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Special Policy Brief

Russia's Information Warfare Towards
Kosovo:

POLITICAL BACKGROUND AND MANIFESTATION

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Executive Summary

The aim of this Policy Brief is to analyze the political background of the Russian malign information operations towards Kosovo, which are part of a much larger malign operations against the Western countries and their partner counties. In this regard, the Brief will firstly introduce a short overview of the Russian involvement in Kosovo, from the beginning of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, until the end of 2017, when, as a result of the Moscow's diplomatic war, Kosovo experienced an unusual act in international politics, namely the withdrawal of recognition of its independence by Suriname. Secondly, it will analyze in detail the Russian diplomatic war against Kosovo, from 2018 to present, and its interrelation with Serbia, which is the most important stronghold of Moscow's influence in the Balkans. In this vein, in order to get a deeper understanding of the recent political background of the Russian malign operation campaign towards Kosovo (June 2018 – September 2020), this Policy Brief analyzes thoroughly the public statements and documents issued by Kremlin, the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Russian Mission to the United Nations, and the Russian Embassy to Serbia, which are the four most important speakers of Moscow in its diplomatic war against Prishtina.

This policy brief concludes that the context of Russian malign information operations towards Kosovo is underpinned by the mutual dependence of Moscow and Belgrade, in pursuing their foreign policy interests towards Prishtina, Brussels and Washington. In this regard, the analyses shows that as much as Serbia needs Russia for supporting its aims towards Kosovo, so does Russia need a "political and military neutrality" of Belgrade. This is a fundamental component of the overall Russia's strategy to stall the integration of the remaining states of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions, by keeping the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia unresolved, in order to instill instabilities in the region and challenge the West in its own garden. Furthermore, Moscow is trying to misuse Kosovo's independence as a "precedent" in pursuing its hegemonic ambitions in the, so called, Russia's "near abroad."

The research provides sufficient evidence in proving that Russia and Serbia's efforts in undermining the viability of Kosovo's statehood are conducted in a concerted manner, with similar positions and statements, that in many cases are systematically accompanied with

disinformation on the state of affairs in Kosovo and the role of the West in its state-building. In this regard, among others, the Kosovo's statehood is propagated by Moscow and Belgrade as a failed project of the West, and as a "rogue state entity" that endangers the regional security and stability, violates the rights of the local Serbian community, and dishonors the agreements achieved in Brussels during the EU facilitated dialogue with Serbia. On the other hand, the role of the West in Kosovo is portrayed, among others, as "NATO hegemony," being responsible for "war crimes" against Serbs, where the European Union is being accused for a failure, and the United States for "privatizing" its Bondsteel military base in Kosovo that operates within the framework of the NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR).

Against this backdrop, it can be expected that both, Russia and Serbia, in the upcoming period will exploit the possible fractures of Trans-Atlantic relations and the lack of unity within the European Union, for their own benefit, and at the expense of Kosovo and the West. Therefore, in order to further curtail the Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans, the Western European countries should finally overcome their different positions on Kosovo's independence, by giving a clarity to the negotiation process between Kosovo and Serbia that will provide to Belgrade the option that is most feared in Russia, namely, making a strategic choice between Brussels and Moscow. Once the unity of Washington's European allies is achieved, the Russian veto in the UN Security Council will also lose its effect, because Kosovo's road for NATO and EU membership will be opened, due to the fact that for the membership in these two institutions, the UN membership is not specifically required.

Most importantly, Kosovo Government should immediately prepare and employ a comprehensive inter-agency counter-strategy against the Russian malign operations, which has proven so far to be quite successful, not only in blocking Kosovo's integration within international community, but also in assisting Serbia in its de-recognition campaign that resulted with the withdrawal of more than ten recognitions of the Kosovo's statehood.

Introduction

The Russian visible diplomatic involvement in Kosovo began with the “Great Eastern Crisis.” The first Russian diplomat posted to the present day Kosovo, the Vice-Consul Ivan Stepanovich Yastrebov, was settled in the town of Prizren in April 1870, which at that time was an outpost of the Russian Consulate in the Vilayet of Shkodra.¹ Yet, the first Consul of Russia posted in the territory of Kosovo during the Ottoman rule was Gregory Stepanovich Shcherbin, whose mission in the town of Mitrovica begun in March 1903 and lasted very shortly.² In this period, the overall foreign policy and diplomatic activities of the Tsarist Russia vis-à-vis the Western Balkans were oriented in support of Serbia’s territorial ambitions in the region, including its territorial ambitions towards Kosovo. This ambition of Russia for expansion of its influence in Balkans was driven also by the Pan-Slavism, that was grown out of the “Slavophile movement.”³ Consequently, Kosovo that used to be a vilayet within the Ottoman Empire, with a majority Albanian population, was occupied by Serbia in 1912 during the First Balkans War, and its conquest was accepted by the London Ambassadorial Conference of 1913.⁴

During the period between two world wars, Moscow’s diplomatic involvement in Kosovo, that was already annexed by the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, virtually vanished as a consequence of the lack of diplomatic relations of Belgrade with the Soviet Union.⁵ In addition, soon after the end of the WWII, the Socialist Yugoslavia broke with Stalin, in 1948, and later became one of the key founders of the Non–Aligned Movement, in 1961. Nevertheless, during the Cold War, when the world was divided alongside ideological lines, and in the fierce geopolitical competition between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, Kosovo had no particular importance in the Balkanian geopolitical and/or ideological chessboard, in order to be given a special attention by

¹ Lilić, Borislava. (2002). *Economy, population and settlements on Šar mountain as described in studies of Russian consul in Prizren I.S. Yastrebov*. 2002. Journal of the Geographical Institute Jovan Cvijić SASA. Belgrade.

² The mission of Consul Scherbin lasted very shortly, because he was killed during an uprising of Kosovar Albanians against Russian presence in Mitrovica on March 31st, 1903.

³ For further exploration see: Phillips, James Peter (2012), *The eastern crisis, 1875- 1878*, in *British and Russian press and society*. PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 31-40.

⁴ Malcolm, Noel. (1998) *Kosovo: A Short History*, New York University Press, pp. 256-257.

⁵ Kingdom of Yugoslavia established the diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union on the eve of the Second World War, in June 1940, whereas the first Soviet ambassador assumed his duties in Belgrade on October 17th, 1940, <http://www.polpred.oldgood.org/1024.html>

Moscow. At that time of fierce global ideological clashes, Kosovo was largely ignored even by Albania⁶ – let alone Moscow, or other great centers of power in international politics.

With the end of the Cold War and dissolution of the Socialist Yugoslavia, a new Russia returned in the Balkans, this time more as a political actor, rather than as a military or economic power. In the unipolar period of the US and NATO's global military preponderance, in its struggle for returning on the stage of the world politics as a great power, after the rapid decline of the Soviet Union and its dissolution, Russia was trying to display the world as multipolar, by using the reminiscences of the post Second World War international system. The West, from its side, adopted an opposite approach, by making efforts to integrate Russia in the new security architecture of Europe that occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This meant giving the opportunity to Moscow to have a voice, but not a veto, on the NATO's enlargement and involvement in crisis management.⁷ The political return of Russia to the Balkans, unavoidably, involved Moscow in a blatant support of the interests of Serbia, and, by default, in an unfriendly policy towards Kosovo. In a way, this resembled the involvement of Tsarist Russia during the Eastern Crisis, in the last quarter of 19th century, albeit in a profoundly different geopolitical context.

