

# Russia's Influence on the EU Facilitated

## Kosovo - Serbia Dialogue



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Contact:

Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED)

Str. Major Mehmet Bushi, H.III/1, 10 000 Prishtina, Kosovo

Tel: +383 (0)38 542 778

Web-site: [www.kipred.org](http://www.kipred.org)

Email: [info@kipred.org](mailto:info@kipred.org)

Authors:

Dr. Lulzim Peci and Dr. Bekim Sejdiu

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## Executive Summary

This paper seeks to elucidate Russia's role and impact within the context of the ongoing EU facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. It offers a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the dialogue process, examining its broader geopolitical and security ramifications. The analysis encompasses the historical context of Russia's involvement in the strained relations between Kosovo and Serbia against the backdrop of Yugoslavia's dissolution. It delves into Moscow's interference in the current dialogue facilitated by the European Union between Kosovo and Serbia, elucidating Russia's specific objectives in this process. Furthermore, the study explores the intersection of the dialogue with Russia's regional security, military, and economic interests, shedding light on the implications for Kosovo's pursuit of international organizational membership.

This paper reveals that Russia's approach to the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has been inconsistent, influenced by the evolving relations with the West. The findings can be distilled into eight key points: *First*, During the Yeltsin era, Russia's policies towards the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, including Kosovo, during this period were shaped by two factors, namely, Russia's general relations with the West, and, the worldviews of the key foreign policy decision-makers in Moscow; *Second*, with the outbreak of the war in Kosovo, Russia was part of all major international efforts to solve the crisis; *Third*, Russia did not accept ultimate outcomes of international peace efforts on Kosovo, mainly in reaction to its general discontent with the West; *Fourth*, while being outside of the negotiation table, in the EU-facilitated Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, the major goal of the Russian Federation has been to prevent and obstruct the successful conclusion of the dialogue process, by attempting to discredit the EU and the West, to reclaim that role for the UNSC; *Fifth*, Moscow does not see the process of the dialogue in isolation from its general geopolitical goals in the Balkans – particularly with those of keeping Serbia and the Serbs within the Russian orbit and obstructing the EU and NATO expansion in the region; *Sixth*, the war in Ukraine has revealed the depth of relations between Russia and Serbia. Russia strives to use the Kosovo case as a bargaining chip for garnering benefits in Ukraine and Georgia, to legitimize its annexation wars; *Seventh*, the lack of unanimity within the Euro-Atlantic Community towards Kosovo – with five EU countries still not recognizing Kosovo's independence – has created more maneuvering space for Russia; and, *Eighth*, an

important leverage for Russia to impact the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue is its power to block Kosovo’s membership in the UN and OSCE.

## **Introduction**

Since 1990s, Kosovo, Serbia, and Balkans in general, have become a barometer for measuring Russia’s (declined) influence in the international system, particularly in the Balkans, which has been a traditional intersection between Russia and the Western interests. Balkans is not within the traditional sphere of Russia’s vital national interest, in the way in which the former Soviet space is. However, in Moscow’s lenses, Balkans represents a strategic buffer zone between Russia’s “near abroad” and the West. In addition, Balkans remains the only geopolitical space of Europe that is not fully integrated with the Western structures and still possesses latent destabilizing potential for the entire Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Against this backdrop, the military aggression launched by Putin against Ukraine has triggered an unprecedented tension between Russian Federation with the US and major European countries. Unavoidably, exacerbation of rivalry between Russia and the Western powers is heavily reflected in the Western Balkans.

Russia’s approach towards the EU-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia is formulated within this milieu. This paper aims to shed light on the Russia’s role and influence in this dialogue. As such, the paper provides a comprehensive and multilayered account of the process of dialogue and wider geopolitical and security implications related to it. In this pursuit, the analysis encompasses the historical background of the involvement of Russia in the conflicting relations between Kosovo and Serbia against the wider backdrop of dissolution of Yugoslavia; the meddling of Moscow in the current process of dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, that is taking place under the EU facilitation; the specific objectives that Russia aims to achieve from the process of dialogue; intersection of the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia with the security, military and economic interests of Russia in the region; and the implications for Kosovo’s goal of membership in the international organizations.

## **I. Trajectory of Russia's involvement in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue: From Yeltsin to Putin**

Following the violent disintegration of Tito's Yugoslavia, Russia initially dismissed the Kosovo issue by opposing its internationalization and supporting Belgrade's actions. It was only during the tenure of the first post-Soviet Russian Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, that Russia's foreign policy aligned more with the West. Despite the prevailing view in Russia's foreign policy circles, Kozyrev believed that transforming Yugoslavia into Russia's Balkan outpost was unrealistic. The shift in Russian foreign policy occurred when Yevgeni Primakov succeeded Kozyrev in 1996. Primakov, influenced by imperial nostalgia and multi-polarity theories, gravitated toward anti-Western alliances.<sup>1</sup>

