Russia?“, which was published at the end of 1992, and republished several times afterwards. In spite of his perceptions that national-territorial problems and contradictions, without the

variety of circumstances, are not likely to become the cause of the disintegration of the Russian Federation (due to the lack of the so-called critical mass), Salmin singled out four “zones” of real or potential instability, in which the nationality factor played the role of a detonator or one of important driving forces: the north Caucasian knot, the Volga area knot, the Siberian/Trans-Baikal knot, and the northern belt (Salmin, 2002).

It should be pointed out that, later, some other authors, in a similar way, observed some possible challenges to the unity of the Russian Federation, i.e. they referred to some “potential hotspots”. One of more prominent Russian authors of pro-Western inclinations, Dmitri Trenin, used to claim that there are several federal subjects in Russia where the domicile population is Muslim or Buddhist, and that “revival of Islam (and potentially Buddhist fermentation) has real implications for those republics and poses a major challenge to Russia” (Trenin, 2002). The best-known theoretician on (Neo)Eurasian issues, Aleksandr Dugin, in his fundamental work, “The Foundations of Geopolitics”, also marked several regions (North Caucasus, Tatarstan, Bashkirstan, Buryatia and Yakutia), which can contribute to the downfall of the Russian Federation due to the independency aspirations of their political elite (Dugin, 2000). All three “hotspot” identifications mentioned above are, geopolitically speaking, rather similar. Therefore, this analysis will capitalize on all the conceptual approaches mentioned above in combination, with the emphasis on Alexei Salmin's work.

#### *North Caucasus “hotspot”*

The most delicate “hotspot” represents the North Caucasus zone (number 1 in Figure 1), where several Russian federal units are situated, in which, apart from Northern Ossetia or Stavropol, Muslim population dominates or it is very considerable. Federal subjects (the Republic of Dagestan, Chechen Republic, the Republic of Ingushetia, the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, the Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, the Republic of Northern Ossetia-Alania, the Province of Stavropol), which are administratively united into a recently formed North Caucasus federal district, cover an area of about 170 000 km<sup>2</sup>, which represents only 1% of the total territory of the Russian Federation. Among all the federal subjects mentioned above, Chechnya was the biggest security threat to the Russian Federation in the 1990s due to its paramilitary formations with thousands of well-armed members. As M. Grčić once observed separatism in Chechnya results from the republic's ethnic structure and peripheral geographic position and a difficult accessibility to the mountainous areas of Caucasus, as well as strong anti-Russian tendencies among the Chechens (Grčić, 1995). Shortly after the disintegration of the USSR, a miniature republic (covering an

area of 15 600 km<sup>2</sup> with the population of 1 200 000) declared its independence from Moscow with pretensions to become a “Caucasus Piedmont” by gathering and uniting all mountain peoples into the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. Chechnya “independence” was created in the atmosphere of terrorism, ethnic cleansing (the victims were largely the Russians, so, at present, the Chechens make more than 90% of the total republic's population), and complete legal anarchy. The influence of Islamic fundamentalism in the republic increased gradually, especially among the younger population, which was institutionally established by introducing shariah ruling at the beginning of 1999. The Russian Federation waged two wars to bring Chechnya back within its legal framework. The first war (1994-1996) was followed by changeable luck but also by the incompetent operation management by the Russians, which resulted in Khasavyurt Accord (1996), which symbolised *de facto* defeat of Russia and enabled the Chechen rebels to rest for the following three years.

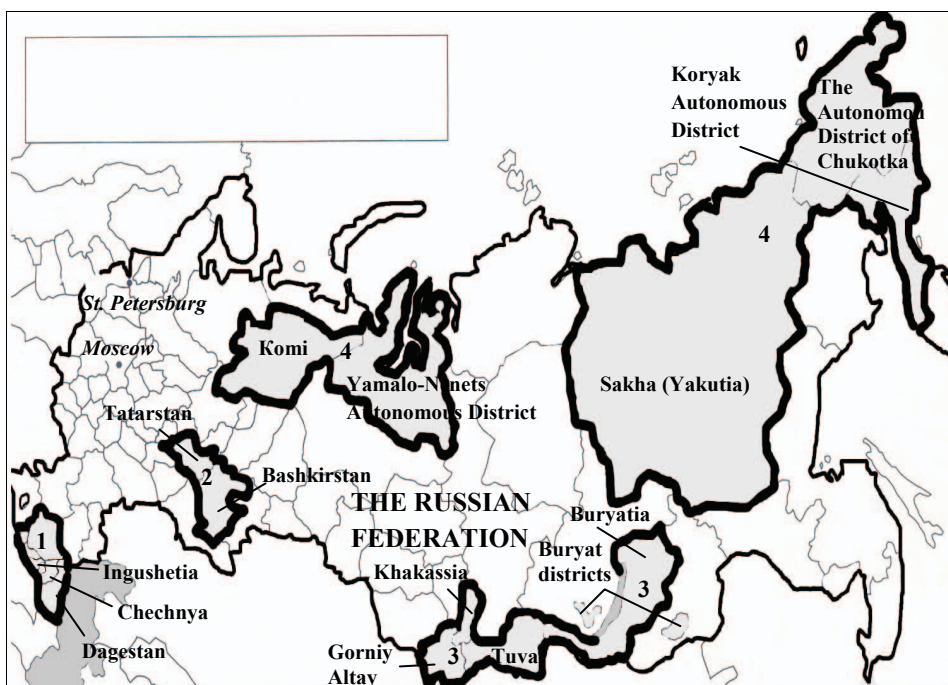


Figure 1. “Hotspots” in the Russian Federation in the 1990s, according to Salmin (2002)  
(1 – North Caucasus; 2 – Volga area; 3 – Siberian/Trans-Baikal, 4 – Northern belt)

