



INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

## **Serbia's novel, mysterious ways with the ex-Soviet Union**

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Serbia has lately shown a surprising activity in its relations with some countries from the former USSR. These seem to be just the next embodiment of the Balkan country's wandering dualism in foreign policy, predicated on the two imperatives of European Union membership and inalienability of Kosovo.

### *Russia*

Russia has been Serbia's consistent ally in Balkan politics and in dealing with the West ever since the collapse of communism across Central and Eastern Europe. It was an ardent United Nations Security Council opponent of the 1999 NATO campaign on Serbia over the atrocities in Kosovo, and the subsequent *de facto* secession and declaration of independence of the province. Russia has also been using very effectively its favourite geopolitical tool – energy policy – vis-à-vis and via Serbia. It controls the former Serbian state oil monopoly NIS and plans huge infrastructure projects across Serbia such as gas pipelines and storage facilities. But Serbian-Russian relations are scarcely a gem to observers, at least in light of the pattern well established over the last 20 years. What is more interesting are the novel dealings with other USSR successor states and the implications for one of Serbia's two foreign policy imperatives – membership of the EU.

### *Azerbaijan*

Serbia and Azerbaijan have recently established a close bond probably founded on (mostly Azeri) perceptions of their identical woes over breakaway territories Kosovo and Nagorno-Karabakh, respectively.<sup>1</sup> High-level meetings and visits between heads of state and government and between foreign policy chiefs have become frequent. Oil- and gas-rich Azerbaijan has been the pro-active side, seeking deepening of relations and underpinning these efforts with serious investments that sometimes go against common logic. Azerbaijan has agreed to give a soft loan of over €300m to Serbia for a motorway construction along the EU-defined Corridor XI,<sup>2</sup> a clearly useful and important gesture given the economic crisis in

<sup>1</sup> "Serbia, Azerbaijan 'agree on Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh'". *B92*, 25 March 2012. Available at: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=25&nav\\_id=79444](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2012&mm=03&dd=25&nav_id=79444).

<sup>2</sup> "Azerbejdžan nam zajmi za Koridor 11 [Azerbaijan lends us for Corridor 11]". *B92*, 2 February 2012. Available at [http://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet.php?yyyy=2012&mm=02&dd=02&nav\\_id=579277](http://www.b92.net/biz/vesti/svet.php?yyyy=2012&mm=02&dd=02&nav_id=579277).

Europe and the desperate need for investment and job creation all across the Balkans. But Serbia also welcomed an Azerbaijani state grant for renovation of a park in central Belgrade, Tašmajdan, which featured the erection of a monument to Azerbaijan's former dictator Heydar Aliyev.<sup>3</sup> Azerbaijan's human rights record is notoriously bad, the country often being criticised for authoritarian practices under Aliyev and the current president, his son Ilham. Is accepting grants from such a regime and having a monument to its former dictator in the heart of Belgrade in line with Serbia's EU aspirations? How would such a project look like in Brussels or Berlin? Azerbaijan, on its part, has been playing Serbia's best friend with all its passion. Azerbaijan is essentially a Muslim country, but it invested in the construction of a [brand new church](#) in the northern Serbian town of Petrovaradin, apart from, of course, renovating the Belgrade mosque. Friendly relations among states and new roads, parks and temples are good, but at what ethical price?

### *Lithuania*

Quite on the contrary, though relations with Lithuania have been undergoing some kind of revival, it has been in the negative direction. Serbian foreign minister Vuk Jeremić has earlier this year applied to become the next president of the United Nations General Assembly. The post is ceremonial but does bring some international prestige. It could give Serbia leverage in its continued effort to stop the country-by-country process of recognition of Kosovo in this most important international forum. The UNGA president is elected rotationally among geographical groups of nations, and it is Eastern Europe's turn for the next session. The problem is Lithuania has officially applied for the post back in 2004, and now a rivalry has arisen within the Eastern Europe group who to be the nomination. Some interpret Serbia's late move as close ally Russia's strategy to silence Lithuania,<sup>4</sup> which may go a bit too far, but it is a fact that it is not collegial to create controversies among your own group within the UNGA by such late applications when it comes to the election of the president. And Jeremić has shown to be an increasingly controversial figure himself, both among his Democratic Party (DS) ranks and in diplomatic circles.<sup>5</sup>

### *The EU-Kosovo dualism in another shape*

The fact is that Serbia's, and more concretely – the ruling DS's, dual and ambiguous foreign policy paradigm of „both EU and Kosovo“ has again surfaced, this time in recent more active relations with ex-USSR countries. The paradigm keeps materialising in domestic politics and in the context of EU integration, epitomised for example by the recent improved dialogue with Kosovo that led to the granting of an EU candidate status to Serbia, on the one hand, and the arrest of Kosovo citizens just before the elections on dubious grounds just to prove a point, on the other.<sup>6</sup> Serbia's newly discovered and lucrative friendship with Azerbaijan and its last-moment bid for the UNGA presidential post to the dismay of Lithuania and the other East European nations, probably mainly in pursuit of Kosovo-related leverage, are just another expression of the recurring dualism. The question is, Isn't this dualism a doomed strategy and hasn't it already started seriously harming the exclusive foreign policy goal that Serbia should have - EU membership?

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<sup>3</sup> Dulovic, Vlada. “The Surreal Tasmajdan Park Story”. *Living in Belgrade*. Available at <http://livinginbelgrade.com/story.php?id=22>.

<sup>4</sup> See Bugajski, Janusz. “Russia's U.N. power play”. *Washington Post*, 12 May 2012. Available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/russias-un-power-play/2012/05/11/gIQA6E0IU\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/russias-un-power-play/2012/05/11/gIQA6E0IU_story.html).

<sup>5</sup> See Karabeg, Omer. “Dokle će Tadić tolerisati Jeremićeve gafove [How long will Tadić tolerate Jeremić's gaffes]” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 18 September 2011. Available at [http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/most\\_dokle\\_će\\_tadic\\_tolerisati\\_jeremiceve\\_gafove/24331684.html](http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/most_dokle_će_tadic_tolerisati_jeremiceve_gafove/24331684.html).

<sup>6</sup> See Igrić, Gordana. “Serbia's Childish Game of Tit-for-Tat”. *BalkanInsight*, 29 March 2012. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-s-childish-game-of-tit-for-tat>.