

## Institute for Regional and International Studies

### *Reconfiguring the Serb Political Situation after the Independence of Kosovo*

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The Declaration of Kosovo's independence has brought organized radicalization in parts of the Serb public. I do not refer to the local Kosovo Serbs, living in the northern city of Mitrovica and in other Serb enclaves of Kosovo, but to the public in Serbia proper. The clashes in the streets of Belgrade and ransacked foreign embassies after the big meeting of late February in Belgrade were the starting point of creating a new political majority in the country. Directly betraying his counterparts from the Democratic Party in Government, Prime Minister Kostunica rushed into operational union with the far right Radical Party in promoting angry nationalist reactions to the declared independent Kosovo.

All observers have previewed the need for Belgrade power holders to reject Kosovo independence in order to save face in front of anxious public opinion of the country. Yet the majority of experts considered such a reaction largely as a show up, provided that Serbia has practically lost Kosovo after the war of 1999, followed by the establishment of an international protectorate on the province's territory. What we see in today's reaction of Kostunica and his allies is a systematic change of course of government, aimed at disrupting relationships with Europe and the US at the expense of a new close alliance with Russia.

There are two basic reasons for this reaction to Kosovo's independence. **First**, at pragmatic level, Kostunica has to fight the decreasing popularity of his Democratic Party of Serbia. Having fallen below 10 per cent of the popular vote at the last elections, Kostunica could retake PM's position only because President Tadic's Democratic Party (pro-European social-liberal) had no other option to form a government and leave anti-democratic Radicals in opposition, but to go for coalition with Kostunica. This coalition provided Kostunica with much bigger power than his party's popular support would allow. Radical stance on Kosovo independence serves Kostunica's plans to expand in the electoral space of hard nationalism and widen his political support. Coincidentally, the leadership of the hard-line Radical Party seems to be exhausted and disappointed. The Party's leader, Voislav Seseli is detained in The Hague under charges of war crimes. His deputy – Tomislav Nikolic – was serious contender of President Tadic at the last elections of January – February this year, yet Nikolic seems to be tired and ill. Radicals have no major figure to replace him. Kostunica rushes for strategic union between his party and the Radicals, headed by himself as a leader. Therefore, there's no surprise in Kostunica's decision to disband the coalition government with Tadic's Democrats and go for early elections on May 11.

The **second** reason for the passionate reaction against Kosovo's independence is more fundamental and may have strategic implications for EU's policies in the Western Balkans in general. It refers to the psychological dynamics of nationalist revisionism in Serbia. Let's take the following examples. The second German Reich was defeated in 1918, followed by political turmoil and socioeconomic hardships. A decade later the Nazi movement started its expansion into the public, which brought Hitler as a chancellor in 1933. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, followed by the Yeltsin years of chaotic democratization, theft of national

assets and oligarchic rule, by crisis of Russian self-awareness and disintegration of the governing institutions. A decade later Putin's star of authoritarian revision against humiliating *status quo* rose up. After the defeat of 1999 and the democratic revolution that followed in October 2000, Serbia passed through a controversial period of stagnation, relative international isolation, uncertainty of nations' borders, territorial and political identity. The real achievements of democracy were combined with painful post-conflict economic and communal suffering, high levels of corruption and political instability, marked by the constant threat of having hard line Radicals back in power.

Today, nine years later, Kosovo independence unleashes the revisionist spirit of anger towards the *status quo*, which was detained by the expectations of democratic alternative – just as in Weimar Germany of the 1920s and post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s. We do not need to forecast neither an authoritarian nationalist coup in Belgrade, nor armed attempts for reversing Serbian misfortunes of the 1990 – towards Kosovo or elsewhere. What we see as a result of Kostunica's radicalization are two major consequences. **First**, rapid worsening of governing attitudes towards Europe and the EU by V. Kostunica and his power base. While President Tadic's Democrats tend to combine negation of Kosovo independence with preserving pro-European strategic priorities (they use the example of Cyprus to define their approach), Kostunica reassesses the entire European perspective of Serbia, binding it closely to illusory claims of reintegrating Kosovo into Serbia.

The **second** consequence is powerful promotion of Russia as patron and key ally of Serbia in opposing the injustice of Kosovo independence. The pro-Russian swing of Belgrade goes quite beyond a tactical flirtation. Serbia's government sold out the entire energy infrastructure of the country to Gasprom on the eve of Kosovo's independence, and joined the South Stream gas pipeline project three weeks later. Putin is the hero of the large Serb protest meetings, organized under the slogan "Russia, help!" A strategic union with Russia to counter American – European "hostility" towards Serbia takes shape in political action and in public attitudes. If such a union becomes a longer-term and steadfast reality, it could seriously harm the EU strategy of integrating the Western Balkans into the European mainstream. A Russian oriented Serbia, reproducing the political model and the strategic approach of the Kremlin, and seriously angered to the West, will create a division line of hostility and instability, cutting through the Balkans and contributing to a general process of marginalization of the region from Europe.

The Serb public opinion is far from being united behind Kostunica's radical revisionism. What we observe is almost an even split between hard line angry nationalists and more pragmatic pro-democracy oriented Serb citizens, who remember the suffering and humiliation of Milosevic's dictatorship. Appropriate political action from Europe is required in order to change the balance in favor of democracy and European future for Serbia. This action does not presume any concessions with the integrity and the stability of newly declared independent Kosovo. It should rather focus, first, on promoting valuable guarantees for the present day borders of Serbia. Second, the EU could apply the experience of the Euro-regions for more intense cooperation among the territories, inhabited by Serbs throughout the Western Balkans – in order to prevent revisionist claims and territorial disputes. Last but not least, Brussels could offer more explicit road map for EU membership to Serbia, with clear conditionality and benefits at every stage of the process.

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