



## Serbia as Regional Driver: Change or Stagnation?

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First of all, let us make an honest and genuine assessment on what is going on and answer to the following questions: What is the situation on the field? What are the real challenges, both spoken and unspoken? And what are the actual trends?

Sometimes, I think that when we comment and assess Serbia, in particular in comparison to what is happening in Kosovo, we are not objective. When I say “we”, I refer to the majority of Western pundits, think-tankers, commentators, and even policy-makers. As a citizen of Serbia, I am becoming pretty much upset about it, because I have always thought that the role of think tanks was to provide in-depth analysis of the events and put forward recommendations, value directions, and options, but not to manipulate data and spread fake news and narratives. Let me remind you that we toppled a very autocratic regime (that committed heinous war crimes against its own citizens and foreigners in the region) through non-violent means, meaning that we had to make very tough compromises and that many of the perpetrators and protagonists of the previous regime are still part of the political-security structure. That was the cost that we had to pay for a non-violent regime change. You have to calculate it further when you predict how fast society, particularly the sectors of foreign policy and the security system, can move on.

Nonetheless, these days, even within the US Congress, people tend to forget that we extradited six generals and two presidents, who were indicted in connection only with war crimes in Kosovo. It is not true that Serbia did not punish anybody for crimes in Kosovo. Our Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic lost his life because, after October 2000<sup>1</sup>, democratic Serbia has started facing its past by cooperating with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Indeed, he was killed by the structures opposing and trying to bring down cooperation with the ICTY.

We peacefully separated from Montenegro. It was a challenging operation in terms of security, as there were and still exist legitimate identities issues, for starters: people from Montenegro who felt like Serbians did not want that, and many people in Serbia did not actually want it either; but we managed this situation, we went through it peacefully.

Now, we are negotiating with the EU, opening chapter by chapter. Besides, we are just renegotiating the second round of the Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, namely the highest form of

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<sup>1</sup> Slobodan Milošević was overthrown on the 5th October 2000.

cooperation between the Atlantic Alliance and a country that does not want money to become a NATO member but is eager to enhance political dialogue, which is exactly what is going on between President Vučić and Secretary-General Stoltenberg. This process started with the confidence-building measures posed by excellent cooperation during the refugee crisis a few years ago, that had a heavy impact on the entire region.

At the present time, Serbia is boosting its cooperation with three NATO and EU Member States, i.e. Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania through quadrilateral forum. I repeat: three South Eastern Europe and NATO Eastern flank countries which are both EU and NATO Member States. Serbia is also strengthening cooperation and relationship with two other important EU and NATO members: Hungary and Italy. Moreover, recently President Vučić visited Slovenia, also an EU and NATO Member State, in a good spirit and atmosphere.

And I could go much further on. We have the highest number of troops from the Western Balkan countries participating in multinational operations; we are members of the international coalition to counter ISIS from its inception; two years ago, we had the biggest military exercise ever between Serbia and the US Army; six months ago, we had the biggest exercise ever between Serbia and NATO related to emergency response and crisis management.

As far as domestic politics is concerned, we have a gay female Prime Minister. Regarding pundits and policy-makers' demand for a multi-ethnic solution as a precondition for a one-dimensional request about the outlook of the agreement on future Belgrade-Pristina relations, it is worth noticing that Serbia has recently organized national Councils elections for twenty-seven national minorities in direct form and for two more national minorities in electronic form. The majority of Serbs will continue to live in Kosovo, while the Albanian community of South Serbia in Serbia. Serbia is and will remain a multi-ethnic state, even in the event that an "adjustment of the administrative line" becomes an element of the multidimensional comprehensive agreement – as the CEAS has suggested in its summer 2018 report titled "West Side Story".

Is this the picture that you get from mainstream Western media and politicians, from those who are commenting the potential outlook of the multi-dimensional comprehensive voluntarily agreement between Belgrade and Pristina? I doubt. Against this framework, do you think that any bilateral agreement which would be verified by Parliaments in Belgrade and Pristina would set the Balkans on fire again? Are we dealing with the same Balkans of the 1990s, or have the rest of the Balkan countries actually improved, just like Serbia has? I think that today's situation cannot be compared to that of the 1990s, because all of us have progressed along the Euro-Atlantic integration path and strengthened mutual cooperation.

When we look at the environment in which the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo has been ongoing until recently, we cannot forget that, by focusing only on the Western Balkans and demanding regional cooperation – hence identifying 'region' with the Western Balkan countries alone - we are neglecting natural ties and serious cooperation with the Eastern Balkans. And somehow, the fact that Serbia is doing exactly that is falling below the radar.