⁶ See for example: Sejdiu B. and Peci L. (2018), "Engaging with the self-captive nation: Albania in the US official documents from 1945 to 1980," *Journal of South-East European and Black Sea Studies*, Routledge, 18(1), London

⁷ For deeper exploration see: Asmus R. (2002), *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, Columbia University Press, New York.

A short Overview of the Post-Soviet Russia's Involvement in Kosovo

In the period that followed with the beginning of the bloody break-up of the Tito's Yugoslavia, Russia initially chose to ignore the problem of Kosovo by blocking its internationalization and by supporting Belgrade actions. Nevertheless, the era of the first post-Soviet Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev is considered the only one in which Russia's foreign policy was accommodating with the West. Contrary to many in the foreign policy establishment of Russia, Kozyrev was considering that the option of turning Yugoslavia into Russia's new outpost in the Balkans was unrealistic.⁸ However, Kozyrev's foreign policy embarked in a different course when his successor, Yevgeni Primakov, took the driver's seat of Russian diplomacy. Primakov was a hostage to imperial nostalgia and theoretical concepts of multi-polarity, that led him in the direction of the illusionary schemes of anti-Western alliances. With this conceptual thinking of the Kremlin's foreign establishment, when the war erupted in Kosovo, Russia, as a member of the Contact Group,⁹ was engaged in the Rambouillet Peace Conference (February 1999) on Kosovo, where it made a deliberative choice to provide unconditional support to the obstructive behavior of Belgrade. Ultimately, Serbia's rejection of the Rambouillet accords, and its military campaign of systematic killings and ethnic cleansing on the ground in Kosovo, left no other options to the West but to wage the war against Yugoslavia.¹⁰

The reaction of Russia to the NATO's military intervention was immediate and harsh. Moscow condemned the Alliance's strikes claiming that those who were in charge for the intervention should be tried for "war crimes," and abruptly terminated, though not completely, relations with NATO. Nevertheless, as NATO ground invasion in Kosovo was becoming a real option – in face of terrible massacres of civilians and large scale ethnic cleansing – Russia represented by its envoy Victor Chernomyrdin joined the Western representatives, the US Envoy Strobe Talbot and Finish President Ahtissaari, in their efforts to end the war that led to the de facto surrendering of

⁸ Levitin, O. (2000). *Inside Moscow's Kosovo muddle*. Survival, 42(1), p. 133, IISS, London.

⁹ For further information on the Contact Group on Former Yugoslavia see: Schwegmann, Ch. (2000), Contact Group and its impact on the European Institutional Structure, Occasional Paper 16, European Union Institute for Security Studies, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/contact-group-and-its-impact-european-institutional-structure>

¹⁰ Levitin, p.137

Milošević.¹¹ Milošević accepted the agreement that provided for a full withdrawal of Serbian security forces and administration from Kosovo, the deployment of the NATO led peace enforcement operation Kosovo Force (KFOR) and the establishment of the UN Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK).¹²

Furthermore, Russia became part of the KFOR mission (although initially conducted an adventurous effort in trying to occupy the airport of Prishtina¹³), and opened an Embassy Chancery in the Kosovo's capital.¹⁴ However, the Russian contingent left the KFOR Mission in July, 2003¹⁵, by de-facto disengaging from the direct military presence in Kosovo. Yet, this move of Kremlin was not accompanied with political and diplomatic withdrawal. Thus, Russia didn't withdrew from its interests related to Kosovo, but instead made a strategic decision to exercise influence over it, by using mainly diplomatic power for pursuing its foreign policy interests and rivaling the West in the region.

Against this backdrop, the Kai Eide Report, that was endorsed by the UN Security Council in October 2005,¹⁶ paved the way for addressing the Kosovo's final status by re-engaging in the Contact Group (U.S., Russia, Great Britain, Germany, France and Italy), and consequently returned Moscow back as a major player in the region. In order to achieve a strategic benefit from this venture, according to Bechev, President Putin played his cards right from the very outset. If Kosovo remained part of Serbia, this could have been marked as a diplomatic victory of Russia. On the other hand, if the West would oppose it, and opt for independence of Kosovo,

¹¹ Norris, J. (2005). *Collision Course: NATO, Russia and Kosovo*, Praeger Publishers.

¹² See: NATO, Technical Military Agreement between the International Security Force ("KFOR") and the Governments of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Serbia, 9 June 1999, <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/docu/a990609a.htm>, and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244(1999), 10 June 1999, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/united-nations-resolution-1244>

¹³ See for example: CNN, Pentagon: Russian presence at Pristina airport 'very minor', June 15, 1999, <http://edition.cnn.com/US/9906/14/us.kosovo.04/>

¹⁴ UNMIK, Diplomatic Missions, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/diplomatic-missions>

¹⁵ NATO Update, Russian Troops Leave Kosovo, July 10, 2003, <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2003/07-july/e0702a.htm>

¹⁶ Security Council (2005), Letter dated 7 October 2005 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2005/635, 7 October 2005, <http://pbosnia.kentlaw.edu/kai-eide-report-N0554069.pdf>

Russia would have tried to present it as a precedent with universal implications, and use it for pursuing territorial interests in its near neighborhood.¹⁷

Consequently, Russia opposed, and warned that it would veto the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement presented to the UN Security Council, in April 2007, by the UN Special Envoy, President Ahtisaari.¹⁸ The Ahtisaari Plan provided for a supervised independence to Kosovo, which basically meant that Kosovo would become independent, but with a transitional period of international supervision and with strong constitutional guarantees for the collective rights of the Serb minority in Kosovo. Furthermore, as Bechev observes, the Declaration of the Military Neutrality by the National Assembly of Serbia, in autumn 2007, cemented the alliance with Russia, which made Belgrade to believe that with the assistance of Moscow, it can pursue a campaign for fighting back against a possible declaration of the independence of Kosovo.¹⁹

Under such circumstances, Kosovo declared independence on 17 February 2008, which was recognized immediately by the vast majority of the Western countries, with the exception of Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. Nevertheless, Russia and Serbia suffered another blow when the initiative backed by the UN General Assembly (October 2008) to address the legality of the Independence of Kosovo by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), resulted in their disfavor. The Advisory Opinion of the ICJ, which was rendered on 22 July 2010, clearly stated that the declaration of independence of Kosovo did not violate the international law.²⁰ The subsequent UN General Assembly Resolution of 9 September 2010 acknowledged the content of the ICJ's Advisory Opinion and transferred the UN mandate related to the Kosovo – Serbia dispute to the European Union,²¹ thus effectively putting Russia out of the negotiating table.

¹⁷ Bechev. D (2017), *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, p. 60.