For the unity of the Russian Federation in the Caucasus zone, the year of 1999 was crucial and momentous. Political destiny of the Russian part of Caucasus was no longer dealt with in Chechnya (it was temporarily lost for the Russian

Federation) but in Dagestan. A year before, in the capital city of Chechnya, Grozny, a so-called Congress of peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan was convened where the union of the two Russian federal units was openly advocated. Dagestan (covering an area of over 50 300 km<sup>2</sup> with the population of 2 700 000) has an especially important geo-strategic position, because of its access to the Caspian Sea and due to the fact that energetic infrastructure crosses its territory. Some of the Chechnya leaders were very aware of these facts, so in the summer of 1999 paramilitary formations of Chechnya entered the territory of Dagestan trying to turn the political situation of the republic completely in favor of the integration project, mentioned above. Had Moscow stayed indifferent to these actions and only passively observed the developments in Dagestan, its position in the North Caucasus would have been permanently undermined, while the centrifugal processes in the entire Russian Federation would have received strong impulses. The Second Chechen Campaign was waged in the last minute (1999-2000), in which the Chechen separatist military movement was defeated, though not crushed. If the Chechen-Dagestan integration project had been implemented, Chechen's neighboring Republic of Ingushetia (covering an area of 3 600 km<sup>2</sup> with the population of 500 000) would not have easily resisted the “uniting waves”.

The North Caucasus region even today represents a “hotspot” because all the three republics (Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan) are still a target of frequent terrorist attacks where both members of local security forces and numerous innocent civilians die. The official statistics indicate great unemployment, poverty and a lack of future prospects, which force younger population to turn to Islamic extremism and terrorism. However, it is difficult to have a clear picture on social conditions in this part of the Russian Federation because of the diffusion of so-called grey economy and criminal activities that bring profit. On the other hand, several factors contribute to the stabilization of geopolitical situations in the North Caucasus. Determined and uncompromising central power, when the integrity and the sovereignty of the Russian Federation are in question, is the main guarantee that the constitutional order in the region will be preserved. In the recent years, it has invested significant financial means in this area, which maintains relative social peace and “buys” political stability. In addition, traditionally strong tribal and clan relationships and rivalries and an unusual ethnic diversity in Dagestan (even 14 official languages) interfere with the geopolitical consolidation and homogenization of the North Caucasus Muslim peoples only on a religious basis. At present, there is no foreign country or a military-political alliance in the region and beyond, that would go into confrontation with the Russian Federation only to support secessionist tendencies of particular ethnicities in the Caucasus region (as it was the case

during the revolt of Albanians in Kosovo and later during the NATO aggression). However, in spite of all the positive aspects of the political situation in the North Caucasus, it is reasonable to expect that the region will continue to represent a “hotspot” in the following decades.

### *Volga area “hotspot”*

Two federal units with the majority of population being Muslims – Tatarstan and Bashkirstan represented the Volga area “hotspot” (number 2 in Figure 1). The two republics, located between the Volga River and the Ural mountains, represent a communication link of its kind between the European and the Asian parts of the Russian Federation. Salmin was also aware of this feature when he stated that the secession of the republics near the Volga River from the Russian Federation, would break basic transportation and energetic lines that stretch from the east to the west and from the north to the south (Salmin, 2002). Special persistence in confronting Moscow was shown by the ruling management of Tatarstan (covering an area of 67 800 km<sup>2</sup> with the population of about 3 800 000). The Declaration of State Sovereignty was issued as far back as 1990. Special challenge to the integrity of the Russian Federation was the 1992 Constitution with certain regulations of highly provoking nature. Article 61 of the Tatarstan Constitution stated that Tatarstan was a sovereign country, subject of public international law that is associated with the Russian Federation – Russia (Fyodorov, 2004). There was also a regulation in the constitution stipulating that only principles and standards of public international law had the supremacy over Tatarstan’s law, whereas the laws of the Russian Federation were not mentioned at all (Gladky, 2006). Federal centre and the republic’s leadership were able to reach an agreement on competence demarcation in 1994. However, the Tatarstan leadership significantly undermined, on a strategic level, the coherence, and the legal-political order of the Russian Federation, because Moscow was subsequently obliged to enter bilateral negotiations with other republics as well and do the competence demarcation.

The confidence of Tatarstan political leadership resulted from several facts. In the Russian Federation, after Russians, Tatars are the second largest ethnic community with the population of 5.6 million. They are the heirs of a powerful country – the Khanate of Kazan, which was destroyed in 1552 during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. In the Russian Empire, the Tatars especially profited during the reign of Catherine II, when they acquired the rights to trade with the Muslims in Middle Asia and later they became the monopolists in the branch owing to their knowledge of Turkic languages and customs (Millar, 2004). This commercial rise enabled the Tatars to form business class and intellectual elite

so that they, due to their power, organization, and influence in the empire, rose above other Muslim ethnic minorities. The capital of Tatarstan – Kazan, has always been one of the most important cities in Russia (University was founded as far back as 1804), and an important commercial centre, a traffic hub, and later an industrial centre.

