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Russian Foreign Policy and the Balkans in the 1990s

Independent foreign policy of the new Russia has seen the light of day in the 1990s, and was represented, as is widely known, by the first President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin. It is just as well known that Yeltsin could not be more different than the last President of the defunct Soviet Union, Michael Gorbachev. It is a paradox, however, that the difference was not evident in foreign policy. On the international scene B. Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozirev carried on from where M. Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze left off. The two teams even competed in a way: which of the leaders would secure greater support from the West.

Initially, it seemed that Yeltsin was the one who won. Pragmatic Western leaders, adoring and bowing down to “Gorbie” a minute before, quickly changed sides and went for his main opponent. The general public in the West, however, responded somewhat differently, remaining cautious towards Yeltsin. Gorbachev was perceived as a civilized and intelligent politician, whereas Yeltsin was seen as a true embodiment of the “enigmatic Russian soul”. He appeared as a genuine “Russian bear”, unpredictable, impulsive, at times even aggressive; especially later, when he, unlike ever-conciliatory Gorbachev, came to be very resolute, only to turn “diplomatic” all of a sudden again.

Other differences between the two leaders also became more obvious. Once in power, Yeltsin never saw foreign policy as a central political issue, while Gorbachev had always considered it as of being of special importance. And as things went from bad to worse for him at home, Gorbachev was becoming more eager to run abroad into the arms of Western politicians and the applauding Western public. Only later did a similar frame of mind become noticeable in Yeltsin as well, but not as prominently.

Another important detail: at the time of Gorbachev and his perestroika, attempts were made to develop a philosophical framework for the changing world and the role of the USSR in it. The Secretary General of the USSR Communist Party wrote a widely-known book, *Perestroika: New*

Thinking for Our Country and the World. Nothing of the kind can be found in the books Yeltsin published at the beginning of his career or later on. The little that was written about foreign policy appears quite superficial, even rudimentary.

On the other hand, the Russian foreign policy of the period cannot be described as ideology free. On the contrary: instead of no ideology in foreign policy, one ideology was simply replaced by another. Instead of communist ideology and aspirations for world leadership, foreign policy increasingly reflected frustrations of a country which had thrown itself at the mercy of the Cold War winners, a country with no aspirations whatsoever. Initially, however, the Russian perception of the collapse of Communism was completely different. It was seen as a victory and a return to normal processes of development. If there was a defeat, then it was the peace that broke out in the aftermath of the Cold War that was lost rather than the war itself.

There is yet another point of interest. Not only that Kozirev in his capacity as Foreign Minister did not seek to cooperate with civil society and governmental structures in building a common foreign policy at national level, but he threw himself into the internal political battle raging in Russia at the time. It was he who coined the characteristic label “war party”, using it indiscriminately for all political opponents and rivals. This, of course, made any cooperation with the legislature, civil society structures and the expert community utterly impossible.

A case in point was Russia’s joining the anti-Serbian sanctions at the time of the Yugoslav crisis (1991–1995). The motives lying behind this step were largely ideological. Kozirev saw the Serbian leadership as mere “national-communists” and had no intention of being lenient with them. Complex geopolitical processes and Russian national interests were of little concern to him in this case.

Kozirev even allowed himself a mild criticism of the United States for their ostensibly belated recognition of the independence of the Yugoslav republics. “In the beginning,” he writes, “until the very break of the SFRY, the USA consistently ignored the demands of this very Bosnia and other federal republics for sovereignty, and advocated until the very last moment the preservation of the [Yugoslav] federal state regardless of its communist nature. Is this not the reason for the strong anti-Yugoslav charge in Washington, a feeling of original guilt?”¹

In order that the position of the Russian Foreign Ministry at the time can be understood, the following episode may be a useful illustration. Asked by the former US President R. Nixon to give him an outline of the interests

¹ A. V. Kozirev, *Преображение* (Moscow 1995), 125.

of the new Russia, Kozirev said: "...one of the problems with the USSR was that we paid too much attention to our national interests, so to speak. Even now we tend to pay more attention to universal human values. But, if you have some ideas, if you can help us and suggest how to define our national interests, I would be very grateful."