In a nutshell, concerning short term measures, the adoption of the Individual Partnership Action Plan should not be stalled by Albania, as it happened last time – and it seems to me that time is passing due to the imposition of Tirana’s unfounded conditions. Genuine regional cooperation must take place until the conclusion of the Pristina-Belgrade with a comprehensive agreement which would not leave any party as a sole loser.

I think that it is very positive that Serbia is increasing its scientific cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance. There is a room for Serbian scientific institutions to address some of the crazy narratives about the use of depleted uranium and its consequences, like alleged epidemics of cancer.

I think that most EU Member States should remind Serbian public that they are also NATO Member States, that to discuss NATO and its affairs in a country which does not want to become a NATO member, but want to join EU, is a legitimate thinking. These countries should not behave like they come from two totally separate systems, just looking optimistic and talking about one perspective while hiding their affiliation with the other structure.

Indeed, the other structure recently marked the 70th anniversary of its inception, however there was no one single event suggested by NATO Member States and Serbia about it, apart from the initiatives organized by the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), notably the extraordinary Spring edition of its annual flagship programme “Belgrade NATO Week”. Why? We need that. Along the same lines, why are Member States and politicians avoiding discussing bombing and its correlation with the new status of Kosovo? By doing so, they are giving the impression that they are hiding something and muting the discussion, and this is exactly how it is perceived in Serbia.

Concerning fake news, I know that NATO Member States are not picking every battle, but Serbia is a unique case: we were bombed by NATO and exposed to a huge Russian operation of misinformation and fake narratives, particularly with respect to the usage of depleted uranium and the number of casualties. It is still ongoing and we are in a dire situation.

It is not easy to deliver on Kosovo and have a democratic validation for it. Sometimes, this angle is missed. It is not easy to listen to fake historical parallels that are force-fed to us. With all due respect for the Prespes agreement<sup>2</sup>, it is only partially an example to follow with regard to political leadership and optimism in EU and NATO integration. In the case of Serbia, NATO integration is not the cookie, only EU membership is. And we will see what happens with North Macedonia. But we cannot forget 13.000 lives lost during the Kosovo war and the bombardment as well. This is a significant distinction, as North Macedonia and Greece did not have to deal with such past issues.

These are unique circumstances that really need acknowledgement and a more tailored approach, this is why the CEAS and I believe and advocate that Serbia should be cut some slack. Belgrade should be helped to get out of the negotiations with Pristina not as a total loser. There should be an

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<sup>2</sup> The Prespes agreement was reached on the 12th of June 2018 between Greece and FYROM. It resolved a long-standing dispute over the latter’s name. It sees the country’s constitutional name, then Republic of Macedonia, changed to Republic of North Macedonia *erga omnes*.

acknowledgement of its improvements and fate, as well as of many setbacks in Kosovo. A tailor-made approach includes a multidimensional comprehensive agreement, that will be appealing to both not-Orthodox and not-Serbian ethnicities in Serbia, who have other interests than those related to Serbian Orthodox Church or Serbs south of the Ibar river, i.e. maybe some resources (mines, water systems) that Serbia can put in the settlement. But, most importantly, any possible solution must keep Serbia on the EU path, because this is the democratic consensus in the country among minorities, women, gay, and everybody else. Clearly, there cannot always be a multi-ethnic reality in only 50 square kilometers, as many who are objecting the correction of the administrative line wrongly demand, masking other agendas they push for. See, for instance, some neighborhoods in New York or in Rome.

And frankly, let us recall that there are strategic spots within small territories, like in North Kosovo, that are relevant in the new geostrategic game – let us think about the events in the Black Sea, or about international nuclear agreements which are falling apart. All this is relevant for Serbia, and we are aware of it.

I think it would be good to acknowledge that helping Serbia to remain on the EU path and feel recognized as a reliable partner by the US and NATO Member States is crucial, because the EU accession and membership now sound farfetched. By doing so, you would actually act in the most natural way.

In conclusion, it is necessary to level the field for better regional cooperation not only in the Western Balkans, but in the Eastern Balkans as well. A comprehensive multidimensional consensual agreement between Pristina and Belgrade would take out arguments for Serbs in Republic of Srpska to object Kosovo's recognition by Bosnia and Herzegovina. B&H's formalization of relations with Kosovo, that should follow a similar move by Serbia, is a precondition for better and stronger regional cooperation in security and defense, which then contributes to all of us in our joint, structured efforts to address common challenges and threats, namely terrorism, illegal migration, smuggling, organized crime, natural and manmade catastrophes.