In contrast to the Tatars, the Bashkirs are significantly smaller in number (about 1 700 000), whereas the Republic of Bashkirstan is twice as big as the republic of Tatarstan (almost 143 000 km<sup>2</sup>). The separatist energy of the Bashkirs, in addition to their sparsity, is significantly stifled with the fact that of around 4 million citizens of this federal unit, only 30% is represented by the Bashkirs<sup>2</sup>. They barely surpass the Tatars who represent 1/4 of the Bashkirstan population, and are left behind by the Russians who represent more than 1/3 of the Bashkirstan population. Nevertheless, the local political leadership, in the 1990s, diligently worked on the independence of Bashkirstan. Agencies of Germany, Hungary, Austria, and Finland opened in the capital city of Ufa. In addition, the republic intensified the contacts with Muslim countries, such as Uzbekistan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia (Gladky, 2006). Given the fact that both republics (Tatarstan and Bashkirstan) have no immediate contact with the outside world, the Bashkir political leadership once insisted on trade in territories with the neighboring Russian region, Orenburg, which would enable Bashkirstan to border with Kazakhstan, only 50 km away from Bashkirstan (Trenin, 2002). Moscow stopped the trade because it realized that Bashkirstan (and directly Tatarstan) bordering with Kazakhstan would have fatal geopolitical consequences on the internal cohesion of the Russian Federation in the future. From the factors that once used to be advantageous for the Tatar-Bashkir integration, and secession from the Russian Federation or, at least an “exclusive status” in the Federation, the following should be mentioned: ethno-linguistic closeness of the two peoples and rebirth of Islam in both republics. In addition, both republics have been showing economic dynamism, so the statist tendencies have had specific economic grounds. However, several other factors largely impeded the realization of the scenario mentioned above. First of all, the majority of Tatars (over 60% of them) live outside Tatarstan, whereas about 25% of declared Bashkirs live outside Bashkirstan (the percentage used to be

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<sup>2</sup> The presented data on the ethnic structure of the regions in the Russian Federation is based on 2002 census results, whereas the facts about the total population number in these regions are based on later estimations (2009 and 2010). In the second half of 2010 (when this paper was written) a new census in the Russian Federation was carried out, whose results will be published completely in 2012-2013. Thus, it is quite possible that some of the data mentioned in this paper, do not match to the current state of the analyzed regions in its entirety. Possible discrepancies are due to these circumstances and are not the author’s intentions.

higher). Both republics are not ethnically homogeneous, which is especially the case for Bashkirstan where the Russians are the relative majority. In Tatarstan, the Tatar population acquired absolute numerical supremacy (about 53% of the local population) only recently. The relations between the Tatars and Bashkirs are far from ideal – unregulated status of the Tatar language (hence the unregulated status of the large Tatar community with the population of 1 000 000) in Bashkirstan is one of the main barriers for bringing together the two peoples. In both federal units, local believers are institutionally separated into different Islamic communities. Finally, in every aspect, both minorities are more strongly integrated in the Russian society than the North Caucasus Muslims.

However, the main obstacle for the realization of the sovereign-confederal aspirations in the two republics situated near Volga was the consolidation of the Russian country itself. By establishing seven federal districts in 2000 (today there are eight of them), a new cycle of recentralization of the country started. Republic constitutions were altered and brought into accord with the federal constitution. Finally, in 2010, there were some political changes in the leadership in both republics – pro-sovereign leaders were replaced with more modest politicians. At present, Tatarstan and Bashkirstan do not represent a “hotspot” because the times of the lax federal centre are over. Nevertheless, these two republics should not be categorized into, figuratively speaking, “extinct volcanoes”, but rather into dormant ones. In both republics, the percentage of the Russian population slowly but constantly decreases – in time, both Tatarstan and Bashkirstan will be more homogeneous societies, in ethno-religious terms. If the Russian Federation enters the state of anarchy and weakness again, possible statist aspirations of the local elite would be more difficult to solve, than it used to be the case in the recent history.

#### *Siberian/Trans-Baikal “hotspot”*

The Buddhist republics (Khakassia is the exception, in terms of religion), placed mostly near the country’s border with Mongolia in the east of Russia, represented a distinctive “hotspot” (number 3 in Figure 1). Salmin (2002) named the area “Siberian/Trans-Baikal knot” in which Tuva, Buryatia and Khakassia stand out because of their size and large population. The Republic of Tuva has some tradition of independence (1921-1944) only becoming the part of the USSR during the World War II. With an area of 170 000 km<sup>2</sup> and population of only 300 000, in anthropogeographical sense, this republic is a characteristic case for the entire Siberian macro region (vast area with sparse population). Politically speaking, Tuva was to some extent analogous to Tatarstan with the



constitution that was unsurpassable because of the sovereign pretensions. Already in the first chapter of the Tuva constitution, Tuva was stated to be a sovereign democratic country within the Russian federation with the right to self-determination and the secession from the Russian Federation through a national referendum. In addition, the constitution of this federal unit contained a great amount of extreme ideas, such as – the local parliament had the authority to deal with the issues of war and peace (Gladky, 2006). In the Republic of Tuva, the Russian population is in absolute minority (20% of the local population), whereas the domicile Tuvinians represent more than 3/4 of the population. In the last two decades, a series of confrontations between the Russians and the Tuvinians has been registered. The percentage of the Russian population is in constant decrease, as well as the number of Tuvinians speaking Russian language. It is the case of one of the most isolated regions in the Russian Federation, in which the autochthonous Turkophone Buddhist population (with a significant percentage of shamanists, *author's remark*) according to a researcher gravitates towards Mongolia rather than Russia (Stepanov, 1994). After 2000, under the pressure from Moscow, Tuva was obliged to alter all the articles in the constitution that were not in accord with the federal constitution, including the regulation on secession from the Russian Federation. However, as far as the ethnic structure is concerned, the situation remains the same.