¹⁸ See for example: BBC: "Russia threatens veto over Kosovo", 24 April, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6587497.stm>

¹⁹ Bechev. D. (2017), p. 60

²⁰ ICJ, *Accordance with the International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in respect of Kosovo*, 22 July, 2010, <https://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/141/141-20100722-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>

²¹ UN General Assembly Resolution (64 Session, Agenda item 77) on the Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on whether the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo is in accordance with international law, 9 September 2010, https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/old_dnn/GA64298.pdf

As a result of the EU facilitated dialogue, Kosovo and Serbia in April 2013 reached in Brussels the First Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations²² that created a ground for “modus vivendi” between the two countries, but it did not solve their dispute. During this negotiation process, Russia was rather marginalized by Serbia. Nevertheless, a month after the agreement, on 24 May 2013, the Serbia’s President Nikolic signed with Putin the Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the two countries that marked a new important turn of Belgrade towards Moscow.

Furthermore, on June 16, 2013, during the first visit of the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Belgrade since 2010, the then Prime-Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, stated that “relations with Russia are probably on the highest level in the last couple of decades” and that, “without the UNSC support by Russia and China, Serbia’s position on Kosovo-Metohija would be hopeless today.”²³ Although Serbia formally remained neutral towards the subsequent Ukrainian Crisis that culminated with the Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which Putin has tried to justify with the “precedent” of the independence of Kosovo,²⁴ Belgrade’s desire to rely on Russia’s support at the expense of the Western efforts and investment to solve the dispute with Kosovo became obvious. Furthermore, Belgrade turned itself into an anchor of Russian interests in the Balkans, during the times when the region is viewed by Moscow as the “Europe’s weakest link.”²⁵

Such a fusion of interests proved to be useful for both countries, since Serbia was getting support by Russia in projecting the independence of Kosovo as reversible and its statehood as failed, whereas Russia was using Serbia for ensuring its security foothold in the region in order to challenge the “NATO hegemony” in the region and for pursuing its energy interests.²⁶ The establishment of the dubious Russian–Serbian Humanitarian Center in the city of Niš that

²² First Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, 19 April, 2013.

<https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2022>

²³ Weber, B. and Bassuener, K., The Western Balkans and Ukrainian Crisis, a changed game for EU and US policies, Policy Paper, Democratization Policy Council, Berlin – Sarajevo 2014, pp. 3-9

²⁴ Barlovac B. “Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession”, BIRN, Belgrade, 18 March, 2014.

²⁵ Bugajski, J, and Assenova, M., (2016) Eurasian Disunion: Russia’s Vulnerable Flanks, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington D.C. p.219.

²⁶ Ibid.

allegedly conducts intelligence activities,²⁷ the failed coup plot in Montenegro in 2016 at the eve of the country's NATO's membership,²⁸ and the Gazprom projects such as the failed South Stream²⁹ and the emerging Turk Stream,³⁰ are visible acts of this alignment between Russia and Serbia.

The results of this "(un)holly alliance" between Russia and Serbia in relation to Kosovo soon became visible. On 27 October 2017, Suriname announced that it had revoked the recognition of the independence of Kosovo.³¹ Allegedly, this act has been undertaken in order to please Putin ahead of the first visit by the Surinam's Foreign Minister Pollack-Beigh to Russia, on 31 October 2017.³² This was preceded with the visit of a Russian business delegation to Suriname in the same month and the visit of the Suriname's Minister of Trade in May of the same year in Saint Petersburg.³³ In the course of one year since this unusual act in international politics has been undertaken by Suriname, the revocation of the recognition of Kosovo's independence was undertaken by nine more countries.³⁴

In order to get a deeper understanding of the recent political background of the Russian malign operation campaign towards Kosovo, the following section of this policy brief will analyze thoroughly the public statements and documents issued by Kremlin, the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Russian Mission to the United Nations, and the Russian Embassy to Serbia, which are the four most important speakers of Moscow in its diplomatic war against Prishtina.

²⁷ See for example: Durdjic M, US Sees Russia's 'Humanitarian Center' in Serbia as Spy Outpost, Voice of America News, 15 June, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-sees-russias-humanitarian-center-serbia-spy-outpost>

²⁸ For deeper inquiry see: Bajrović, R., Garčević, R. and Kramer, R. (2018), Hanging by a thread: Russia's Strategy for Destabilization in Montenegro, Russia Foreign Policy Papers, Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kraemer-rfp5.pdf>

²⁹ See for example: Korsunskaya D. Putin drops South Stream gas pipeline to EU, courts Turkey, Reuters, 1 December 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-gas-gazprom-pipeline-idUSKCN0JF30A20141201>

³⁰ See the official web-site of Turk Stream: <https://turkstream.info/>

³¹ Balkan Insider, What did Suriname just do to Kosovo, 31 October, 2017, <https://www.balkaninsider.com/what-did-suriname-just-do-to-kosovo/>

³² Kos-Stanišić, L., Luša, Đ. 2018. Position of Latin America Towards Kosovo in: Proroković, D. (ed.) Kosovo: Sui generis or Precedent in International Relations. Belgrade: Institute for International Politics and Economics, p. 254

³³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Surinamese Foreign Minister Yldiz Pollack-Beighle, Moscow, October 31, 2017.

³⁴ European Parliament, Parliamentary Questions, Subject: VP/HR — Withdrawal of recognition of Kosovo, 20 December 2018, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2018-006438_EN.html

The “Stereo Dolby System” of the Russian Diplomatic War against Kosovo

Soon after the withdrawal of the Kosovo’s recognition by Suriname, on December 19, 2017, President Vučić of Serbia paid his first visit in that capacity to Moscow. In a statement issued after the meeting with Vučić, Russia’s President Putin expressed his support for the “sovereignty and territorial integrity” of Serbia, while stressing at the same time that dispute between Prishtina and Belgrade should be settled by political means and in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, and that Russia will support any mutually acceptable solution by Belgrade and Prishtina.³⁵

In line with the efforts of Moscow and Belgrade aimed at the de-recognitions of Kosovo, the Russia’s Permanent Representative to the U.N., Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia, in a statement delivered on 7 February 2018, accused, what he called as “the sponsors and executors of the questionable Kosovo project.” He called them to “reflect on the results of that misadventure,” by considering that “Kosovo continues to be one of the main problems on the regional, European and international agendas.” Furthermore, Nebenzia tried to project the legacy of Kosovo’s independence as a failure, by accusing also the KFOR and the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) for the same, including for alleged inefficiency of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers.³⁶ In addition, he accused the European Union for a failure in facilitating the dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade, and Kosovo as the spoiler of the dialogue, by restating that the only solution to the Kosovo problem is a political one, which should be based on dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina in accordance with resolution 1244 (1999) of the Security Council.³⁷

A week after Vučić’s next meeting with Putin in Moscow (8 May, 2018),³⁸ in the meeting of the Security Council of 14 May 2018, Nebenzia’s deputy, Mr. Safronkov, while reinstating the same

³⁵ The Kremlin, Press Statements following the Russian – Serbian Talks, December 19, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/56418>

³⁶ For further details see: The Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor’s Office, <https://www.scp-ks.org/en>

³⁷ UNSC Meeting Transcript, Speech by Vladimir A. Nebenzi, Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Kosovo, 7 February, 2018, <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/kos070218>

³⁸ The Kremlin, Meeting with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, 8 May 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/57434>

position on Kosovo–Serbia dispute, increased further accusations towards Kosovo and the West. The Kosovar Government, among others was blamed for intimidation of local Serbs and preparations for transformation of the Kosovo Security Force into a full-fledged army, whereas NATO was blamed for termination of contacts between KFOR and Russia, and the U.S. was blamed for the “absolute secrecy of the Bondsteel base” and for the “military training of Kosovo Albanian security forces for conducting active hostile activities.”³⁹

On the other hand, President Putin, in an interview with the Austrian ORF Television Channel, given 4 June, 2018, made again an effort to use the “Kosovo precedent” to justify the legality of annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. In this regard, he justified the illegal referendum held in Crimea prior to the invasion by the Moscow’s military forces, by considering it as “a legal foundation” for the annexation by Russia. In addition, Putin considered the Kosovo independence as an annexation, which has been done after the invasion NATO.⁴⁰ This malicious using of the Kosovo’s false card for pursuing the Russia’s hegemonic ambition in its neighborhood was once again confirmed by Kremlin.