Later on, Nixon commented on the Russian Foreign Minister's reply: "When I was Vice-President and then President I wanted everybody to know what a Son-of-a-Bitch I am, and that I will fight for American interests with all my might. [Henry] Kissinger was one such S-o-B, so I could learn a few more things from him. And this man, now that Russia needs to be protected and strengthened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, wants to show everybody how nice and affable he is!"²

This failure to develop theoretical and conceptual approaches was increasingly noticeable as time went by. Lack of ability and of the wish to understand the real state of affairs led to a long-held naïve belief in the altruism of Western democracies, that the West would forego its own interests and welcome Russia with open arms into the "family of progressive democracies" and share the burden of the transitional reforms in a brotherly way. When concessions were demanded of Russia, the demands were willingly met. Russia even made unsolicited concessions. What was seen as paramount was to build up, at any price, relations with leading Western nations, the USA above all. Russian diplomacy followed their lead, expecting that the compliance would earn a ticket to the "civilized world".

The years 1991–1993 are believed to have been a period of "infatuation" in Russian foreign policy, a honeymoon which lasted three "honey years". What put an end to it in 1993 was the decision to expand NATO into Eastern Europe. It is this eastward expansion of NATO and the Yugoslav conflict that largely unravelled the strategic goals of the North-Atlantic Alliance.

The Yugoslav conflict marked the beginning of NATO engagements outside of its zone of responsibility; and not defensive, but offensive, using its full military arsenal. It became clear it was not only about spreading democracy and democratic values, human rights and the like.

After some initial reluctance, the USA declared itself the only winner of the Cold War and, consequently, entitled to "war trophies": to expanding perceptibly its influence, even hegemony, in the modern-day world. This issue was addressed by President Vladimir Putin in his much debated Munich speech. The speech provoked a strong reaction. The public refusal of obedience caused a psychological shock: Russia turned out to be able to say "nyet".

² Y. M. Primakov, *Годы в большой политике* (Moscow 1999), 210–211.

It has also become obvious that many things are perceived in different ways in Russia and in the West, the Yugoslav crisis for one. Many such examples can be found in a book of the Scottish analyst Sarah McArthur.³ For instance, in Russia the World War Two pro-Nazi Independent State of Croatia is seen in a negative light, and the famous “Islamic Declaration” of the Bosnian Muslim community leader Alija Izetbegović is perceived as fundamentalist and as one of the main causes of the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the West, while not justifying the horrible, large-scale anti-Serb and anti-Jewish crimes of Croatian World War Two fascists, it still is believed, as Franjo Tudjman did, that the Independent State of Croatia was an expression of the will of its people to live independently. The views on the “Islamic Declaration” are even more drastically divergent: in the West, it is included in political science courses as an example of Islamic democracy. A list of similar misinterpretations could go on.

We are yet to learn to listen to each other and to respect each other’s opinion, hopefully based on reliable and verifiable facts. The so-called “New Europeans” might play a key role in this complex matter, for the Central and South-Eastern European mentality is much closer to the Eastern European mentality than the Western one is. Unfortunately, this process has not begun yet. Furthermore, some new members of NATO and the EU make such an intra-European dialogue even more difficult.

Be that as it may, without Russia it is not possible for NATO to solve a number of difficult problems, the Balkan issue included. Nor is it possible for Russia not to cooperate with NATO in the modern global world. Yet, rather than merely ceremonial, this should be a day-to-day working relationship. And most importantly, this relationship has to become an honest cooperation for both parties.

Let us go back to the 1990s. The weakening of Russia’s international position was inevitable following the collapse of the USSR, coupled with her transition-induced, mostly economic problems. The only question is how far this retreat had to go. Namely, not even the West formulated its goals at once. They in part depended on the position Russia would eventually take. Russia’s continuous concessions only whetted the appetite of the other side. Not that Russian opinion was ignored. Russia often simply had no opinion! Suffice it to say that the Russian Foreign Ministry, in spite of its many promises, had never come up with its own programme for solving the Yugoslav crisis.

By the mid-1990s Russian foreign-policy failures became more and more obvious. Consequently, the policy of the Foreign Ministry now had

³ S. McArthur, *Когда к штыку приравняли перо. Деятельность СМИ по освещению боснийского кризиса 1992–1995 гг.* (Moscow 2007).

against it not only the Opposition but virtually the entire political elite and the expert community. The attitude crystallized that Russia had to have its own identity and place in world politics. Of course, this did not imply her getting into argument with the West over trifles, which would entail confrontation. But there was no need to be acquiescent, at times to the detriment of Russian interests.

