

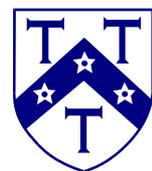
South East European Studies
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opinion piece

Consolidating instability: Serbia pushed back to the edge

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S E E S O X
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Consolidating instability: Serbia pushed back to the edge

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The Serbian presidential elections of 3 February 2007 were the most uncertain in Serbia's recent history and the most pivotal since the fall of Milosevic in 2000. They were carried out in the face of an imminent declaration of independence by Kosovo's Albanian leadership, who enjoy the backing of most of the Western powers. In the end, higher voter turnout for the last round tipped the scales in favour of Tadic – over Nikolic – only for Kostunica to step down a few weeks later, forcing spring parliamentary elections and perpetuating political instability in Belgrade.

So the February election results cannot be interpreted as a victory for the pro-Westerners over the pro-Russians, resolving the storied dilemma of whether Serbia's future lies in accession to the EU or under Russia's wing. And this is simply because there is no such dilemma for either Belgrade or Moscow. Despite the persistent hum of hard-line nationalist rhetoric in Serbia – and given that Russia confined itself to verbal support of Nikolic – Serbs cast their votes in favour of their economic survival and their future within the framework of a European perspective that, when all is said and done, is really the only path they can take. A privileged bilateral partnership with Moscow cannot solve the problem of Serbia's isolation, with Romania and Bulgaria already members of the EU and NATO, and Croatia having started accession negotiations with Brussels, a path down which Bosnia, Montenegro, Albania and FYROM are already headed. As demonstrated by the rekindling of Moscow-Sofia relations with the signing of energy agreements, Russia is part of the equation, but is no substitute for full accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions. Consequently, the absence of a viable alternative led the Serbs to opt for the difficult but relatively safe route of incorporation into Europe over the uncertainty of isolation.

Russia's gains

Still, capitalising on Serbian disappointment in the West that stems from the latter's failure to come through with a balanced stance on both Kosovo and EU accession, Russia has clearly reasserted influence in Serbia, aspiring to convert its traditionally intractable Slavic brother into an economic, energy and political bridgehead for

Russian influence in the Balkans. The signing on 25 January 2008 of an energy agreement between Serbia and Russia's Gazprom was a watershed in this process, providing for: Gazprom's purchase, for \$400,000, of a majority share in Serbia's state oil company, NIS; the construction of a section of the new South Stream pipeline on Serbian territory; and the construction of natural gas storage facilities in Serbia. Gazprom – and, by extension, Russia – is seen as the big winner in this agreement, certainly because of the nominal price it is paying to buy out NIS, but primarily because it is strengthening its foothold in the Balkans. As Putin put it, "Serbia is becoming a pivotal intermediate link in the system being developed to deliver Russian energy to Southeast Europe."

But if Russian interests are to be served and Moscow is to maintain its influence in the region via Serbia, the latter will have to be incorporated into Europe, achieving the consequent political stability and steady economic growth that will render it a reliable and effective partner. Russia's neutral stance in the recent Serbian elections indicates its preference for the moderate Tadic, who is hotly pursuing accession while acknowledging Russia's support on the Kosovo issue.

Europe's botched job

The U.S. and the EU, in turn, welcomed Tadic's re-election with relief, seeing it as the Serbian people's vote of confidence in the EU. Despite the EU's best intentions to support Tadic, however, its stance thus far has probably worked in the opposite direction. Infighting and a failure to achieve a unanimous stance on Serbia's accession have done anything but bolster Belgrade's European perspective. Pressure from Del Ponte cannot be allowed to keep Serbia from taking its place in line: When the EU wants to consolidate its interests in a country that feels – at least somewhat justifiably – that its pro-Western orientation in recent years has not borne commensurate fruit, is a Dutch veto or the failure to deliver Mladic and Karadzic good enough cause not to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement? The security and stability of the region – and, by extension, of Europe – hinge not on a jilted Serbia, but on a Serbia that is assisting efforts to stabilise the Balkans. When the objective is to deter nationalistic trends at all costs, Brussels needs to find tangible ways to support Tadic, rather than simply dangling a distant, uncertain prospect of accession to the EU.

This need is all the more imperative in light of the fact that, despite the victory of the pro-Western ticket, the political scene in Serbia remains stormy, particularly in

the wake of the EU's green light for the police mission to Kosovo. Tadic's victory, however narrow, was a personal victory, achieved at a time when his political rival, Nikolic, was particularly powerful – backed by the party with the most seats in the National Assembly– and when Prime Minister Kostunica, with whom Tadic led the coalition government, offered him no support.