Interestingly, almost ten days later, in a statement given by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in a news conference following the talks with the Greek Foreign Minister, Kotzias, on 13 June 2018, gave a signal that the position of Russia on the Kosovo–Serbia dispute has slightly changed and gave to it a dimension of regional implications. In his words, Russia is “interested in settling issues in the Western Balkans in line with the aspirations of the people there. This applies to a Kosovo settlement based on UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, two days later, in a press briefing, the Spokeswomen of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova changed the

³⁹ UN Security Council Meeting Transcript, Speech by Deputy Permanent Representative V.K. Safronkov at an open meeting of the UN Security Council on the situation in Kosovo, 14 May, 2018, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8254.pdf

⁴⁰ The Kremlin, Interview with Austrian ORF television channel, 4 June 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57675>

⁴¹ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions during a news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Hellenic Republic Nikos Kotzias, Moscow, June 13, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3257405

tone by stating that the Russian position “above all reflects the interests and requests of Serbia as a state and a nation.”⁴²

In this vein, in their meeting that took place on 29 June 2018, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić confirmed their “readiness to continue to closely interact on the problem of Kosovo, including at multilateral platforms.”⁴³ This made publically the very known fact that Russia and Serbia are working in a close coordination in pursuing their similar and complementary interests against the statehood of Kosovo and its Western supporters. The position of Russia towards Kosovo modified to the new dynamics of Moscow–Belgrade relations was presented by a special comment delivered by the Russian Foreign Ministry on 20 July, 2018:⁴⁴

“As is known, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is conducted with EU mediation under the UN General Assembly Resolution of September 9, 2010. The position of the Russian Federation is as follows: This process relies on international law and the fundamental document of the Kosovo settlement, *UN Security Council Resolution 1244, according to which the Autonomous Province of Kosovo is part of the Republic of Serbia.*”

Russian-Serbian relations have the nature of a strategic partnership. Contacts between Moscow and Belgrade, including those at the top level, are fairly intensive. The situation around Kosovo and other urgent bilateral and international issues are systematically discussed...

⁴² The Russian Foreign Ministry, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, 15 June, 2018 https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3260571#27

⁴³ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s meeting with Foreign Minister of Serbia Ivica Dačić, 29 June, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/3286104

⁴⁴ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Comment by the Information and Press Department on the inquiry of the Beta News Agency into Russia’s position on the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, 20 July, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3302372

We are resolutely opposed to the artificial deadlines for a dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. We believe the Kosovo issue can only be resolved on terms that are acceptable to Serbia.

With this comment, Russia, first and foremost, clarified that it does not recognize the Advisory Opinion of the ICJ on the Kosovo's Declaration of independence, and also has given a manipulative interpretation of the General Assembly Resolution of 9 September 2010,⁴⁵ which specifically acknowledged the Advisory Opinion and transferred the authority for the settlement of the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia to the European Union. Also, Moscow made clear its intentions to turn the dialogue into a "never ending story" and to prolong it as much as possible, in order to weaken the credibility of the West and to keep the region unstable. Furthermore, through this comment, Moscow also displayed its intention to give to Serbia a veto power on the settlement of its dispute with Kosovo, which at the end of the day may require the Russian approval of any solution. In other words, the Russian "lovely embrace" became a recipe for suffocating Serbia's EU integration ambitions that are conditioned with the full normalization of relations with Kosovo.

Yet, Lavrov and Dačić met again on August 21, 2018, in Sochi. In the press conference following the meeting, Lavrov praised the "constructive role" of Serbia in the EU facilitated dialogue. He blamed Kosovo for not honoring the signed agreements in Brussels. While Kosovo had not a single visible sign of inter-ethnic violence for more than a decade, Lavrov was calling on KFOR and EULEX "to prevent violence and vandalism in Kosovo, including against Serbs and religious sites."⁴⁶ In addition to the press conference, a press release had been issued after their meeting, which stated that Lavrov and Dačić have reviewed in detail the charted steps to further improve

⁴⁵ General Assembly Resolution, A/Res/64/298/, 9 September 2010, https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/old_dnn/GA64298.pdf

⁴⁶ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Serbia Ivica Dacic, Sochi, 21 August, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/3322203

coordination in relation to Kosovo,⁴⁷ thus giving a hint on possible detailed implementation of joint strategy against Kosovo and the West. Therefore, it was not a surprise that in the press conference, Lavrov was trying to portray Kosovo as a country that is perpetuating violence against its Serbian non-majority community, whose representatives and members are integrated within the Kosovo Government, including multi-ethnic Kosovo Police. In essence, through these disinformation efforts, both Russia and Serbia are trying to create a ground for giving to Kosovo Serbs separate authority in policing, and ultimately eradicating the multi-ethnic character of the Kosovo's statehood.

On the other hand, in his remarks at the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly, held on September 28th, 2018 in New York, Lavrov reiterated that Russia will support any solution of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute that will be acceptable for Serbia, he blamed Kosovo for not fulfilling the agreements achieved in Brussels, and he also accused bluntly the United States for morphing the international presence in Kosovo (KFOR) into a US base,⁴⁸ thus giving to Kosovo a public character of a clashing point with Washington.

Furthermore, in a joint press conference with the Foreign Minister of Comoros, Mohamed El-Amine Souef, that took place in Moscow on 9 November, 2018, Lavrov praised the decision of Comoros to withdraw the recognition of Kosovo, and, among others, blamed again the NATO, "Washington and its allies," for bombing ex-Yugoslavia in 1999 and for recognizing Kosovo in 2008 in a bid to "legitimize their aggression in retrospect."⁴⁹ These Lavrov's narratives regarding Kosovo and the role of the West in its state building, are not a product of an undeliberated policy. In contrary they represent an attempt for revision of the bloody history of the break-up of former

⁴⁷ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's conversation with Serbian First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, 21 August, 2018,

https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/3322221

⁴⁸ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 73rd session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 28, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/general_assembly/-/asset_publisher/lrzZMhfoyrUj/content/id/3359296

⁴⁹ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference following talks with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Comoros, Mohamed El-Amine Souef, Moscow, November 9, 2018,

https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3404241

Yugoslavia, and particularly of Kosovo, in which Serbia has perpetuated the largest atrocities, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing, in the European soil since the end of the Second World War. In this regard, Russia tries also to hide its role as a spoiler in almost all peace efforts in relation to Kosovo, from Rambouillet, to the Kosovo Status talks led by the UN Envoy, President Ahtisaari, by accusing the West and interpreting their threat with veto in the UN Security Council as a respect for the norms of international law, that has been done at the cost of human sufferings, and at the expense of justice.