In addition to Tuva, the Republic of Buryatia represented a possible “hotspot,” even though the aspirations of the local political elite and the population were of significantly moderate character which is logical because even 2/3 of the population are of Russian ethnicity. Buryatia surpasses Tuva both in area coverage (351 000 km<sup>2</sup>), and population number (over 960 000 people) but the domicile Buryats in their home federal unit are less than 30% (about 280 000 people). While D. Trenin claims that the Buryats were generally oriented towards joining two Buryat autonomous districts outside Buryatia to the homeland (which later lost that status, *author's remark*) (Trenin, 2002), other authors state that there are ideas of joining Buryatia to Mongolia, because Buryats, who are Buddhists, have a lot in common with Mongolian population (Stepanov, 1994). Nevertheless, small percentage of Buryats in their own republic and a relatively strong Russian population block, impede stronger manifestations of separatist tendencies in this Russian federal unit. In the Republic of Khakassia (covering an area of over 61 000 km<sup>2</sup>, population of about 540 000), assumptions for a stronger separatist sovereign movement are even smaller, because the Russian population has an absolute dominance in this republic (about 80%) whereas Khakass (a Turkophone ethnicity dominated by Shamanism and Orthodoxy) only comprise 12%. Some authors noticed in

Khakass a tendency to join the Panturkic movement (Stepanov, 1994). By themselves, these regions cannot represent independent “hotspots” nor do they have the potential of their own to create and emit crises and ethno-political tensions to other Russian regions. However, in case of the downfall of the political hierarchy or the strong pressure imposed by the external “geopolitical players” (China, USA), the statist aspirations in Buddhist regions of the Russian Federation could come to life again. Nonetheless, compared to the North Caucasus “hotspot” or the “dormant” Volga area separatism, this area does not represent nor it will in near future a significant challenge to the constitutional order, sovereignty, and integrity of the Russian Federation.

#### *Northern belt “hotspot”*

According to Salmin (2002), the fourth “belt of instability” could be “the chain of the northern regions” of the Russian Federation, from the Komi Republic in the west to the Chukotka and Koryak autonomous districts in the east. In Salmin’s analysis, the reason for potential separatism (isolationism) of these areas can be found in the domain of economy rather than in the inter-ethnic conflicts. The Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) was prominent in the past as a leader of “North Confederalism”. It is a vast republic with over 3 000 000 km<sup>2</sup> of area coverage and the population of less than 1 000 000. On the other hand, Yakutia is an extremely wealthy area – 99% of the Russian diamond is produced here, 24% of gold and 33% of silver. Coal, gas, and wood exploitation is also well developed (Millar, 2004). The combination of the sparse population and enormous natural resources tempted the local leadership during the Russian anarchy in the 1990s to become more distant from the federal centre and thus keep all the income from natural resources exploitation for the republic. Owing to the support the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) gave to the political leadership in Moscow, it was given the right in 1993 to control a part of the gold and diamond production and make economic relations with foreign countries and investors (Gladky, 2006). Even though there were some inter-ethnic tensions, they never gave rise to an overt conflict. However, ethnic structure in the republic has experienced changes. The percentage of the Russians in the population of Yakutia dropped to below than 50% between 1989 and 2002, whereas, at the same time, the percentage of Yakuts increased from 33.4 to 45.5. Sparse population, harsh climate, transportation isolation and significant Russian population represented a specific barrier for the independence aspiration of the local elite. However, Yakut statist tendencies were downgraded to a minimum only after the change of policy in Moscow itself, i.e. after 2000, when some contracts between the federal centre and Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) were annulled. In addition to Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), in 1990s several other

regions in the north of Russia abundant with natural resources had grounds for “economic nationalism”, such as Komi Republic (covering an area of 416 800 km<sup>2</sup> with the population of less than 1 000 000). However, characteristic features for all these regions – relatively low percentage of the non-Russian autochthonous population in the total population of the northern regions, the majority of Russian population and the lack of independence tradition – completely impede their potential for any kind of separatism. To sum up, the “northern belt” of republics and autonomous districts in the Russian federation represents a macro region that can jeopardize, in the least, the unity of the Russian state.

### **“Hotspots” in the Republic of Serbia**

#### *Kosovo and Metohija*

Without a doubt, the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija represent the biggest and most dangerous “hotspot” in the Republic of Serbia (number 1 in Figure 2). In spite of the self-proclaimed independence on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2008, Kosovo and Metohija is treated in this analysis as a crisis area in the Republic of Serbia. The reasons are twofold. Firstly, it is the case of a unilateral secession that is not recognized by the Republic of Serbia. Secondly, in spite of the high aspirations of the Kosovo Albanians to become a member of the UN, there are no future prospects for this “para-state” to become a part of the World Nation Organization.

The territory of Kosovo and Metohija covers an area of 10 887 km<sup>2</sup> and it represents 12.3 % of the total area of the Republic of Serbia. There are no precise data on the population number but only various assumptions. The last official census that included Albanian population was carried out in 1981. According to the census, the total population in the province was 1 600 000. The Albanians represented 1 200 000, i.e. 77.4% whereas the Serbs (with the Montenegrins) represented 240 000 or almost 15%. Because of the Albanians’ boycott to 1991 census, Demographic Research Centre had to estimate the number of Kosovo Albanians which was 1 596 072, whereas the number of the Serbs (with the Montenegrins) decreased to 215 000 (Krstić, 2000). According to “a school of thought”, the 1981 census results were incorrect, because the census was carried out under Albanian organization that deliberately increased the population number in order to gain the status of constitutional nationality in Yugoslavia and right of secession. Number estimations from 1991 only represent false figures based on the incorrect data from the previous census. As a result, no further speculations on the population number in Kosovo and Metohija based on

the 1981 census and estimation from 1991 are valid. According to this concept, the number of Kosovo Albanians does not reach even to 1 500 000. Another “school of thought” accepts the census results and estimations mentioned above and on the grounds of the data speculate on the total population number in Kosovo and Metohija, and on the total percentage of Albanians as well. According to the 2009 Population Reference Bureau report, the total population number in Kosovo and Metohija is 2 200 000 (PRB, 2009), which suggests the conclusion that only Kosovo Albanians represent 1 800 000 to 1 900 000. Nevertheless, there are three undisputed facts. Firstly, there has not been a reliable and a complete census carried out in Kosovo and Metohija for at least three decades. Secondly, the population number of Kosovo Albanians is definitely above 1 million but significantly below 2 million. Thirdly, in terms of ethnic structure, the area of Kosovo and Metohija is rather homogenous as far as the nationality is concerned (the percentage of the Albanian population in the southern Serbian province is comparable with the percentage of Serbs in the Republic of Serbia excluding Kosovo and Metohija).