Against this backdrop, when the crisis erupted in Kosovo in 1998, Russia was already on a collision course with the West. This was exacerbated by the Alliance's decision to invite Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary at the Madrid Summit of April 1997.<sup>2</sup> The policies of Primakov, a staunch opponent of NATO's enlargement,<sup>3</sup> further fuelled this discord, which rose to another level when he became Prime-Minister of the Russian Federation, in September 1998. A fundamental aspect of "Primakov doctrine" emphasized Russia's pre-eminence in the post-Soviet space and the push for increased integration among former Soviet republics, with Russia taking the lead. Another key element involved opposition to NATO's expansion and, on a more global scale, continued efforts to undermine transatlantic institutions and the U.S.-led international order. Another crucial component of Moscow's foreign policy strategy was the strategic partnership with China. These three elements continue to serve as key pillars of Russian foreign policy today.<sup>4</sup>

With the outbreak of war in Kosovo, Russia initially cooperated with the West by supporting three United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions related to Kosovo crisis, adopted under the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In this regard, the UNSC Resolution 1160 (1998), dated March 31, 1998, imposed an arms embargo on Yugoslavia (Serbia and

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<sup>1</sup> Oleg Levitin, "Inside Moscow's Kosovo muddle," *Survival*, 42(1), p. 133, 2000, IISS, London.

<sup>2</sup> For deeper exploration see: Roland Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, 2002, Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Izvetiya, Summary of Primakov/SVR Report on NATO, National Security Archive, November 26, 1993, Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16381-document-09-izvetiya-summary-primakov-svr>.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Rumer, *The Return of Global Russia: The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2019, Available at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rumer\\_PrimakovDoctrine\\_final1.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Rumer_PrimakovDoctrine_final1.pdf).

Montenegro – FRY). It urged the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia to collect information on violence and crimes committed in Kosovo. Importantly, it stressed that a lack of “constructive progress towards a peaceful resolution” in Kosovo could lead to considering additional measures.<sup>5</sup> In response to escalating conflict and a worsening humanitarian situation in Kosovo, on September 23, 1998 the UNSC adopted Resolution 1199. This resolution took a step further by clearly stating that the threat originated from the violence inflicted by the Serbian Police and Yugoslav Army on the civilian population of Kosovo, and explicitly mentioned the possibility of authorizing “other measures,” including military intervention, to preserve or restore peace and stability.<sup>6</sup> The change of Russia’s position, expressed through the support for this UNSC resolution, resulted from Milošević’s failure to uphold the agreement with President Yeltsin of June 18, 1998, to resume negotiations with Kosovo’s political leadership.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia openly or discreetly sought to hinder the notion of any settlement that could be seen as imposed on the FRY and enforced by NATO. If preventing such imposition proved difficult, Russia, at the very least, aimed to retain a controlling role in the ongoing international involvement in the crisis through international bodies, where Moscow enjoys the veto power (UNSC, Contact Group and OSCE).<sup>8</sup> In this regard, although Russia overtly expressed its objection to employing force in support of UNSC Resolution 1199, NATO officially threatened air bombardments against the FRY. Consequently, on October 16, 1998 the Milošević-Holbrooke agreement was announced that provided for establishment of the OSCE Verification Mission in Kosovo and the NATO-s Air Verification Mission over the region.<sup>9</sup> The following UNSC Resolution 1203 (1998), adopted on October 24, 1998, acknowledged the establishment of the OSCE verification mission in Kosovo and NATO’s air-verification mission over the region.<sup>10</sup>

However, the effectiveness of the OSCE mission in preventing the conflict and Belgrade’s atrocities against the civilian population in Kosovo proved to be inadequate. Following the summary execution of 45 Kosovo Albanian civilians by Serbian armed forces in the village of

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<sup>5</sup> UNSC Resolution 1160 (1998), March 31, 1998. Available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1160>.

<sup>6</sup> UNSC Resolution 1199 (1988), September 28, 1998, Available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1199>.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Bellamy, J. *Kosovo and International Society*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Weller, “The Rambouillet Conference on Kosovo,” *International Affairs*, Vol.75(2), April, 1999, p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> OSCE/ODIHR, Kosovo As seen, As told, An analyses of the human rights findings of the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission, October 1998 – June 1999, 1999, Available at:

<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/d/17772.pdf> .

<sup>10</sup> UNSC Resolution 1203 (1998), October 24, 1998. Available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/1203>.

Reçak, on January 15, 1999, NATO issued a warning to Serbia, expressing its readiness to use air-strikes if necessary to halt the violence,<sup>11</sup> which was not objected by Russia. Faced with the threat, Milošević agreed to peace talks with Kosovo Albanians under the auspices of the Contact Group (comprising the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, Italy, and Russia), held in Rambouillet (France). The Rambouillet Conference was chaired by the Foreign Minister of France, Yber Vedrine, and the UK's Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook. Yet, the negotiations were primarily steered by the three appointed Contact Group negotiators: Ambassadors Christopher Hill (United States), Wolfgang Petritsch (EU), and Boris Mayorski (Russian Federation).<sup>12</sup> The Kosovo Albanians agreed to the Peace Accords proposed by the Contact Group representatives<sup>13</sup> and officially signed them in Paris, on March 15, 1999, whereas Belgrade rejected them. Interestingly, only U.S. and EU negotiators witnessed the signing, as the Russian negotiator Mayorski declined to participate, *de facto* withdrawing support for the accords at the last minute in an attempt to undermine Western efforts.