Yet, President Vučić paid another visit to Moscow on 2 October, 2018, and he thanked Putin for his strong position in safeguarding the international law and vital national and state interests of Serbia.⁵⁰ Soon after this meeting, the Russia's U.N. Ambassador Nebenzia, in a statement delivered on 14 November 2018, intensified his accusations against Kosovo authorities, by falsely claiming that Prishtina will deploy one of the garrisons of the future army in the northern part of its territory, when no such intention was ever planned by the Kosovo Security Force that is developed under the supervision of NATO,⁵¹ by reiterating the false claims on Kosovo Albanians "for daily attacks on Kosovo Serb homes, arson, property damage and [that] cadastral authorities are usurpation of the UNESCO protected Orthodox sites," and asked, as in many previous UN Security Council meetings, the Specialist Chambers to start delivering on treating the "crimes committed by the Kosovo Liberation Army."⁵²

On the other hand, in a repeated attempt to revise the history, Foreign Minister Lavrov in an interview given to the daily newspaper *Srpski Telegraf* on 17 November 2018, stated that the West "trampled international law underfoot in 1999 when they bombed Yugoslavia for two and a half months, after which the West, seeking to legitimize its aggression, recognized Kosovo's self-proclaimed independence," and accused the West for the creation of new dividing lines in a

⁵⁰ The Kremlin, Meeting with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, 2 October 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/58675>

⁵¹ See: NATO Liaison and Advisory Team (NALT), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_144933.htm

⁵² The UN Security Council, Speech by Permanent Representative V.A. Nebenzia at the meeting of the UN Security Council on Kosovo settlement, 14 November, 2018, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8399.pdf

Post-Cold War Europe.⁵³ Similarly, in an interview given a month later to the Greek daily *Efimerida ton Sindakton*, Lavrov, on one hand, accused NATO and the EU for increasing their efforts to “absorb” the Balkans, and for imposing to the countries of the region making “a false choice” between Moscow with Washington and Brussels. According to him, this destabilizes the security architecture in Europe, increases tensions and creates new dividing lines, thus reinforcing the Russian opposition towards integration of the region into the EU and NATO. On the other hand, he projected Kosovo as the biggest source of instability in the region, and he accused the Kosovo Government for creating a regular Kosovo army, which, according to him, will be hostile towards Serbian Community in Kosovo.⁵⁴ In this vein, the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Spokeswoman, Zaharova, on 13 December, 2018, reinforced the position of Russia by stating that the Resolution 1244 (1999) has not been cancelled, by adding that any possible changes of the resolution can be made utterly in the agreement with Belgrade and solely in the interest of the Serbian people,⁵⁵ thus reiterating that, related to Kosovo, Russia is a de-facto holder of the Belgrade’s veto in the U.N. Security Council.

After Kosovo Parliament adopted a package of laws on 14 December 2018 that provided for a gradual ten years transformation of Kosovo Security Forces into an armed force, which were supported by the United States, with the request of Russia and Serbia, the UN Security Council held an emergency meeting on 17 December 2018. The Russian Ambassador Nebenzia in his statement bluntly tried to manipulate the interpretation of the Resolution 1244 of the Security Council, by stating that the resolution provides for a demilitarization of all Kosovo Albanian armed groups. Obviously, this has nothing to do with the Kosovo Security Force that is a multi-ethnic institution and by all means is not a subject of demilitarization. In his statement, Ambassador Nebenzia also tried to display the Kosovo Security Force as a threat to peace and

⁵³ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Serbian newspaper *Srpski Telegraf*, 17 November, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3411347

⁵⁴ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with the Greek daily *Efimerida ton Sindakton*, published on December 7, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xlEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3437070

⁵⁵ Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, 13 December, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3440823

security in the region, while at the same time he accused the United States for the secrecy of military activities in the Bondsteel base. Furthermore, and quite strangely, he stated that if the Kosovar armed forces enter the north of the country or exercise violence against local Serbs in another areas of Kosovo, Belgrade will protect them.⁵⁶ He thus hinted at a possibility of a direct conflict of Serbia's forces with the KFOR troops, even though President Vučić was present in the meeting and he did not say a single word on these speculations.

The issue of the transformation of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) was commented also by President Putin, in an interview with Serbian newspapers *Politika* and *Večernje Novosti*, given on the eve of his visit to Belgrade in mid-January 2019. He criticized the European Union for “a rather passive response” on the decision of the Kosovar authorities to transform the KSF, which has “violated international law” and is perceived by Kosovar Serbs as a security threat. Putin also reiterated his strong opposition towards NATO enlargement in the Balkans, by calling it, among others, a “vestige of the Cold War, a misguided destructive military and political strategy” that reduces trust and increases tensions in Europe,⁵⁷ thus trying to undermine the fundamental positive effects that the enlargement of the Alliance has had on the stability and security of Europe and of the Western Balkans. This statement represents a Cold War syndrome of Russia towards the West, that also helps the understanding of the strategic depth and narratives that lay behind malign disinformation operations towards Kosovo, which is undoubtedly a crucial point of the diplomatic battleground with the US and EU in the Balkans.

In the news conference that took place in Belgrade on 17 January 2019, following the meeting with Vučić, Putin again reiterated his interpretation on the transformation of KSF, and the Russian request for an immediate creation of the Association of the Serbian Majority Municipalities. But, regarding the dialogue between Kosovo and Belgrade, he opted for “a mutually acceptable agreement, based on the UNSC Resolution 1244.”⁵⁸ This was slightly different from the

⁵⁶ The United Nations Security Council, 8427th Meeting, 17 December 2018, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8427.pdf

⁵⁷ The Kremlin, Interviews to Serbian periodicals *Politika* and *Večernje novosti*, 16 January 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59680>

⁵⁸ The Kremlin, Joint News Conference with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, 17 January, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/59693>

statements of the Russian Foreign Ministry that push for an agreement that has to be acceptable only for the Serbian people and Serbia. But, on the other hand, in order to give a public attention to the Russian overall engagement towards Kosovo, the next day after his visit to Serbia, President Putin convened a meeting with the permanent members of the Russian Security Council, in which, among others, participated the Defense Minister Shoigu, the Director of the Federal Security Service Bortnikov, and the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service Naryshkin. According to the statement issued after the meeting, the discussion was particularly focused on the outcomes of the talks with Vučić in relation to Kosovo.⁵⁹