Data reference on the ethnic structure of the population is relevant for the understanding of this “hotspot”, because the numerical dominance of the Albanians gives them the reason to demand independence from the Republic of Serbia. Even though some Serbian authors talk about *Albanian ethnic right* in Kosovo and Metohija (Krstić, 2000) because of their numerical supremacy, it is considered that this right should not be accepted as valid, because the numerical imbalance between the Albanians and Serbs is largely created with violence in various shapes (such as murders, pogroms, property usurpation, mistreating causing “willing departures” and albanisation of the Serbs). In other words, *only the fact* about the Albanian numerical dominance is undisputed, but this fact does not imply the ethnic right to the territory of Kosovo and Metohija because, as previously mentioned, the Albanian numerical supremacy has been achieved mostly by violence that, by all means, cannot be justified nor legally valued.

Nowadays, Kosovo and Metohija reminds of Chechnya in the 1990s, due to its political, economic and social characteristics. The ethnic structure, already inconvenient to the Serbs, was additionally worsened because of the uncontrolled violence first in the summer and autumn of 1999 after the withdrawal of the Yugoslav Army and the Serbian police, and then later in March pogroms in 2004, due to mass deportation of the Serbian population. Similar to rebellious Chechnyan political leadership, Albanian leadership is not able to create normal conditions to live and work in the province, even though they have had a decade of complete independence from Belgrade. Unemployment is estimated among the 50% of the working population. As in

Chechnya once, tribal-criminal clans, who often conflict with each other over the distribution of illegal income, govern the province.



Figure 2. “Hotspots” in the Republic of Serbia (1 – Kosovo and Metohija; 2 – Preševo and Bujanovac; 3 – Raška region; 4 – AP Vojvodina; 5 – Area of Hungarian ethnic majority)

For the vast amount of narcotics that come to the European market, mostly from Afghanistan, so-called Kosovo represents a crucial transit point. In addition to drug trafficking, in Kosovo and Metohija, weapon trafficking and sex trafficking are also widespread. So-called Kosovo State possesses its own police formations (Kosovo Police Force) and military formations (Kosovo Defend Corpus), which mostly consist of the former members of the “Kosovo Liberation Army” (the KLA) which is categorized as a terrorist organization by the most unbiased

political analysts. In addition to being a haven for crime of any kind, as Chechnya used to be, Kosovo is also a gathering place for Islamic fundamentalists (the Wahhabi) who advocate religious extremism, intolerance and so-called Holy War – Jihad. By the European standards, the so-called state of Kosovo is a genuine “hotspot” because of unusual concentration of organized crime, paramilitary formations, Islamic radicalism, poverty, unemployment, high population growth, and the permanent violence inflicted on the non-Albanian population.

In geopolitical terms, for the Republic of Serbia, it is inconvenient that its southern province borders the Republic of Albania, which represented the major logistic support for the Kosovo Albanians in their fight for secession. During the 1990s, Albania was the main provider of weaponry to the KLA, a proving ground for the military training of the KLA members and a meeting place for Islamic volunteers who together with the local Albanians took part in actions against the police and military forces of the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, respectively. Rebels in Chechnya sought a logistic support in not-always-reliable Georgia with which this Russian federal unit shares about 80 km long border. In contrast to them, military formations of Albanian separatists in Kosovo and Metohija always counted on the safe shelter of the neighboring Albania, a country they consider as a motherland and a “natural ally.” In the following years, by building modern transportation lines, bridges and tunnels, Albania and Kosovo and Metohija could integrate even more into an indivisible territory, in terms of communication, geo-strategy, and geo-economy.

The chances of the republic of Serbia to neutralize this “hotspot” are exclusively bound to its internal rebirth (economic, demographic, and military) and a radical transformation of power relations in the world, which would diminish the importance and power of the current sponsors of Kosovo independence, the most important of which is the USA. For now, the current situation goes in favor of the Albanian secession. If the current demographic trends remain the same, in the following decades the Republic of Serbia will find it difficult to regain and absorb its southern province into its own political-legal order. According to the projections of the Population Reference Bureau, in 2050 so-called Kosovo State will have the population of 3.2 million, and the rest of the republic of Serbia will have the population of only 5.9 million. Young people will be dominant in the Kosovo population, whereas the Serbian population will mostly comprise of senior citizens. Even if the predictions are wrong, i.e. if the population number of the southern province is unjustifiably increased, tendencies that lead to a decreasing numerical difference between the Serbian and Albanian population

are undisputed. Stepić made a good observation saying that Kosovo and Metohija has turned from a centre of the Serbian country into its territorial and ethnic periphery (Stepić, 2004). Main economic and population centers in Serbia nowadays are Belgrade with the surrounding area and the territory of Vojvodina (especially the area Belgrade-Novı Sad), whereas the areas bordering Kosovo and Metohija, such as the districts of Jablanica and Pčinja, experience economic and demographic downfall. Factors that go in favour of the integration of Kosovo and Metohija into the legal-political order of the Republic of Serbia are as follows: clan-tribal divisions in the Albanian community (which seriously damages its internal political coherence), progressive social atomization, women emancipation, and widespread social deviations, which altogether can significantly diminish the demographic potential of Kosovo Albanians.