Yet, this Kremlin's strategy ultimately proved to be counterproductive for both, Russia and Serbia. Following the unsuccessful final effort by the U.S. Envoy Richard Holbrooke to persuade Milošević to accept the Rambouillet Accords, on March 24, 1999, NATO initiated airstrikes against FRY with the aim to prevent human catastrophe and to bring Serbia to the peace terms.<sup>14</sup> Two days later, on March 26, 1999, the UN Security Council with a vote of 12 to 3 (China, Russia, and Namibia) decisively rejected a resolution presented by Russia, Belarus, and India, demanding the cessation of the use of force by NATO against the FRY.<sup>15</sup>

In less than two months, Russia underwent a significant shift by joining the West within the G8 framework and agreeing to the principles established during the foreign ministers' meeting at Petersberg Center, held on May 6, 1999. These principles encompassed key elements for achieving peace, such as the complete withdrawal of the FRY/Serb military and police forces and the establishment of an interim UN administration in Kosovo, all while fully considering the Rambouillet Accords,<sup>16</sup> which became an integral part of the UNSC Resolution 1239

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<sup>11</sup> NATO, NATO's Role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo, July 15, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Marc Weller, "The Rambouillet Conference on Kosovo," *International Affairs*, Vol.75 (2), April, 1999, p.227.

<sup>13</sup> Rambouillet Agreement, Interim Agreement for Peace and Self Government in Kosovo, US State Department Archive, Available at: [https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ksvo\\_rambouillet\\_text.html](https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/regions/eur/ksvo_rambouillet_text.html).

<sup>14</sup> NATO, Press Statement by Dr. Javier Solana, Secretary General of NATO, March 23, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, Press Release SC/6659, Security Council rejects demand for cessation of use of force against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, March 26, 1999, Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/1999/19990326.sc6659.html>.

<sup>16</sup> UN Documents, Statement by the Chairman of the meeting of the G8 Foreign Ministers, S/1999/516, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/kosovo-statement-chairman-meeting-g-8-foreign-ministers>.

(1999), adopted in the midst of NATO's airstrikes, on May 14, 1999.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Russia aligned with Western endeavors to seek a diplomatic resolution, compelling Milošević to accept NATO's terms. During a joint meeting in Bonn on June 2 and 3, 1999, involving U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, Russia's Envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin, and former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari (acting as the EU Envoy), an agreement was reached on a plan that met all NATO requirements. Consequently, Milošević accepted the plan on June 3, 1999.<sup>18</sup> The war concluded with the signing of the Military-Technical Agreement (Kumanovo Agreement), on June 9, 1999, between NATO-led International Security Force (KFOR) and the FRY and Serbian Governments. This agreement envisaged the complete withdrawal of Belgrade's security forces from Kosovo and the deployment of KFOR in the region.<sup>19</sup>

The next day, on June 10, 1999, the UNSC passed Resolution 1244 (with the support of Russia). This resolution bestowed legitimacy and practically gave legal stamp from the Security Council to the new circumstances shaped by NATO intervention and the Kumanovo Agreement. Effectively, Resolution 1244 stripped the FRY of any sovereign power over Kosovo. Instead, adopted under the Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the resolution authorized the establishment of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and deployment of the NATO-led peace-enforcement mission – KFOR.<sup>20</sup>

Russia joined the NATO-led KFOR mission, but initially embarked on a provocative military action to seize control of the Pristina international airport, on June 12, 1999. This involved a surprise deploying of 200 paratroopers from its SFOR contingent in Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>21</sup> to prepare the ground for additional troops from Russia, utilizing air transport. By establishing a significant military presence without prior notice, Russia aimed to shape new realities on the ground and create a zone in Serb majority area in the northern part of Kosovo, under Russian command.<sup>22</sup> This move would effectively have casted doubt on the credibility of NATO-led KFOR peace enforcement mandate. According to the then Serbian Ambassador to Russia, Bora

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<sup>17</sup> UNSC Resolution 1239 (1999), May 14, 1999. Available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/123>.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Williams, "Serbia Yields to NATO Terms," Washington Post, June 4, 1999. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/balkans/stories/belgrade060499.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> NATO, Military - Technical Agreement between the NATO's led International Security Force and the Yugoslav and Serbian Governments, on June 9, 1999. Available at: <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/docu/a990609a.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> UNSC Resolution 1244 (1999), June 10, 1999. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/274488?ln=en>.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Wintour and Ian Traynor, Russian and British Troops in tense Pristina Stand-off, The Guardian, July 13, 1999, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jun/13/balkans5>.

<sup>22</sup> BBC, Confrontation over Pristina Airport, March 9, 2000, Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/671495.stm>.



Milošević, Marshal Sergeyev informed him that the Russian contingent could range from 3,000 to 10,000 men, while Prime Minister Stepashin mentioned 5,000 troops, with an estimated budget requirement of around 150 million dollars.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, this plan did not materialize because, among others, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary denied the use of their air-space to the Russian authorities.<sup>24</sup>