After this meeting, the Russian diplomatic war towards Kosovo intensified and was accompanied with more targeting and structured narratives. In the public statements delivered in the following months, especially by the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Russian Mission to the United Nations, the following propaganda elements came at the forefront of the Russian diplomatic war against Kosovo: the narratives on the case of alleged organ harvesting and trafficking related against the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, labeling the majority of the members of the Kosovo Security Force as “former KLA terrorists,” blaming the US and a number of other NATO countries, for training and equipping with weapons the KSF and presenting it as a security threat for Kosovo Serbs, targeting the “secrecy” of the US Bondsteel base in Kosovo, blaming Kosovo for virtually non-existent crimes against Kosovo Serbs, including those on the Serbian Orthodox Church, denying the war crimes conducted by Serbia in Kosovo by including also the Reçak Massacre, blaming Kosovo for not honoring the agreements achieved in Brussels, especially on the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities, blaming NATO for the intervention of 1999 by presenting false figures on the number of people and children killed in Serbia during the bombing campaign of the Alliance, blaming KFOR and EU for supporting “Kosovo Albanians,” and presenting Kosovo as a failed state and a stronghold of Islamic terrorists.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ The Kremlin, Meeting with the permanent members of the Security Council, 18 January 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/59693>

⁶⁰ For further details see the following documents: Speech by Permanent Representative V. A. Nebenzia at the UN Security Council meeting on the situation in Kosovo, 07 February, 2018, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8459.pdf, Speech by Permanent Representative V. A. Nebenzia at the UN

Ironically, Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić and, especially, President Vučić, in the meetings of the UN Security Council, used less harsh vocabulary towards Kosovo, than the representatives of Russia. Although they criticized the performance of KFOR and EULEX, and they certainly were trying to present a bleak picture of Kosovo, their narratives did not match the tough harshness of those of Russia.⁶¹ Obviously, Russia made a choice to become a “very bad guy” towards Kosovo and the West, whereas the Serbian approach was to project itself as “not a bad guy” for the West,

Security Council meeting on the situation in Kosovo, 31 October 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8655.pdf, Statement and Right of Reply by Chargé d'Affaires of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Polyanskiy, at the UN Security Council open debate, 19 November 2019, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/sc_1911, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 7, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3503377, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, 14 February, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3517450, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at the Munich Security Conference, Munich, 16 February, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3520272, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, 28 February, 2019 https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3549162, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview for a Vladimir Kobyakov documentary, “A U-Turn over the Atlantic”, to be screened by NTV Channel, Moscow, 22 March, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3580855, Foreign Ministry statement on the 20th anniversary of NATO aggression against Yugoslavia, 23 March, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3583602, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko's interview with the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, April 15, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/evropejskij-souz-es/-/asset_publisher/6OiYovt2s4Yc/content/id/3616145, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on the sidelines of the Terra Scientia National Educational Youth Forum, Solnechnogorsk, August 9, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3754402, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, 4 September, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3772341, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club's panel on Russia's policy in the Middle East, Sochi, 2 October, 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3826083

⁶¹ See for example the transcripts of the following UN Security Council Meetings, S/PV.8427, 17 December 2018, in which participated President Vučić, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_8427.pdf, and S/PV.9541, 10 June 2019, in which participated Foreign Minister Dačić.

and “a bad guy” for Kosovo, in order to keep open the doors for diplomatic maneuvering with Washington and Brussels.

Another important step of Russia, in pursuing the diplomatic war and malign disinformation operations towards Kosovo, was marked with the appointment of a very seasoned Ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, on 10 June 2019, who among others was a Special Envoy of the Russian Foreign Minister for the Balkans from 2004 to 2009, and Ambassador in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2009 to 2014.⁶² In his capacity as a Special Envoy for the Balkans, Ambassador Kharchenko was part of the Contact Group’s troika special envoys together with the US Ambassador Frank Wisner, and the EU representative, Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, in the follow-up mediation efforts between Kosovo and Serbia, which started with the initiative of the President Sarkozy of France, after Russia threatened to veto the Ahtisaari’s Plan for Kosovo’s supervised independence.⁶³ At the beginning of December 2010, the Troika reported to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon the failure of their efforts in reaching an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia,⁶⁴ in which, as explained earlier, Putin strategically played his cards very well.

In his interview with *RIA Novosti*, on 1 July 2019, while emphasizing the mutual support between Russia and Serbia in different international forums and venues, Kharchenko underlined that during Putin’s visit in Belgrade, on 17 January 2019, long term decisions have been made. In regard to Kosovo, in addition to reiterating the already set narratives of Russia against Kosovo and the West, he restated the position of Moscow that is “guided” by the UN Security Council Resolution 1244(1999), that Russia favors a negotiated solution on the bases of agreements between Belgrade and Prishtina, and underlined that such an agreement should be confirmed or approved by the UN Security Council, thus making public the intention of Russia to keep an upper hand upon the results of the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue. Furthermore, following the already set

⁶² See the official CV of Ambassador Kharchenko, <https://serbia.mid.ru/sr/embassy/ambassador/>

⁶³ See for example: Deutsche Welle, Contact Group Meets on Kosovo’s Future as Tensions Rise, 25 July, 2007, https://www.google.com/search?q=Contact+group+troika+Kosovo&rlz=1C1GCEA_en_843_843&oq=Contact+group+troika+Kosovo&aqs=chrome..69i57.22441j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

⁶⁴ See for example: UN SG’s letter dated 10 Dec 2007 to the President of the UN SC - Report of the EU/US/Russian Fed. Troika on Kosovo (S/2007/723), <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/un-sgs-letter-dated-10-dec-2007-president-un-sc-report-euusrussian-fed-troika-kosovo>

course of Kremlin's policy, he accused the West, and particularly the US, for supporting Kosovo and NATO enlargement in the Balkans, and praised Serbia's "balanced multi-vector foreign policy."⁶⁵

In the interview given to *Politika*, on 1 September, 2019, he stated that "Serbia is a stronghold of Russia, as well as Russia is a stronghold of Serbia and will remain so". In this spirit, he stressed that the West wants Russia out of the Balkans, in order for all the countries to become NATO members, which, in case of Serbia's membership in the Alliance, would justify "the atrocities" committed during the air campaign of 1999. On the other hand, while stressing that Russia does not advocate the partition of Kosovo, Kharchenko stated that the partition of Kosovo would not set "a precedent for territorial division in Europe,"⁶⁶ thus indicating that Moscow has nothing against this option, which, at the end of the day, will only serve to its hegemonic interests in its neighborhood.

Furthermore, the stature of Kharchenko in the Russian foreign policy establishment related to the Balkans, has been also displayed by his comments of 4 October, 2019, published by the Russian Embassy in Belgrade, on the statements of the US Defense Secretary, Mark Esper, delivered in the US Senate in July 2019. In his comments, among other things, he accused the US for a "rules-based order" outside of the international law, by claiming that the US wants to turn Kosovo into a "NATO platform" with the largest Bondsteel base.⁶⁷ He also reiterated, with the same tone, the Russian already set narratives against Kosovo and the West, in his interview with the Russian *TASS News Agency*, on October 31, 2019, few days after Prime-Minister Brnabić met

⁶⁵ Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia, A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko to the *RIA Novosti* news agency, 1 July 2019, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_ria_novosti/

⁶⁶ Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia, A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko, to the *Politika* newspaper, 1 September, 2019, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_gazete_politika/

⁶⁷ Commentary of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia, A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko, in connection with the statements of the US Secretary of Defense M. Esper, actively quoted in the Serbian media at the hearings on his candidacy in the Senate in July 2019, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/kommentariy_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_v_svyazi_s_aktivno_tsitiruemymi_v_serbskikh/

with Medvedev in Russia on the occasion of the signing of the agreement on the free trade zone between Serbia and Euro Asian Economic Union (EAEU).⁶⁸

In another interview given in December 2019, Kharchenko clarified that since the withdrawal of the Russian contingent from KFOR in July 2003, the Moscow's diplomatic engagement towards Kosovo was focused on political work, particularly in the UN Security Council,⁶⁹ by aiming to project Kosovo as a "global problem" of international security. Obviously, in pursuing its interests in the Balkans, Russia has projected Kosovo as one of the hottest regional spots of the diplomatic confrontation with the West, and particularly with the United States.