#### *Preševo and Bujanovac*

Next “hotspot” can be found in the two municipalities in the southernmost part of the Republic of Serbia – Preševo and Bujanovac, largely inhabited by the Albanian population (number 2 in Figure 2). Albanians approximately make 90% of the population in the municipality of Preševo (according to the 2002 census there were almost 35 000 people). Data from the same census show that the ethnic structure in Bujanovac is more balanced (the population of 43 000 comprises 55% of Albanians, 34% of Serbs and 9% of the Romanies). The two municipalities covering an area of 725 km<sup>2</sup> (Bujanovac 461 km<sup>2</sup> and Preševo 264 km<sup>2</sup>) have an extremely important geopolitical position – along the international corridor E-10 that connects Belgrade, Skopje, Thessaloniki, and Athens. Local Albanian communities in the two municipalities demanded several times, through their political representatives, the demilitarization of the area (still called “The Valley of Preševo” or “Eastern Kosovo” by the Albanians), and the withdrawal of the police force. In addition, they also demanded from the International Community to interact as a mediator and the distribution of the international forces, as well. Their main objective is the formation of a special autonomous district, which would have the right to merge with the so-called Kosovo State. Political aspirations of the local Albanians transformed in the last months of 2000 into an armed rebellion of the Liberation Army of Preševo, Medveđa, and Bujanovac, which was repressed in relatively short time. However, the area remains a “hotspot” due to sporadic terrorist attacks, political provocation of great proportions (putting up the flag of Albania on its public holiday) and due to the organized crime, that is connected to that of Kosovo and Metohija. Unless the Republic of Serbia does not regain the factual sovereignty over Kosovo and Metohija in the following decades, the status of the two municipalities could become more problematic. Albanian geopolitical

spreading and penetration towards Preševo, Bujanovac, Kumanovo, and a potential territorial contact with Bulgaria would have unforeseen and historically justified negative geopolitical and geo-strategic consequences to the Serbian existential interests (Stepić, 2004). By Albanian-Bulgarian merger, the potential for creating the geopolitical axis Belgrade-Athens through the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, would be lost.

### *Raška region*

While the municipalities of Preševo and Bujanovac border in the southeast with Kosovo and Metohija, as a major “hotspot” in the Republic of Serbia, the Medieval Serbian “heartland” – Raška region borders with the southern province in the northwest (number 3 in Figure 2). Historical-geographic Raška region stretches nowadays both in Serbia and Montenegro. The Serbian part of once called Sandžak of Novi Pazar comprises six municipalities (Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Tutin, Prijepolje, Priboj, and Nova Varoš) with an area of about 4500 km<sup>2</sup>. Treating the Raška region as a “hotspot” is justified because of the open demands of Bosniac/Muslim religious-political elite for a special status of so-called Sandžak (the Turkish term for an administrative area) with the characteristics of an autonomy or a federal unit. In the days of the FRY, i.e. Serbia and Montenegro, the demands for the autonomy of the so-called Sandžak had more chances for the realization. Nowadays, when the region is divided by the two independent countries, the aspirations of the Bosniac/Muslim religious-political leadership in the Republic of Serbia are oriented towards gaining a special status for the municipalities mentioned above or creating a so-called Coterminous Autonomy (similar to the South Tyrol model). According to the 2002 census, in the Serbian part of the Raška region, the population is about 235 000, 142 000 of which are Bosniacs/Muslims. In the three municipalities of the region, Bosniac/Muslim population represents a majority (Novi Pazar, Sjenica, and Tutin). Bosniacs/Muslims are especially dominant in the municipality of Tutin where they represent over 90% of the total population, while only in the municipality of Novi Pazar almost 70 000 members of this ethnic community are concentrated (65 593 Bosniacs and 1 599 Muslims) or over 40% of the total Bosniac/Muslim population in the entire region (the Serbian part). Promoting their slight numerical supremacy and the fact that Sandžak of Novi Pazar was a special administrative region in the Ottoman Empire, leading Bosniac/Muslim political organisations carried out an illegal referendum on the autonomy of Sandžak in 1991. The refusal of the political leadership of the Republic of Serbia to accept the results of that referendum forced the autonomous-statist aspirations to be put aside. About twenty years later, the concept of so-called Sandžak as a special region was re-actualized in the political platforms of the leadership in



Islamic society in Serbia and of some Bosniac/Muslim Non-governmental Organisations. The main argument for the region's exclusive status are the 1991 referendum results, mentioned above, in which more than 90% of the citizens supposedly declared for the complete autonomy of the so-called Sandžak.

Political atmosphere in this region is additionally strained by the bad social-economic situation. The Raška region is the one of the poorest regions in the Republic of Serbia. Only in Novi Pazar, there are over 20 000 unemployed. The figures seem especially dramatic, if it is taken into account that the municipality has the population less than 90 thousand (2002 census). The town that was once known as a regional centre and a leader in textile and footwear industry has experienced an economic collapse in the last ten years. The situation is not better in other municipalities of Raška region as well including those where the majority of the population is Bosniac/Muslim (Tutin and Sjenica). A significant part of the population solves the existential problems by turning to illegal activities. A great amount of narcotics distributed from Kosovo and Metohija across Europe goes through the territory of Raška region. In addition to drug trafficking, weapon-, food-, medicine-, and oil derivate-trafficking are also present. Besides organized crime, religious fundamentalism and the existence of Islamic radical groups (Wahhabi) are increased as well, especially in the three municipalities with the majority of Bosniac/Muslim population. In 2007 near Novi Pazar, an armed conflict broke out between members of Wahhabi fraction and the officials of the Ministry of the Interior, in which the leader of the local Wahhabis got killed in gunfire. In addition to the incident, on several occasions, the police force arrested the extremists and confiscated their weaponry. To sum up, the Raška region represents a zone of high security risks for the Republic of Serbia in the years to come, because of the dangerous concentration of secessionist aspirations of the local Bosniac/Muslim religious-political elite, religious extremism, widespread crime, social misery, and unemployment. The fulcrum for the Republic of Serbia for keeping its own integrity and sovereignty in the Raška region is the fact that domicile local Bosniac/Muslim population is strictly divided in two Islamic communities that compete with each other for the spiritual leadership. The mutual antagonism is so severe, that it will within certain time impede the political homogenization of the Bosniac/Muslim population. In addition, the percentage of the Serbian population in the entire region is still significant – it represents the part of the Serbian nation that is extremely devoted to its motherland and wholeheartedly interested in its stability and unity.