President Putin decided to withdraw the Russian contingent from the KFOR Mission in July, 2003, thereby disengaging from military presence in Kosovo.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the Kremlin's decision was not coupled with a political and diplomatic withdrawal. The Russian Embassy Chancery has been operational in Pristina since the inception of the UN Mission in Kosovo in 1999. Russia did not disengage from its interests in Kosovo but instead made a strategic choice to wield influence primarily through diplomatic channels and via Serbia, as it pursued its foreign policy objectives mostly through rivalry, and even hostility, with the West in the region.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of defining the final status of Kosovo, Russia reengaged within the framework of the UN Security Council and the Contact Group. On November 15, 2005, the UN Security Council approved the proposal of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan for appointment of Martti Ahtisaari as the Special Envoy for the Future Status Process for Kosovo.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Contact Group meeting at the level of foreign ministers, including Russia, held in London on January 31, 2006, adopted the guiding principles for defining the status of Kosovo. These principles emphasized that there should be “no return of Kosovo to the pre-1999 situation; no partition of Kosovo; and no union of Kosovo with any part of another country.” Most importantly, the guiding principles stipulated that the “Ministers looked to Belgrade to bear in mind that the settlement needs, among other things, to be acceptable to the people of Kosovo,”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Vladan Vlaković, *Military Secret, Part I*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> BBC, Confrontation over Pristina Airport, March 9, 2000, Available at:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/671495.stm>.

<sup>25</sup> NATO Update, Russian Troops Leave Kosovo, July 10, 2003, Available at:

<https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2003/07-july/e0702a.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Lulzim Peci, Russia's Information Warfare Against Kosovo, Political Background and Manifestations, Policy Brief, KIPRED, October 2020. p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> UN Meetings Coverage and Press-Releases, Secretary-General appoints former President Martti Ahtissari of Finland as Special Envoy for the Future Status Process for Kosovo, November 15, 2005. Available at:

<https://press.un.org/en/2005/sga955.doc.htm> .

<sup>28</sup> Kosovo Contact Group Statement, London, January 31, 2006, points 6 and 7. Available at:

[https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/declarations/88236.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/declarations/88236.pdf).

which opened the door for Kosovo's independence. It should be emphasized that these "guiding principles," were supported by Moscow.

Due to the lack of progress in negotiations, the Contact Group at the level of foreign ministers, on September 20, 2006, directed President Ahtisaari to "prepare a comprehensive proposal for a status settlement and, on this basis, engage the parties in moving the negotiating process forward." Contact Group stressed that "striving for a negotiated settlement should not obscure the fact that neither party can unilaterally block the status process from advancing."<sup>29</sup> In accordance with these instructions, President Ahtisaari presented the Draft Comprehensive Proposal on the Kosovo Status Settlement to the Contact Group, on February 2, 2007,<sup>30</sup> outlining supervised independence for Kosovo. On March 26, 2007, the UN Secretary-General endorsed the proposal and forwarded the final draft of the Comprehensive Proposal on the Kosovo Status Settlement to the UNSC.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, Russia's confrontational stance against the West was escalating. The George W. Bush Administration's decision to deploy interceptor missiles and radar installations in Poland and the Czech Republic in early 2007, drew strong reaction from Putin. He viewed this as an action that would disrupt the existing "world strategic stability" and issue threats of a new Cold War.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, once again, similarly to the Rambouillet Conference, Russia, in pursuit of rivalry with the West, chose to sabotage the UN process for Kosovo's status by threatening to use a veto to block the proposal of the UN Envoy Martti Ahtisaari.<sup>33</sup> Kremlin aligned with Serbia with the goal of turning Kosovo into an indefinite frozen conflict, intending to strike the West in its vulnerable areas and seeking transactional benefits in its neighborhood in the future.

In order to make a final attempt to overcome the deadlock at the UNSC caused by Russia, in similar fashion to the Rambouillet talks, the Contact Group, in the Ministerial Meeting of September 27, 2007, appointed a troika of negotiators led by German Ambassador Ischinger,

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<sup>29</sup> Kosovo Contact Group Ministerial Statement, September 20, 2006. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/72892.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Joint Contact Group Statement, February 2, 2007. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/79892.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> UNSC, Letter from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2007/168, March 26, 2007, Available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Luke Hardin, Russia threatening new cold war over missile defence, The Guardian, April 11, 2007, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/apr/11/usa.topstories3>.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Rettman, Russia confirms veto on Kosovo's independence, Euobserver, April 27, 2007, Available at: <https://euobserver.com/world/23933>.

representing the European Union, with senior Russian diplomat Alexander Bhotsan-Harchenko and the US Ambassador Frank Wiesner. As it was expected, the Troika submitted a report to the UN Secretary-General on December 4, 2007, stating that Kosovo and Serbia were unable to reach an agreement on Kosovo's final status.<sup>34</sup> In this regard it has to be stipulated that the UNSC Resolution 1244 did not make it mandatory for the final status of Kosovo to be approved by the Security Council.

After exhausting all diplomatic avenues, in coordination with Brussels and Washington, Kosovo declared independence on February 17, 2008. As anticipated, Moscow reacted with great hostility, and Putin labeled it a "terrible precedent" that will "come back to hit the West in the face."<sup>35</sup> Russia and Serbia faced another setback when their initiative endorsed by the UN General Assembly in October 2008<sup>36</sup> to refer the legality of Kosovo's independence for review by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) did not go in their favor. Russia presented to the Court a lengthy statement that presented its point of view and arguments why the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo is not in accordance with international law.<sup>37</sup> But, the ICJ's Advisory Opinion, delivered on July 22, 2010, explicitly stated that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, the UN General Assembly Resolution [A/RES/64/292] adopted on September 9, 2010, that was supported by Russia as well, acknowledged the content of the ICJ's Advisory Opinion and transferred the UN mandate concerning the Kosovo-Serbia dispute to the European Union.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> UNSC, S/2007/723, Letter dated 10 December 2007 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council, Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/un-sgs-letter-dated-10-dec-2007-president-un-sc-report-euussussian-fed-troika-kosovo>.