On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry was not the only one to blame for the series of foreign-policy failures. The leadership of the country shared the blame inasmuch as it had created a system in which the Foreign Ministry was able to operate without any control and in a monopolistic position. It is probably this lack of a collegial mechanism in the process of developing and implementing policies that was the major flaw in the system. The old institutions, such as the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had been disbanded and no new ones were set up. It seemed that Yeltsin simply signed virtually everything that Kozirev put before him without reading the small print or bothering much with additional consultations.

To tell the truth, the Foreign Ministry, or any other similar department, could not be expected to generate elaborate foreign policy concepts, and not even as a result of the ill will of its top ranks. There were objective limitations. Traditionally, the role of a diplomat is not to generate ideas but to implement them. In that respect diplomats resemble soldiers. They can only be more or less successful in following their instructions, depending on personal abilities. However, precisely that was lacking: strategic instructions from the top officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Many astute observers noticed this strange phenomenon. During Yeltsin's term of office attempts were made to set up a special mechanism for coordinating foreign-policy activities among different departments. The attempts failed for various reasons, but mostly because the leadership of the Foreign Ministry actively opposed the whole project. Kozirev managed to implement two presidential decrees confirming the coordinating role of the Foreign Ministry in foreign-policy issues. A third decree of similar nature was signed by Yeltsin's next Foreign Minister, Y. Primakov. At the end of the day, the Russian Foreign Ministry was assigning tasks to itself, fulfilling them by itself, coordinating itself, and all this under its own control.

All these developments took place in the 1990s, a watershed period for Europe and the world at large. The old European security system created in a bipolar world collapsed and a new one was formed in its place. The formation of this new system was significantly influenced by the Yugoslav crisis. Sadly, it took the Russian Foreign Ministry long to understand that.

In early 1996 Andrei Kozirev was eventually retired. It is indicative that Yeltsin blamed him for two things: for NATO's rapid eastward expan-

sion, and for a lack of political “precision”, particularly with regard to the former Yugoslavia. The Russian President’s diagnosis was accurate, but it came too late to change the course of some developments. In early 1996 Y. Primakov was appointed Foreign Minister. Primakov, an experienced expert, was not reluctant to speak of Russian national interests. Russia intensified relations not only with the West, but with the East too. Her foreign policy began to be defined as multivectorial. A multipolar world also began to be mentioned. Yet, on the whole, Russian diplomacy failed to reverse the negative trends and to put herself on an equal footing with the West.

Therefore, two flaws in the Russian foreign policy of that period emerge most prominently: too much attention paid to a new ideology instead of developing an ideology-free outlook, and a monopoly of the diplomatic department in the process of decision-making.

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Let us put across a few observations about the contemporary Balkans. We should try to understand what the Balkans is today and what happened there during the 1990s. And not just out of idle curiosity. One can speak about a Russian Balkan policy so long as there is a Balkans as a distinct region. That there still is such a region is open to doubt given that Eastern Europe as a distinct region disappeared with the collapse of Communism. To be more precise, what counts as Eastern Europe today amounts to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The rest of it broke again into Central and South-Eastern Europe (i.e. the Balkans). Not to mention the former DDR, now integrated into Western Europe.

But even the Balkans is in the process of breaking into two parts. Slovenia, and Croatia, are somewhat ashamed of their Balkan roots and seek to position themselves as constituent elements of Central Europe. At the same time, in the West and the world at large, a new and not quite appropriate term, a mere result of the current political conjuncture, “the Western Balkans”, has come into use to denote the post-Yugoslav states minus Slovenia plus Albania.

In spite of everything, however, the Balkans seems to be a sustainable region. It has its distinctive history, geography, culture, mentality. The fact that most Balkan states were part of the “Eastern bloc” and are now joining, or have already joined, the EU and NATO is not fundamental. Greece is a case in point. Regardless of her fifty years within NATO and the EU, Greece typologically remains a Balkan country, and there are no indications that other Balkan countries will fare differently in the foreseeable future.

What happened, then, in the Balkans during the 1990s? It seems that there were at least three separate processes. They affected one another, producing various complex combinations.

One process was quite obvious: the Yugoslav crisis itself. The crisis was related to other significant events across Eastern Europe: the Perestroika and collapse of the USSR, and the so-called “velvet revolutions” in the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe in 1989, even though not all of them were so “velvety”. In Yugoslavia this process extended for a full decade, and was bloodiest. It resulted in the collapse of the multinational federation, a federation riddled with a host of serious internal problems. Moreover, the collapse came about without any agreement having been reached, which was one of the main causes of the war or, to be more precise, a series of wars spreading from the northwest to the southeast of the former Yugoslavia.

