

THE PASSING OF THE “UNIPOLAR MOMENT”, RUSSIA AND THE FUTURE OF KOSOVO ISSUE

The return of Russia's influence in the Balkans and its implications for the Kosovo-Serbia final agreement

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Introduction

The unipolar moment¹ of the post-Cold War with the political, economic and military supremacy of the United States as the sole superpower left from the Cold War has ended. The anarchical state² of the international scene is not yet totally back, but the world is slowly moving towards a multipolar world with different Great Powers competing for domination³, which in many cases is being compared with Europe before the First World War⁴. But the analogy is still not totally correct, because the world is moving towards an international situation where there is still a very powerful (economically and militarily) state as the United States of America and two powerful states like China especially, but also Russia. These three states will be the main actors in the next two to three decades.

There is a fourth power, the European Union (EU), which still constitutes the wealthiest entity and the biggest economic zone in the world, but since the end of communism in Europe, the EU has focused more and more on democracy, human rights and promotion of peace, while for defense it still relies mostly on the United States through NATO.

This change is happening for three reasons: first, because in the last decade the United States overstretched and exhausted itself in Iraq and Afghanistan; secondly, Obama's 'red line' threat to Assad in 2013 about using chemical weapons and his failure to enforce it after Assad used them considerably damaged US credibility; and thirdly, the rapid economic development of China in the

last three decades, the political consequences of which are currently starting to be felt in the international scene.

The Return of Geopolitics in the Balkans

One of the regions that experienced the greatest effect from the unipolar moment in the 1990s and early 2000s is the Balkans. While during the Cold War the Balkans were divided between NATO countries like Greece and Turkey, Warsaw Pact countries like Bulgaria and Romania and neutral countries like Yugoslavia and Albania, the crumbling of the Cold War international order brought NATO to the forefront in the region. NATO intervention in Kosovo and later its expansion to almost all the countries in the region, changed the geopolitical structure of the region. About at the same time, the unipolar moment changed the territorial configuration of the region's countries through the disintegration of Yugoslavia, breaking apart the six former Yugoslav republics. Later the unipolar moment brought about Kosovo's independence.

It could fairly be said that Albanians in the region have benefited the most from the unipolar moment. Albania became part of NATO with a strong US backing and Albanian-majority Kosovo became an independent country in 2007 after a US-led NATO intervention in 1999 rolled back almost 100 years of Serb political and military repression of the region. The unipolar moment



as well helped Albanians in North Macedonia to obtain more rights and influence proportionate to their population in that country.

What is meant by the return of geopolitics? This corresponds to a situation similar to the XIXth century in the Balkans where Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy vied for influence and power in the newly liberated states like Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria or in the territories still under the Ottoman Empire. If we stretch the analogy a little further we can say that Austro-Hungary from the XIXth century corresponds to the United States of the last three decades in its support for Albanian NATO membership, Kosovo independence and the Albanian rights in North Macedonia, while Russia in her traditional role since the XIXth century continues to focus her energies on Serbia, Serb-majority areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina and less on Bulgaria. The other main actor from the XIXth century is Turkey as the successor of the Ottoman Empire. As it happened in the XIXth century, Turkey is concentrating its main influence and

energies in the Muslim-majority areas of Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia, as one former Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs and later Prime Minister has written.

A change from the geopolitical analogy from the XIXth century is China. The Chinese influence in the region has been growing steadily in the last years, mostly through economic collaboration and financial support for infrastructure projects.

At first glance, it may seem that this geopolitical rivalry is illusory, because in recent years Montenegro became part of NATO and North Macedonia after the name-agreement with Greece, will become part of NATO very soon. In this way, the unipolar moment and the supremacy of the US-led military alliance is still marching on in the region. On the other hand, because of several internal and external challenges to the European Union, there is the perception that EU influence and EU integration perspective in the region has stalled. In many countries there is a perceived fatigue from the EU integration process. This perceived waning of EU influence in the region has stepped up the US role in the Balkans through NATO membership of Montenegro and North Macedonia. Also one might add that decisive actions taken by the US Special Representatives in solving political crisis where the European Union had failed as happened in 2017 in Albania and North Macedonia did as well increase US clout in the region.

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But also at the same time, the vacuum that the ongoing EU integration process created has been filled with the returning of Russian influence in the region, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Russian influence in these regions has always been there even during the post-Cold War unipolar moment and also during NATO's armed intervention in Yugoslavia, but what has changed now is that this Russian influence is crucial for the future developments in Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was not the case in the 1990s.

Also China has become more attractive for the countries of the region because it invests without demanding a precondition respect for democracy and rule of law as the EU and US does.

Russia and the Kosovo-Serbia Issue

Contrary to the 1990s, when the Russian power in the region eclipsed following the dissolution of the USSR, and the political and economic transformations undergoing in Russia at the time left little possibility for projecting power beyond the borders, the situation now has changed for two reasons: first, because Russia has regained the economic, social and political stability that she lacked in the 90s, and secondly because the US influence in the world is not the same as in the 90s.

Kosovo and Serbia in the last seven years have been engaged in a trilateral dialogue between them and the EU, in order to reach a final agreement that is supposed to result in the recognition of Kosovo's statehood from Serbia and consequently to open up Kosovo's road to the United Nations as well as to recognition by all the countries in the world. Several years ago there was the perception that this process was conducted with Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, but the last years have shown that Kosovo has experienced more and more difficulties in getting new diplomatic recognitions and becoming member of different international organizations like UNESCO or INTERPOL. At the same time several countries have withdrawn recognition





from Kosovo⁵, creating an unprecedented situation and much frustration amidst Kosovo's political elite.

Because of Russia's weakness when the war in Kosovo ended in 1999 and its relative impotence when Kosovo declared independence in 2008, the issue of Russia's veto in the Security Council was not taken very seriously. At the same time, north Kosovo's de facto separation from the other part of Kosovo was not regarded as a serious setback. But last years have shown that the influence of US and UK to force other countries to recognize Kosovo's independence has waned. This has increased Russia's position as a Security Council member to influence any final agreement.

These two issues have come back to haunt the international community that backs Kosovo's statehood. Kosovo needs to overcome the Russian obstacle in the Security Council to become a UN member, without which it seems very difficult to be recognized by all the

countries in the world, and in order to overcome this obstacle Kosovo needs a final agreement with Serbia, an agreement where Serbia recognizes Kosovo's statehood, and which will bring along surely in more international recognitions of Kosovo.

At the same time, the Serb-majority in north Kosovo has become a leverage in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, in which Serbia is practically demanding north Kosovo as a territory for granting the recognition of independence. This kind of final agreement would have two main repercussions: first, it would create a good model where these kinds of issues are resolved with a bilateral agreement and not unilaterally; and secondly, it would create a bad precedent where territory is traded for recognition of independence. This could affect several other similar hot issues like the ones in Caucasus, Transnistria or Ukraine. This is the crux of the matter where the real Russian interest crystalizes.

Endnotes

- 1 Charles Krauthammer, *The unipolar moment*, Foreign Affairs Vol. 70, No. 1, America and the World 1990/91 (1990/1991), pp. 23-33
- 2 Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society*, 2002
- 3 John Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, 2001
- 4 Ana Swanson, *The world today looks ominously like it did before World War I*, The Washington Post, December 29, 2016
- 5 12. PO REDU Dačić: Još jedna zemlja povukla priznanje Kosova, Blic 07.12.2018, it could be found here: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/12-po-redu-dacic-jos-jedna-zemlja-povukla-priznanje-kosova/0tkxc9p>