<sup>35</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald, Putin calls Kosovo independence 'terrible precedent,' February 23, 2008, Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/putin-calls-kosovo-independence-terrible-precedent-20080223-gds2d5.html>.

<sup>36</sup> UNGA, A/Res/63/3, October 8, 2008, Available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kos%20A%20RES63%203.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> The Russian assertion was argued on several basis: Resolution 1244 emphasizes the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, creating a presumption in favor of territorial integrity; the resolution does not exclude the possibility of independence but requires it to be a result of negotiated agreement or a Security Council decision, ruling out unilateral acts; the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, established under Resolution 1244, lacked the competence for declaring independence. Furthermore, the Russian statement contended that, according to general international law, secession is allowed only in extreme circumstances of severe oppression, which did not apply to Kosovo in 2008. Written Statement of the Russian Federation, February 16, 2009, Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/141/15628.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> ICJ, Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect to Kosovo, July 22, 2010. Available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/141/141-20100722-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> United Nations, General Assembly Resolution 64/298, September 9, 2010, Available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/ROL%20A%20RES64%20298.pdf>

With this, Russia effectively remained outside of the negotiating table between Kosovo and Serbia, which was transferred under the EU's umbrella. However, subsequent events demonstrate that Moscow's influence on the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has not been avoided. The internal rifts within the European Union have offered an opportunity for the Kremlin to leverage and advance its own agenda. This entails bolstering its influence over Serbia, which stands as the primary stronghold for Russian interests in the Western Balkans. The following sections of this paper provides comprehensive analysis of the role and interest of the Russian Federation in the new phase of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, facilitated by the EU.

## **II. Russia's meddling on the EU-facilitated dialogue**

The first move by Russia following the adoption of UN General Assembly Resolution 64/298 was an attempt to undermine the EU's mandate in facilitating the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia for the normalization of their relations, as well as the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion. In a statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry one day after the adoption of the UNGA resolution, on September 10, 2010,<sup>40</sup> there was no mention of the EU's role in the facilitation of the dialogue process. Instead, the statement emphasized that "UN Security Council resolution 1244 remains the legal basis for a long-term, sustainable solution for the Kosovo problem." It also asserted that "the UN Mission in Kosovo is to continue to play an important role in facilitating this process on the basis of its mandate received from the UN Security Council," even though, by that time, the UN Mission had already handed over all its executive competencies to Kosovar authorities and the EU Rule of Law Mission (EULEX). One month after the EU-facilitated dialogue began in Brussels, on March 8, 2011, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, during his visit to Belgrade on April 19, 2011, reiterated support for Serbia's position. He further emphasized the importance of maintaining the role of UNMIK under the same terms as before Kosovo's declaration of independence.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, with the aim of undermining the facilitating role of the EU, Lavrov stated in November 2011 that Russia

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<sup>40</sup> Russian MFA Information and Press Department Comment in Relation to the Adoption by UN General Assembly of a Resolution on the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Kosovo, September 19, 2010, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1597928/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1597928/).

<sup>41</sup> Russian MFA, Transcript of Remarks and Replies by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić, Belgrade, April 19, 2011, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1701838/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1701838/)

emphasizes the urgent need to preserve the UN and its Security Council's role in the negotiation process.<sup>42</sup>

Against this backdrop, one of the landmark momentums in the dialogue took place in April 2013, when Kosovo and Serbia reached the First Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations in Brussels.<sup>43</sup> This agreement laid the foundation for a “modus vivendi” between the two nations, but did not resolve their dispute. However, just a month after the agreement, on May 24, 2013, Serbia's President Nikolić signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership with Putin, signaling a significant shift in Belgrade's alignment towards Moscow. On this occasion, he stated that a “new era” in cooperation was ahead for Russia and Serbia, emphasizing that no goal was unachievable if the two countries worked together.<sup>44</sup> On the flip side, during the meeting of June 27-28, 2013, the European Council reached a consensus to initiate accession negotiations with Serbia by January 2014.<sup>45</sup> The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Kosovo was negotiated between October 2013 and May 2014, initialed in July 2014, and the Council of the EU approved its signature on October 22, 2015.<sup>46</sup>

In this context, Russia has strategically positioned itself to indirectly influence the dialogue, motivating Serbia to refrain from taking bold steps toward full normalization of relations with Kosovo. This was aptly demonstrated during the visit in Belgrade of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, on June 16, 2013, two months after the First Agreement on the Normalization of Relations. On this occasion, the then Prime Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, enthusiastically stated that “relations with Russia are probably at the highest level in the last couple of decades” and asserted that “without the UNSC support by Russia and China, Serbia's position on Kosovo-Metohija would be hopeless today.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, by extending this untimely carrot – opening of the accession talks - to Belgrade, the EU suffered a significant loss of leverage on Serbia. This created an opportunity for Serbia to draw closer to Russia without facing

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<sup>42</sup> Russian MFA, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov interview to the Serbian Newspaper Večernje Novosti, November 1, 2011, Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1622784/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1622784/) .