Another process unfolding in the Balkans was the internationalization of the Balkan conflict, in other words the involvement of the “international community” in the conflict. This involvement was responsible to an extent for the ten years of warfare: it precipitated recognition of new states, overtly sponsored some parties in the conflict at the expense of others, and so on.

Speaking about peace in the aftermath of the Cold War, Russian philosopher Alexander Zinoviev observed that “Communism was aimed at but Russia was hit”. By analogy, one might say that Western mediators aimed at Slobodan Milošević, but hit Serbia. This explains a lot.

The process of international involvement in the Yugoslav crises can be termed the process of NATOization of the Balkans, and seen as part of a broader process, that of NATO’s eastward expansion. In some cases this expansion was peaceful, with countries voluntarily joining the alliance, such as the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe; in others, such as Yugoslavia, there was a civil war. At any rate, the gap left by the disappearance of a bipolar world was being filled.

The process of NATO’s eastward expansion was closely connected with another and even broader trend: the setting up of a new, both European and international, security model. This is precisely what sets the Yugoslav crisis apart from other recent interethnic conflicts in Europe, such as those in Northern Ireland or Cyprus. It was precisely at the time of the Yugoslav crisis that NATO began to assume a pivotal role in the building of a new European security system.

Yet another key element should be stressed: the Balkans has always been an object rather than a subject of international relations. The NATOization of the Balkans only proves this observation. In light of Balkan history, this process is not an unusual one, as evidenced not only by centuries-long Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian rule, but also by more recent decades in Balkan history. Processes in the Balkans have followed a pattern. Thus the 1940s were marked by fascization, followed by a period of about

half a century that could be termed Sovietization and, finally, the present – NATOization.

It may be of interest to point out that all three processes – fascization, Sovietization and NATOization – met with strongest resistance in one and the same country, Yugoslavia, and mostly by its Serbian population. To explain this phenomenon of Serbian unwillingness to compromise would require a separate and sophisticated analysis. We shall only observe that the Serbs are a small nation with the mentality of a large one. This aspect of their self-perception provides a mine of possible explanations.

Only Greece has managed to an extent to escape the pattern of a Balkan country, but similar processes can be observed even there: the period of occupation during the Second World War – fascism; then seven years of the “black colonels” military dictatorship (1967–1974) which can be seen as its echo; an attempt at Sovietization during the civil war 1946–1949; and finally, the first Balkan state to join NATO as early as 1952.

We believe that the optimum solution for the Balkans would be to apply the old motto: “The Balkans to the Balkan peoples!” At present though, it seems utopian.

Finally, one of the consequences of Western involvement in the Yugoslav conflict is the loss of the fragile balance previously existing in this part of the world. In order to bring the Serbs to heel, Western mediators opted to support the Albanian minority in Serbia. On the other hand, the Serbs were the only force in the Balkans capable of halting Albanian expansion. Eventually, the West largely lost control over the Albanians, as the events that took place in Kosovo in March 2004 have shown. As a reminder, within just three days in March thirty-five Christian churches were completely or partially demolished. Not to mention human casualties. Giving Kosovo a *de facto* independence, as envisaged by the Martti Ahtisaari plan, cannot resolve the problem of Serb-Albanian conflict in a sustainable way.

This exceptionally fast-rising Albanian expansion is the third process in the present-day Balkans. And it is an objective one. There is no doubt that at this moment the Albanians are the most active Balkan ethnic group, an ethnicity in nationalist ascent and striving for unification. They are also, as the Russian ethnographer Leo Gumilyov would put it, “the most passionate” of the Balkan peoples. Given that the Albanians live not only in Albania but also in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Greece, further divisions in the Balkans can be feared. Here too some broader processes can be identified. Albanian expansion fits well into the same “southern belt of instability” making its way into Europe across the Balkans, and using Albania as the key destabilizing factor.

Even though NATO is now fully established in the Balkans and the worst of the Yugoslav crisis is well behind us, the Albanian factor can still make itself pretty much felt.

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It was our conscious intention to show how intricate and multifaceted the Yugoslav crisis was, and how important it has turned out to be for the future of the whole planet. It should be added at once that in the early 1990s there was no clear understanding in Russia of what was going on in the Balkans. For this simple reason Russia's Balkan policy could not be but inadequate.

The Yugoslav crisis, which has impacted so greatly on the current development of international relations and new geopolitical divisions in the world, was initially perceived by Russian authorities as no more than an unpleasant obstacle on their way to the "civilized world".