Geopolitically speaking, especially unfavorable fact for Republic of Serbia is that the Raška region and the municipalities of Preševo and Bujanovac have an

immediate territorial contact with Kosovo and Metohija. Hypothetically speaking, the three hotspots could form in future, a unique geopolitical zone in which Albanian separatists and Bosniac/Muslim extremists could act in coordination with the intention of fragmenting the Republic of Serbia on territories analyzed. In other words, the creators of instability mentioned above could merge the three “hotspots” into one, from the Macedonian border to the border of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Generation of this “crisis belt” with an area of 16 000 km<sup>2</sup> fits into the wider geo-strategic platform of creating a compact “chain” of territories with the dominant Islamic population from the north-westernmost part of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Bosphorus, i.e. creating the so-called “Green Transversal.” The three presented “hotspots” represent a key geopolitical “buckle” for the realization of this Pan-Islamic Project.

#### *Autonomous Province of Vojvodina*

A potential “hotspot” in the Republic of Serbia can even be found in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (an area of 21 506 km<sup>2</sup> and the population of slightly more than 2 million) (number 4 in Figure 2). In contrast to Kosovo and Metohija, Raška region and Preševo-Bujanovac region, in the northern Serbian province the existence of Islamic radicals or paramilitary formations is not registered. In addition, the problems of unemployment, social misery, and poverty are less pronounced than in the regions mentioned above. Ethnic structure in the northern province goes in favor of the state interests of the Republic of Serbia. Serbian population is the majority and represents 2/3 of the total population. This region appears not to have any kind of challenges to the unity and the constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia. However, this is not the case.

The Republic of Serbia, when it was the constituent of Socialist Yugoslavia, had two separate administrative districts within its borders – Vojvodina and Kosovo and Metohija. Over time, the two districts acquired more competence – a process which would culminate in 1974 when the Federal and Republic Constitution were adopted (Popov, 2000) giving the provinces many republic jurisdictions. This legal-political system was to be cancelled only in 1990, when a new Serbian Constitution was adopted. Simultaneously with the outbreak of political crisis and secessionist tendencies in the Yugoslav Federation, political ideas and organizations were formulated in Vojvodina, advocating the return of the 1974 Constitution model, i.e. the federalization of Serbia. During the 1990s, their influence was weak, but after 2000, the ideas of redesigning the Serbian Constitution that would threaten the republic’s unity, began to gain weight. A fact that the Vojvodina is more developed than the Republic in general, stands

out as the main reason for stronger and wider institutional independence. At first glance, considering the Russia’s political “hotspots”, a parallel can be drawn between Yakutia and Vojvodina, because the “economic nationalism” in this Russian federal unit was also the main motive for the local political elite to demand a privileged status for their republic. However, whereas Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) is abundant in diamond, gold, silver, oil, gas, and coal, Vojvodina has none of the mentioned, or, at least, not in larger amounts (oil and gas). As an agricultural region, it has been a victim for decades, but not of Serbia and its hegemony, but rather a victim of ideological economic politics, which, by exploiting the village, developed urban centers, industry, and infrastructure. Besides relatively agreeable natural conditions for agriculture, the territory of Vojvodina is devoid of other resources (energy substances, ores, forests, hydro-energetic potential) and only with the rest of the Republic of Serbia can create a valuable geo-economic territory characterized by diversity and mutual complementation.

Another supposed reason for statist pretensions in Vojvodina lies in the forming, or, according to some authors, already formed so-called Vojvodinian identity. Historians, Jelena and Čedomir Popov, managed to demonstrate and prove convincingly in their study that the concept of autonomous Vojvodina had been throughout history a Serbian idea in its essence. It was mainly concerned with regulating the status of the Serbs in the Habsburg Empire (1848 May Assembly resolution on creating Serbian Vojvodina; 1849 Wien Resolution on creating the Duchy of Serbia and Tamiš Banat) (Popov, 2000). After uniting Vojvodina with Serbia in 1918, the issue of Vojvodina’s essential autonomy is inappropriate. In the last years, Belgrade (and not Novi Sad – the capital of the province) sends major impulses for the independence of Vojvodina, which reminds of the period in the 1990s, when the Russian political leadership sent the message to the elite of the republics – “take as much sovereignty as you can digest” (Dushenko, 2005). Vojvodinian political elite estimated that it could take over more than 150 competences from the republic, including the right to establish its own regional agencies abroad, to have its own source of income, Academy of Science, and the development bank. Serbian Parliament accepted the Statute of Vojvodina with only minor modifications in 2009 and consented to set foundations for a new country within the territory of the Republic of Serbia; i.e. to establish the administrative (the government, ministries, province agencies), diplomatic (regional agencies), financial (development bank), and symbolic (the flag and the coat of arms) state-building infrastructure. The proof that statist ambitions in some Vojvodinian political circles are not fulfilled with this solution is the project of the “Federal Republic of Serbia” which would be constituted of two federal entities – Vojvodina and Serbia (Berisavljević, 2010). It takes only one

step from this type of “federation” to a complete secession of Vojvodina from the Republic of Serbia. As a paradox, it could happen under the circumstances when the Serbian ethnic population has never been larger in Vojvodina.