<sup>43</sup> First Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, April 19, 2013, Available at: <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2022> .

<sup>44</sup> B92, Nikolić, Putin sign Strategic Partnership Declaration, May 24, 2013. Available at: [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=24&nav\\_id=86333](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=05&dd=24&nav_id=86333)

<sup>45</sup> European Council, Serbia, Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/serbia/> .

<sup>46</sup> European Council, Press Release, Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Kosovo signed, October 27, 2015. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/27/kosovo-eu-stabilisation-association-agreement/> .

<sup>47</sup> Bodo Weber, and Kurt Bassuener, The Western Balkans and Ukrainian Crisis, a changed game for EU and US policies, Policy Paper, Democratization Policy Council, Berlin – Sarajevo, 2014, p. 3.

significant consequences in its journey toward EU integration, all while enjoying the corresponding financial assistance from the EU, totaling 1.1 billion Euros annually.<sup>48</sup>

This policy of “both, the EU and Russia” of Serbia was further shaped when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014. Serbia declaratively supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine but refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia, aiming to avoid risking good relations with Moscow. This is illustrated in a Hamlet’s dilemma style by the then Deputy Prime-Minister Vučić, who on March 22, 2014 stated “Do you want us to introduce sanctions against Russia, that we state that we support the breach of territorial integrity, whereby we would lose Kosovo, or to turn our back on the EU?”<sup>49</sup> Consequently, Serbia has refrained from aligning itself with the numerous declarations on Ukraine issued by the EU following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. It also did not participate in initiatives launched by EU member states at the OSCE. Additionally, when questioned about Chapter 31 of the accession negotiations (on the Common Foreign and Security Policy - CFSP), the Foreign Minister Dačić and other Serbian representatives have emphasized that full harmonization is only required towards the conclusion of the accession process.<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly, the EU has not sanctioned this policy of Serbia, despite its evident alignment with Russia. This alignment has provided Moscow with additional indirect leverage on the EU facilitated Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Considering that Kremlin has misused the declaration of independence of Kosovo to justify the illegal annexation of Crimea,<sup>51</sup> Moscow has obviously incorporated outcomes of the dialogue, into a broader geopolitical calculation of Russian interests in its near abroad, by accounting on the alignment of Serbia, and consequently increasing the destabilization potential in the Balkans. Belgrade’s inclination to prioritize support from Russia over Western efforts to resolve the dispute with Kosovo became apparent. Moreover, Belgrade positioned itself as a stronghold for Russian interests in the Balkans, especially at a time when the region is perceived by Moscow as “Europe’s weakest link.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Mateja Agatonović, How much money Serbia receives from the EU and how much it risks to lose?, European Western Balkans, December 12, 2022, Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/12/14/how-much-money-serbia-receives-from-the-eu-an-how-much-it-risks-to-lose/>

<sup>49</sup> Blic, Vučić: Srbija neće imati neprijateljski stav prema Rusij, March 22, 2013. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-srbija-neece-imati-neprijateljski-stav-prema-rusiji/22400e5>

<sup>50</sup> Bodo Weber, and Kurt Bassuener, The Western Balkans and Ukrainian Crisis, a changed game for EU and US policies, Policy Paper, Democratization Policy Council, Berlin – Sarajevo 2014, p. 7

<sup>51</sup> Kremlin, Address by President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014, Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

<sup>52</sup> Janusz Bugajski and Margarita Assenova, *Eurasian Disunion: Russia’s Vulnerable Flanks*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington D.C., 2016, p.219.

On August 25, 2015, Kosovo and Serbia achieved another breakthrough in the EU-facilitated dialogue by agreeing on the General Principles of the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities.<sup>53</sup> However, the establishment of the Association was put on hold by the decision of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo, on December 23, 2015, which concluded that several provisions specifying the role and competencies of the Association did not fully meet constitutional standards, requiring certain adjustments.<sup>54</sup> In the coming years, Kosovo faced political instability that lasted until 2021, experiencing five changes in government, primarily as a consequence of the challenging negotiation process with Serbia.

These circumstances provided Russia with an opportunity to depict the EU as a partial mediator, while accusing Kosovo for evading the establishment of the Association. In a statement following the visit of Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić to Moscow, on April 1, 2016, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov initially emphasized Russia's high regard for Serbia's principled stance against EU-backed attempts to involve non-EU countries in imposing sanctions against Russia. Additionally, he baselessly claimed that the rights of the Serbian people in Kosovo are consistently violated, and agreements between Belgrade and Pristina, supported by the EU, particularly regarding the creation of a Serbian municipality community in Kosovo, are subject to ongoing sabotage. Moscow expressed concern about the lack of "a decisive response" from Brussels to these issues and called on the "EU to maintain its reputation as an impartial mediator", ensuring that Kosovo fulfills its commitments.<sup>55</sup> This position was reiterated by statements from President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, Deputy Minister Meshkov, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich, and the MFA Spokeswomen Zakharova, throughout 2016 and 2017.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> European External Action Service, Association/Community/of/ Serb/majority/municipali'es/in/Kosovo/-/general/principles/main/elements, August 25, 2015, Available at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/150825\\_02\\_association-community-of-serb-majority-municipalities-in-kosovo-general-principles-main-elements\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/150825_02_association-community-of-serb-majority-municipalities-in-kosovo-general-principles-main-elements_en.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, Case number KO 130/15, "Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo general principles/main elements" with the spirit of the Constitution, Article 3 [Equality Before the Law], paragraph 1, Chapter II [Fundamental Rights and Freedoms] and Chapter III [Rights of Communities and Their Members] of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo", December 23, 2015, Available at: [https://gjk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/vendimet/gjk\\_ko\\_130\\_15\\_ang.pdf](https://gjk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/vendimet/gjk_ko_130_15_ang.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Russian MFA, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Ivica Dačić, Moscow, April 1, 2016, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/1525371/](https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1525371/).