In this regard, one should take into account that Russia's GDP (1.7 trillion USD) is much smaller than, for example, those of the Italy (2.001 trillion USD), and the United Kingdom (2.287 trillion USD),⁷⁰ with each of these two countries having almost 2.5 times smaller population,⁷¹ and its military budget (66.527 billion USD), can in no way match that of the United States (731.751 billion USD).⁷² Thus, having in mind its economic and military capacities, Russia has wisely chosen the economically much more affordable and cost effective strategy to exert diplomatic hardness and malign information operations towards the West and the Balkans.

Within this context an intense diplomatic interaction between Russia and Serbia has marked the end of the year 2019. Prior to the meeting between Presidents Putin and Vučić in Moscow in the beginning of December, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Groshenko had a political consultations' meeting in Belgrade with Dačić on 29 November. On the other hand, in a press-conference after the meeting of two presidents in Sochi, on 4 December, 2019 Putin, among

⁶⁸ Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia A.A. Botsan-Kharchenko to the TASS news agency, Belgrade, 31 October, 2019, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_informatsionnomu_agentstvu_tass_belgrad_31_oktya/

⁶⁹ Russian Embassy in Belgrade, Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia, A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko, to the newspaper *Edinstvo*, 25 December, 2019 https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_gazete_edinstvo_25_dekabrya_2019_goda/

⁷⁰ The World Bank Data, GDP (Current USD), Russian Federation, Italy, United Kingdom, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU-IT-GB>

⁷¹ The World Bank Data, Total Population, Russian Federation, Italy, United Kingdom, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RU-IT-GB>

⁷² The World Bank Data, Military Expenditure, Russian Federation, United States, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=RU-US>

others, underlined Russia's endorsement for Serbia's political-military neutrality, and he reiterated the Russian position that the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia should be solved within the framework of the UNSC Resolution 1244, including the respect "for sovereignty and territorial integrity," backing Serbia's position against the independence of Kosovo.⁷³

On the other hand, Foreign Minister Lavrov met with Dačić in Moscow on 20 December, 2019, where, according to the statement issued after the meeting, they pointed out their coordinated efforts towards Kosovo, "based on the Resolution 1244 and international law," and their "shared intention" for stability in the Balkans. Whereas in an interview with *Srpski Telegraf*, on the same day, Lavrov reiterated that any agreement between Kosovo and Serbia should be approved by the UN Security Council, and that Russia will approve a solution that is acceptable for Serbia,⁷⁴ by not letting a room for doubting any dissonance in the strategic partnership of the two countries in their diplomatic war towards Kosovo.

An interesting development regarding the Russian diplomatic war towards Kosovo, is the publication of a rather odd report of the Russian Foreign Ministry on "Human Rights in certain countries," on 7 February 2020, in which, in addition to all NATO and EU countries, the human rights situation was "reviewed" for Australia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Japan and Kosovo. Belarus and Serbia were the single countries of Europe not included in the list,⁷⁵ and this very fact, obviously tells that Russia considers these two countries as its strongholds in Europe. The Report highlights the geographic scope of Moscow's malign operations against the West and its allies and partners.

In regard to Kosovo, the situation in the country is presented with a lot of false allegations, especially about the position of Serbian minority community. The (non)seriousness of this Report

⁷³ The Kremlin, News conference following Russian-Serbian talks, 4 Decemeber, 2019,

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/62240>

⁷⁴ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Serbian newspaper *Srpski Telegraf*, published on 20 December, 2019,

https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3965980

⁷⁵ Russian Foreign Ministry, The Report on "Human Rights in certain countries", 7 February 2020,

https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/humanitarian_cooperation/-/asset_publisher/bB3NYd16mBFC/content/id/4025481

is shown by the fact that it uses only three references which are interpreted in a manipulative manner. The Russian Foreign Ministry went as far as to present even a blatant disinformation by quoting an inexistent report of the respected Kosovo Serbian *NGO Aktiv* that allegedly, “50 local Serbs have been murdered in Kosovo from September 2017 and September 2018,”⁷⁶ when not even a single case of inter-ethnic killing in Kosovo was recorded ever since 2004.

In the following period, which was marked with the worldwide spread of the COVID-19 pandemics, the intensity of bilateral visits between Russia and Serbia decreased, but this had not an effect on keeping the track of Moscow’s malign information operations towards Kosovo. In the press briefings of the Russian Foreign Ministry, in the meetings of the UN Security Council and in the interviews of Ambassador Kharchenko, Kosovo and its Western supporters remained a constant target of blame and disinformation, especially about the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, the denial of the war crimes committed by Serbia in Kosovo, on “crimes” committed against local Serbs in Kosovo, transformation of the Kosovo Security Force, stalling of the EU facilitated dialogue, changing the historical narratives about NATO’s involvement in the Balkans and the US Bondsteel base, as well as the comparison of the independence of Kosovo with the annexation of Crimea, in addition to reiterating almost in every occasion their support of Serbia and their aim that any agreement between Kosovo and Serbia should be approved by the UN Security Council.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ The Russian Foreign Ministry: Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, 27 February 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4062030, Comment by the Information and Press Department on the politicisation of war crimes in the Balkans, 25 May, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/komentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/4138028, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s news conference on the telephone conversation with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, Moscow, June 16, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/4166417; The Russian Mission to the United Nations: Statement by Mr. Vassily Nebenzia, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 28 April, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_339_E.pdf, Highlights of the remarks by Vassily Nebenzia, Permanent Representative of Russia to the UN, at an Arria-formula VTC “Follow-up to the Arria-formula discussion of March 6, 2020, on the situation in Crimea”, 21 May, 2020, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/arria_210520; The Russian Embassy in Belgrade: Speech by the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko during the video-conference “Let’s bow to those great years,” 08 May, 2020, <https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press->

In light of this approach, it cannot be ruled out that Russia will block any change of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 in order to keep the situation tensed in the region and fuel instability in the Balkans, even if Kosovo and Serbia reach any agreement that paves the way for recognition of Kosovo (tacit or expressive), and even in a case that Serbia embarks in the direction of the West and detaches itself from the strong embrace of the “Russian Bear.”

Furthermore, after the admission of North Macedonia in NATO on 1 April 2020, that has been accepted with uneasiness by Moscow,⁷⁸ the Kosovo–Serbian dispute and the Bosnia and Herzegovina disagreement between the Federation and Republika Srpska on the future of the country and membership in NATO, remained the single hot spots where Russia still has some space to instill instabilities at the expense of the Western efforts to project stability and security in the Western Balkans.