Europe has clearly had a hand in shaping the domestic crisis that is gripping Belgrade and has enabled a Kostunica weakened by Tadic's victory to strike a righteous political pose: With the signing of the interim political agreement slated for 7 February, Europe jumped the gun on 5 February – the day after Tadic's re-election – and announced the decision to send a European force to Kosovo. Instead of waiting three days, they didn't. Whatever their intentions, in effect they put the squeeze on Belgrade while knocking fresh wind out of Tadic. Kostunica's rejection of the consolation accord – a move aimed at strengthening his own position on the political scene – starkly depicts the situation of Serbia's social and political elite, and voices the frustration of many, though not necessarily the majority of, Serbian citizens. Thus, it is no surprise that Kostunica finally dissolved the coalition government and called early elections on the grounds of failing to agree with Tadic on how to handle Kosovo's independence.

How to avoid Serbia's isolation after Kosovo's independence

Belgrade's reaction to an independent Kosovo will certainly do more harm to Serbia's interests than to those of the Kosovars or the West. A Serbian embargo on the newly independent state entity, whose economy and transport system are completely dependent on Serbia, will force Kosovo to become self-sufficient in these sectors all the sooner, leaving Belgrade with little political leverage in the new state. This being the case, it seems that the Western policy on Kosovo was designed to render Belgrade incapable of really hurting post-independence Pristina: Belgrade will react dynamically at an initial stage, but sooner or later it will adapt to the new state of affairs; still, we cannot rule out that extremist elements will attempt to fully exploit the current situation in improving their position within the country.

The real problem, however, is not Serbia's scope for driving up the cost for Kosovo of transition from NATO protectorate to independent state, but how long Belgrade's isolation will continue in the wake of the events currently unfolding. If the EU had provided a credible, feasible European perspective for Belgrade, the latter's

reactions to Kosovo's independence would be predictable, at worst. As it stands, even if Kosovo's independence fails to provoke reactions in the region, Serbia's continued isolation will suffice, in and of itself, to undermine any settlements and poison relations. The problem is not with Pristina. It is with Washington and Brussels and their plans for the Balkans¹. The real problem is not the imposed solution, but the confirmation that the EU and many other members of the international community have no long-range strategy or framework of principles; they're just making it up as they go along, patching up crises that they themselves have either provoked or allowed to be provoked.

Within this truly complex state of affairs that has been further confused by Kostunica's opportunistic move to step down, we need decisions that go beyond stereotypes and doctrines. The EU must provide substantial support for Tadic and strengthen his political position, averting in the early parliamentary elections the rise of extremist elements which would derail Serbia's prospects for accession to the EU and create a black hole in the Balkans. Tadic's re-election can have the desired results only if the EU manages, by taking tangible measures to accelerate Serbia's integration into Europe, to isolate the part of the Serbian political elite that might jeopardize Belgrade's future for achieving their own political ends. And as the results of the recent presidential elections in Serbia show, it is not too late to reverse the political climate in Belgrade and put Serbia firmly on the safe track to European integration. The upcoming elections will be a critical test of whether the Serbian people can be convinced of the obvious: that Belgrade's negotiating position and prospects for prosperity will be stronger within Europe than without.

¹ To be fair regarding post-Cold War Balkan history, it was the Germans who provoked much of the current situation in the Balkans. Furthermore, Berlin and the Democrats (in the US) pushed harder for Kosovo's independence than the Bush administration. It is just that the Americans had little choice but to adopt the German agenda in order not to leave any space for Berlin to develop an independent policy in the Balkans and – if it proved successful – elsewhere as well.

ABOUT SEESOX

SEESOX South East European Studies @ OXFORD



South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX) is part of the European Studies Centre at the University of Oxford. It focuses on the interdisciplinary study of the relationship between European integration and the politics, economics and societies of the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. Drawing on the academic excellence of the University and an international network of associates, it conducts policy relevant research on the multifaceted transformations of the region in the 21st century. It follows closely conflict and post-conflict situations and analyses the historical and intellectual influences which have shaped perceptions and actions in the region. In Oxford's best tradition, the SEESOX team is committed to understanding the present through the *longue durée* and reflecting on the future through high quality scholarship.

SEESOX has the following objectives:

- To support high-quality academic and policy-relevant research on South East Europe;
- To organise conferences, workshops and research seminars;
- To promote multi-disciplinary study of the region's development within Oxford University (e.g. politics, international relations, law, sociology, economics) working in collaboration with other Centres and Programmes within the University, including student societies;
- To spearhead intellectual exchanges and debate on these issues among networks of individuals and institutions beyond Oxford;
- To foster cooperation between the academic and the policy making communities.

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