<sup>56</sup> See for example: Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 24, 2016, Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesman/briefings/1538558/](https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/1538558/); Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, February 9, 2017, Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1541890/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1541890/); Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference following talks with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and

The consequences of this Russo-Serbian alignment against Kosovo and the undermining of EU facilitating efforts became apparent. Thus, on October 27, 2017, Suriname announced the revocation of its recognition of Kosovo's independence,<sup>57</sup> reportedly done to please Putin ahead of Suriname Foreign Minister Pollack-Beigh's first visit to Russia, on October 31, 2017.<sup>58</sup> This move was preceded by a visit from a Russian business delegation to Suriname in the same month and the Suriname Minister of Trade's visit to Saint Petersburg, in May of the same year.<sup>59</sup> Over the next year, nine more countries followed suit in revoking their recognition of Kosovo's independence.<sup>60</sup> After Suriname withdrew recognition of Kosovo, President Vučić of Serbia visited Moscow on December 19, 2017, where President Putin expressed support for Serbia's "sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>61</sup> This aligned with efforts to de-recognize Kosovo, with Russia's UN Ambassador Nebenzia accusing "the sponsors and executors of Kosovo project" and calling for reflection on its results, while accusing the EU for failure in facilitating the dialogue.<sup>62</sup> In June 2018, Putin used again the "Kosovo precedent" to justify Crimea's annexation, by claiming that Kosovo's independence was an annexation through NATO invasion.<sup>63</sup> This Kremlin's hybrid warfare strategically exploited NATO's 1999 intervention and Kosovo's independence, using them to advance Russia's hegemonic ambitions in neighboring regions.

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European Affairs of Croatia Davor Ivo Stier, Moscow, May 23, 2017, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1547273/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1547273/); Deputy Foreign Minister Alexey Meshkov's remarks at the round table, Peace, Stability and Security in Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean, held as part of the Dubrovnik Forum 2017, Dubrovnik, July 1, 2017, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1549321/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549321/); Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE Alexander Lukashovich's remarks at a meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, Vienna, August 31, 2017, Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/rso/1551687/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/rso/1551687/).

<sup>57</sup> Balkan Insider, What did Suriname just do to Kosovo, 31 October, 2017, Available at:

<https://www.balkaninsider.com/what-did-suriname-just-do-to-kosovo/>

<sup>58</sup> Lidia Kos-Stanišić, Đana Luša, "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, 2018, p. 254.

<sup>59</sup> 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, Available at:

[https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1556116/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1556116/).

<sup>60</sup> European Parliament, Parliamentary Questions, Subject: VP/HR — Withdrawal of recognition of Kosovo, 20 December 2018, Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2018-006438\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2018-006438_EN.html).

<sup>61</sup> Kremlin, Press Statements following the Russian – Serbian Talks, December 19, 2017, Available at:

<http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/56418>.

<sup>62</sup> 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, Available at:

<https://russiaun.ru/en/news/kos070218>.

<sup>63</sup> The Kremlin, Interview with Austrian ORF television channel, 4 June 2018, Available at:

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57675>.



Instead of moving forward with the normalization process, these actions of Serbia - Russia alignment geared towards a deadlock in the negotiations, prompting parties as well as the EU foreign policy chief and mediator of the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue Federica Mogherini,<sup>64</sup> and some EU countries,<sup>65</sup> to consider the prospect of a territorial swap between Kosovo and Serbia. This proposal encountered resistance from other member countries,<sup>66</sup> deepening divisions within the European Union and further intensifying the existing deadlock in the dialogue process, alongside the stance of the five non-recognizing countries. On the other hand, the option of a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia may have played into Russia’s geopolitical calculations in its nearby regions, especially with regard to South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk. It is not coincidental that what seemed unimaginable became a reality when President Putin and Kosovo’s President Hashim Thaçi briefly met in Paris at the Armistice commemorations on November 12, 2018. According to Thaçi, Putin’s stance was clear: “If you achieve a peaceful agreement, Russia will support it.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a Kremlin statement issued on November 14, 2018 stated that Putin “pointed out to Thaçi that Pristina needs to reach a consensus with Belgrade and told him that Russia will support a joint decision by Belgrade and Pristina.”<sup>68</sup>

Against this background, Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, further elucidated Russia’s stance in an interview with the Serbian Daily Politika, on September 1, 2019,<sup>69</sup> amidst the significant setback of the land swap proposal. In this interview he stated, “Serbia is a stronghold of Russia, as well as Russia is a stronghold of Serbia and will remain so.” In this vein, he emphasized that the West aims to push Russia out of the Balkans, intending

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<sup>64</sup> Jacopo Barigazai, Mogherini defends Kosovo border change talks, Politico. August 31, 2019, Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/federica-mogherini-kosovo-serbia-defends-border-change-talks/>.