#### *Area of Hungarian ethnic majority*

Finally, a possible political “hotspot” in Serbia could be found in eight municipalities in the northern part of Vojvodina, mainly populated by the Hungarian national minority (number 5 in Figure 2). In six of them, the Hungarians represent an absolute majority of the population (Kanjiža, Senta, Ada, Bačka Topola, Mali Idoš, Čoka), and in the remaining two, they are the relative majority (Subotica, Bečej). The biggest problem of the Hungarian ethnic community in Serbia is not the violation of their rights, but a continuous population decline, which decreases the percentage of the Hungarians in the total population of Vojvodina (and Serbia, in general). According to 2002 census, the percentage of the Hungarian community in the total population of the Republic of Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Metohija) was only 3.9 (about 293 000), whereas in the northern province the percentage does not reach to 15 (290 000). That the Hungarian population has significantly decreased in number is proved by the fact that after World War II, almost 430 000 Hungarians lived in Serbia (Vojvodina). Only between the two censuses (1991 and 2002) the number of this ethnic community decreased by almost 50 000. The reasons for such a ethno-demographic trend are threefold. Firstly, the poor birth growth. Secondly, the part of the Hungarian community assimilated through mixed-nationality marriages. Thirdly, the departure of the Hungarians abroad, especially to their motherland, has increased in the last two decades.

As a reaction to this problem, political organization of the Hungarian ethnic minority demanded improvement of the minority rights and insisted on the opportunity to realize their personal (cultural) autonomy in the domains of education and media. They also demanded the creation of a territorial autonomy or the so-called Hungarian Autonomous District encompassing the eight municipalities mentioned above with Subotica as the seat. The creation of an autonomy with an accent on ethnicity within Vojvodina is not supported by the national majority (the Serbs), nor even by the supporters of the federalization of the Republic of Serbia, because institutional and territorial selection of the Hungarians in the northern Serbian province would demystify the concept of “Vojvodinian identity” which both the Serbs and Hungarians supposedly share. Individuals and some political groups of Vojvodinian Hungarians advocate the revision of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which determined present Hungarian borders, in order to recover all “lost” territories under Budapest jurisdiction.

Recently, political subjects of Vojvodinian Hungarians, instead of a direct support for territorial autonomy, take the longer, albeit more productive way from their point of view – they strongly support all sovereign demands sent from Novi Sad to Belgrade, hoping that they would more easily realize their own geopolitical goals in additionally fragmented Serbia. This kind of reasoning among the leaders of Vojvodinian Hungarians is definitely logical – Hungarian ethnic community could be a more influential political factor in “independent” Vojvodina (with the population of almost 15%) than in the entire Republic of Serbia where its population does not reach to 5%. Besides, when the issues of the status and positions of Vojvodinian Hungarians are on the agenda, the chances are bigger that this ethnic group will make a better institutional arrangement for its own sake if Hungary directly confronts with “independent Vojvodina” than with the unified and strong Republic of Serbia. Thus, the future of this potential “hotspot” will primarily depend on the ability of the Republic of Serbia and the Serbian nation to survive on the international scene as a respectable geopolitical agent.

### **Conclusion**

As it can be noticed, the Russian “hotspots” were discussed in the Past Tense. Serbian crisis areas were mentioned both in the historical context and from the present and future perspective. The Republic of Serbia entered the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a new constitution that homogenized the country in the political-territorial sense. Since 1999 NATO aggression, the geopolitical tissue of the Serbian country has slowly but constantly disintegrated. In the Russian case, the sequence of events was completely reverse. As Russian authors tend to point out, it all started with the “sovereignty parades”, anarchy and the self-will of the local political structures. Then, in 1999, the internal consolidation of the Russian Federation started with the military intervention in Chechnya. We are the witnesses of two completely divergent processes – in the first one, the country disintegrates itself because of external pressure and internal contradictions, whereas in the other, political situations are shaped in completely divergent way – the country’s centre strengthens and takes strategic decisions with the loyal following of the federal subjects. This insight does not imply that the Russian Federation definitely solved its problems (danger and challenges) of the disintegration in political-territorial and ethno-religious senses. Russian geopolitical surroundings are expansive in nature (military expansion of the West, strengthening of the Islamic world, unprecedented rise of China), and in combination with the “weak” federal centre, the factor of external pressure can crucially contribute in the possible re-fragmentation of the Russian Federation in the future. So far, current tendencies in international relations go in favor of the

Russian Federation in maintaining the status quo (one existing and three solved hotspots). Strategic prospects of Serbia are more uncertain, which is reasonable if the size and power of both the republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation are taken into consideration. In addition, the aggravating factor for the Republic of Serbia is that its “hotspots” are in immediate territorial contact (three in the south and two in the north) whereas the “hotspots” in Russia are geographically disperse without the possibility of closer communication and co-ordination. Finally, in both cases compared in this analysis, the population number is of great importance. The Russian federation with the population of over 140 million can easily deal with the separatism in Chechnya that has the population of barely 1 million, whereas the Republic of Serbia with the population of 7.4 million (excluding Kosovo and Metohija) will find it difficult to deal with the statist aspirations of Kosovo Albanians who are comparable to the Chechens in number.

The prognosis of future political, demographic, and safety trends represents the most challenging and riskiest part of a geopolitical analysis. Judging the historical experience and the recent events, one thing is almost certain. The international setting, in which the Republic of Serbia will have to face internal challenges to its unity, greatly depends on the “overall strength” of the Russian Federation as a democratic, and a prosperous country, which solved all its “hotspots”. Multidimensional Russian consolidation is definitely not a guarantee that the Republic of Serbia will easily neutralize all its crisis areas in the future, but it can be a vantage for it. Thus, on a higher, strategic level, political situations in the two countries and in the analyzed “hotspots” are in an immediate and partially interactive relationship.

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