That is why Russia was among the first to recognize – well before any intra-Yugoslav agreements were reached – the independence of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. That is why Russia willingly accepted to play by Western rules in solving the Yugoslav issue: big players impose their will onto the Yugoslav peoples, and the latter comply unquestioningly. Making use of her privileged position with the Serbian side, Russia was imposing the will of the so-called "international community" onto the FRY. At first, the Russian media also conveyed the predominantly Western view of the Yugoslav conflict, thereby shaping Russian public opinion.

It was only later that the Russian public swung in the opposite direction. The exorbitant price of the reforms became obvious, as did the unwillingness of Western democracies to extend any kind of substantial aid to Russia. On the contrary, it was increasingly obvious that the difficulties Russia was experiencing were only being used to weaken her further and push her out of the Balkans and the rest of Europe. The case in point was the onset of NATO's eastward expansion. Accordingly, Russia's idea of establishing a new pan-European system of security based on the OSCE framework ended in failure. This has turned out to be just as lethal for the OSCE. In our view, the OSCE as it is today is a virtually fringe organization.

From about 1994, Russian diplomacy sought to become more synchronized with the prevailing mood in Russian society, even more so as the Yugoslav crisis was becoming an internal rather than external policy issue. Yet, the change in the activity of the Foreign Ministry amounted to a change in style and phrasing in official statements. One could hear phrases about treating all sides in the conflict equally, recognizing the Balkans as an area of Russian interest and so forth. Some observers rashly read this as

Russia's adopting a pro-Serbian stance. The reality was very different though. Among other things, Russia retained, together with the Western states, the severe regime of anti-Serbian sanctions, and even repeatedly voted for their tightening.

In the final stage of the Bosnian crisis NATO intervened openly against the Bosnian-Serb population in the Bosnian civil war. This was its first ever foreign intervention since its creation. And Russia was simply pushed aside; her services were no longer needed. What Russia was needed for was to play a supporting role in the process of solving the problem in order to secure its formal legitimacy, and in exerting by now traditional pressure on the Bosnian Serbs. Russia played this supporting role during the Dayton peace talks in November 1996 as well as during peace implementation operations in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The most surprising of all was that Russian diplomacy publicly described its policy as tremendously successful, reporting one triumph after another and an ever-growing Russian influence in the Yugoslav events. The reality was very different.

The Kosovo crisis changed little with regard both to foreign interference and to the position of Russia. Once again, it all led to a NATO attack, this time on the Serb-Montenegrin dual federation, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in March 1999. Once again, the West managed to tie the Serbs down and break their fierce resistance largely through the efforts of the Russian special envoy V. Chernomirdin.

After that and until recently – having got her fingers burnt many times while attempting to solve Balkan problems, and being *de facto* driven out of the Balkans – Russia almost demonstratively abstained from being involved in the Balkans. Top levels of Russian diplomacy stopped reporting victories scored in the Balkans. Quite the opposite, they seemed unwilling to remember the events in the former Yugoslavia, or even chose to forget them altogether. An indication of Russia's attitude towards the Balkans was withdrawal of the few Russian peacekeepers from Bosnia and Kosovo.

In Russia's relations with the Balkan states the so-called "measured-political-dialogue" approach was used, the measure depending on their respective attitudes towards Russia. Such a position, of course, lacked initiative.

The only Russian initiative in recent years was Putin's proposal to hold a Balkan conference which would discuss the inviolability of borders and human rights, but the initiative was left out in the open.

Recently, however, Russia has become more active in connection with the Kosovo status talks. The reasons for this reactivation may be found in Russia's aspiration to translate her newly-gained economic power into political power, and also in the fact that there are in the post-Soviet territory as

well some unrecognized self-proclaimed states, moreover, for the most part pro-Russian. But what is central, in our view, is Russia's desire to develop a conceptual framework for past events, and to prevent any breach of international law in the future. Hence all those statements that stress the necessity of laying down "universal principles" applicable in all situations, not just in the case of Kosovo.

It is often heard that recognition of Kosovo's independence, even in breach of international law, would put an end to all Balkan strife. But anyone who has a profound understanding of the Balkans knows that nothing is that simple over there. In particular considering that today at least three national questions in the Balkans – Serbian, Albanian and Macedonian – remain pending.

The idealistic belief that all these problems will be almost automatically resolved once the "Western Balkans" finds itself in the EU, or even just in NATO, seems completely incompatible with any sustainable long-term scenario.

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