Against this background, there are no visible signs on the horizon that Serbia will start to change the parameters of its alignment with Russia and its position towards Kosovo. In Belgrade’s diplomatic calculations, both Moscow and Prishtina are variables of the same equation in relation to the European Union and the United States. In this vein, in their joint article “The Kosovo knot: is a fair solution possible?,” published in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Kurir* on June 18, 2020, on the same date of Lavrov’s visit to Belgrade and meeting with President Vučić, Lavrov and Dačić confirmed that they share the same positions, not only related to Kosovo, but also towards the United States and the European Union.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Lavrov and Dačić implicitly supported the

[centre/news/vystuplenie_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_v_khode_videokonferentsii_poklonimysya_veliki/](https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/vystuplenie_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_v_khode_videokonferentsii_poklonimysya_veliki/), Statement by the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko for the media, 12 May, 2020, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/zayavlenie_posla_rossii_v_serbii_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_12_maya_2020_goda/, Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko to the RTS TV channel, 12 June, 2020, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu_posla_rossii_v_serbii_telekanalu_rts_12_iyunya_2020_g/

⁷⁸ See for example: Reuters, Russia threatens retaliation as Montenegro becomes the 29th NATO member, 6 June, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nato-montenegro-idUSKBN18W2WS>, and Euractiv, Russia fumes at North Macedonia’s NATO Accession, 1 April, 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-fumes-at-north-macedonias-nato-accession/>

⁷⁹ The Russian Foreign Ministry: Article co-authored by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dačić published in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Serbian Kurir* on June 18, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/us/-/asset_publisher/unVXBbj4Z6e8/content/id/4168272

option of partition of Kosovo as a compromise for normalization of relations with Serbia, as underlined in their joint article:

“At the same time, we note that Serbia’s admission to the EU is still used by some as a lever to exert pressure on Belgrade in matters of recognizing Kosovo’s “independence.” It turns out that to become an EU member, the applicant state must give away a chunk of its territory. Those behind this absurd demand see a certain threat in the possible adjustment of the Kosovo administrative line. Such a concern seems all the more hypocritical if you think about who and how dismembered Yugoslavia.”⁸⁰

On the other hand, Putin and Vučić had an intensive communication during the COVID-19 pandemics that culminated with Vučić’s visit to Moscow on 23 June 2020. This visit took place just a few days before the planned White House meeting in Washington between Kosovo and Serbia.⁸¹ Interestingly, in the introductory statement to Vučić’s visit, Putin did not mention Kosovo at all.⁸²

Nevertheless, after the Washington Agreement of 4 September 2020,⁸³ at the request of Vučić, initially a phone conversation took place with Lavrov on 6 September, 2020, in which the overall commitment of the strategic partnership between the two countries was stated, but in terms of synchronization of policy on Kosovo, it was stated only the Russian position that the dispute should be solved in accordance with the Resolution 1244.⁸⁴ In the statement issued by Kremlin, following the phone conversation with Putin on 10 September 2020, the Resolution 1244 was not mentioned as a basis for an agreement for the Kosovo–Serbia dispute. Instead, a “balanced

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ See for example: Balkan Insight, Serbia, Kosovo Prepare for Restart of Talks in Washington, 17 June 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/16/serbia-kosovo-prepare-for-restart-of-talks-in-washington/>

⁸² The Kremlin, Meeting with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, 23 June, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/63549>

⁸³ See for example: The Washington Post, Serbia and Kosovo sign breakthrough economic accord that is short of normal relations, 4 September 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-kosovo-serbia-agreement/2020/09/04/b1283f8c-eec0-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29_story.html

⁸⁴ The Russian Embassy in Belgrade, Telephone conversation between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President of Serbia A. Vucic, 06 September, 2020, https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/o_telefonnom_razgovore_ministra_inostrannykh_del_rossii_s_v_lavrova_s_prezidentom_serbii_a_v_uchichem/

compromise solution, that should be acceptable to Belgrade, and approved by the UN Security Council,” was used as wording on this matter.⁸⁵

Yet, Serbia’s commitment to move its Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, as a part of the Washington Agreement, which is also in collision with the position of Russia regarding the Palestinian problem, was not criticized by Lavrov in a press conference held on 09 September, 2020. Ironically, while not criticizing Serbia for the agreement, Lavrov used the opportunity to question the sincerity of Washington as a mediator,⁸⁶ thus signaling that deviations of Belgrade from Moscow’s positions will be tolerated, as long as they do not endanger the Russian interests, that is, the interests to keep the upper hand on Kosovo–Serbia dispute in the quest for influence and rivalry with Washington and Brussels in the Balkans.

⁸⁵ The Kremlin, Telephone conversation with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, September 10, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/64019>

⁸⁶ The Russian Foreign Ministry, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tleuberdi, Moscow, September 9, 2020, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tleuberdi, Moscow, September 9, 2020

Conclusion

The context of Russian malign information operations towards Kosovo is underpinned by the mutual dependence of Moscow and Belgrade, in pursuing their foreign policy interests towards Prishtina, Brussels and Washington. As much as Serbia needs Russia for supporting its aims towards Kosovo, so does Russia need a “political and military neutrality” of Belgrade. This is a fundamental component of Russia’s strategy to stall the integration of the remaining states of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions, by keeping the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia unresolved in order to instill instabilities in the region and challenge the West through “malicious soft power.”

In this regard Moscow made clear its intention to give Serbia the veto power on the settlement of its dispute with Kosovo, which, at the end of the day, may require the involvement of the United Nations Security Council, and, ultimately, the Russian approval. In other words, the Russia’s “lovely embrace,” became a recipe for suffocating Serbia’s EU integration ambitions that are conditioned with the full normalization of relations with Kosovo. Nevertheless, the end game of the Russian malign operations towards Kosovo, by recalling the vast investment of its political credo in Serbia, will depend from the “face saving mode” of both of them in the end of the negotiation process between Kosovo and Serbia.

Against this backdrop, it is very likely that both, Russia and Serbia, in the upcoming period will exploit possible fractures of Trans-Atlantic relations and the lack of unity within European Union for their own benefit and at the expense of Kosovo and the West. Therefore, in order to further curtail the Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans, the Western European countries should finally overcome their different positions on Kosovo’s independence, by giving a clarity to the negotiation process between Kosovo and Serbia that will provide to Belgrade the most feared option for Russia, namely, making a strategic choice between Brussels and Moscow. Once after the unity of the Washington’s European allies is achieved, the Russian veto in the UN Security Council will also lose its effect, because Kosovo’s road for NATO and EU membership will be opened, due to the fact that for the membership in these two institutions, the UN membership is not specifically required.

On the other hand, Kosovo Government, which until now did not address in a systematic manner the Russian diplomatic war, should immediately prepare and employ a comprehensive inter-institutional counter-strategy against Moscow's malign operations, which have proven so far to be quite successful, not only in blocking Kosovo's integration within international community, but also in assisting Serbia in its de-recognition campaign that resulted with the withdrawal of more than ten recognitions of Kosovo's statehood.