<sup>65</sup> See for example: Die Morina, Austria ‘Will Not Oppose’ Kosovo-Serbia Border Changes, BalkanInsight, November 6, 2018, Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/06/austria-supports-border-correction-between-kosovo-and-serbia-11-06-2018/>; Available at: Die Morina, Kosovo President Claims Macron Supports Border Correction, Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/12/macron-supports-border-correction-with-serbia-kosovo-president-says-10-12-2018/>.

<sup>66</sup> See for example: Andrew Gray, Angela Merkel: No Balkan border changes, Politico, August 13, 2018 Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-no-balkan-border-changes-kosovo-serbia-vucic-thaci/>; Available at: Robin Emmott, EU warns against Serbia-Kosovo land swap idea, Reuters, August 31, 2018, transmitted by Euronews, Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2018/08/31/eu-warns-against-serbia-kosovo-land-swap-idea>

<sup>67</sup> Dia Morina, Putin Will Back Kosovo-Serbia Deal, Thaci Insists, November 12, 2019, Balkan Insight, Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/12/kosovo-s-thaci-putin-supports-an-agreement-between-kosovo-and-serbia-11-12-2018/>.

<sup>68</sup> B92, Kremlin discloses what Putin told Thaci, November 14, 2018, Available at: [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=11&dd=14&nav\\_id=105518](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=11&dd=14&nav_id=105518).

<sup>69</sup> Interview of the Ambassador of Russia to Serbia, A. A. Botsan-Kharchenko, to the *Politika* newspaper, 1 September, 2019, Available at: [https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu\\_a\\_a\\_botsan\\_kharchenko\\_gazete\\_politika/](https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/intervyu_a_a_botsan_kharchenko_gazete_politika/).

for all countries in the region to join NATO. Despite underlining that Russia does not explicitly support the partition of Kosovo, Kharchenko mentioned that such a division would not establish “a precedent for territorial division in Europe,” indicating Moscow’s preference for this option that undoubtedly serves its hegemonic ambitions in its near neighborhood.

Nevertheless, the mandate of EU foreign policy chief Mogherini concluded on November 30, 2019, marking her legacy in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue with the initial agreement on the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities and subsequent support for talks on a land swap, a move conflicting with the concept of Association. The lack of cohesion and leadership within the EU, combined with political instability and divisions in Kosovo, deemed this mandate a missed opportunity for normalizing relations between Pristina and Belgrade. It also led to stronger alignment of Serbia with Russia, perpetuating tensions in the region that solely serve the interests of the Kremlin.

When Miroslav Lajčák assumed the role of the new EU Special Representative for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, in April 2020, the proposal for a land swap was almost discarded. At the commencement of his mandate, in May 2020, Lajčák explicitly stated that the option of a land swap is not under consideration, and that it is against international law and regional stability.<sup>70</sup> However, Serbia and Russia have not abandoned this option that aligns with their hegemonic ambitions. In their jointly authored article titled “The Kosovo Knot: Is a Fair Solution Possible?,” published on June 18, 2020, in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Kurir*, Lavrov and Dačić affirmed their aligned positions, including common positions on the United States and the European Union. They criticized Europeans for opposing the land swap proposal and reiterated that the final decision should be approved by the UN Security Council and that Moscow would only accept a settlement agreed upon by Belgrade.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, on June 19, 2020, US special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, Richard Grenell, rejected the idea that a land-swap between Kosovo and Serbia was part of President Trump’s policy. He also announced a “historical agreement” expected on June 27, 2020, at the White House between Kosovo and Serbia, seen as a preliminary step toward a potential final

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<sup>70</sup> *Gazetaexpress*, EU’s envoy on Dialogue oppose Kosovo-Serbia land swap, May 11, 2020, Available at: <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/eus-envoy-on-dialogue-oppose-kosovo-serbia-land-swap/>.

<sup>71</sup> 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*, June 18, 2020, Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/us/-/asset\\_publisher/unVXBbj4Z6e8/content/id/416827](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/us/-/asset_publisher/unVXBbj4Z6e8/content/id/416827).

agreement facilitated by the European Union.<sup>72</sup> However, the meeting did not occur as planned due to the indictment by the Specialized Chambers of Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci en route to Washington. The Washington Agreement was later signed by Kosovar Prime Minister Hoti and Serbian President Vučić, on September 4, 2020.<sup>73</sup>

However, after the Washington meeting, at the request of Vučić, an initial phone conversation took place with Lavrov on September 6, 2020. During the conversation, concerning the synchronization of policy on Kosovo, only the Russian position advocating for an agreement in accordance with (the Russian interpretation) of the Resolution 1244 was emphasized.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, the statement issued by the Kremlin following Vučić's phone conversation with Putin on September 10, 2020, emphasized the necessity of a "balanced compromise solution" that would be acceptable to Belgrade and approved by the UN Security Council.<sup>75</sup>

After the land swap option was dismissed by both, Brussels and Washington, Russia escalated its diplomatic warfare by questioning the EU's credibility as a mediator, insisting on the establishment of the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities, stressing that any agreement must be acceptable to Serbia and, consequently, approved by the UN Security Council.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, in a rather harassing Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and

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<sup>72</sup> Victoria Garcia, Grenell trashes Bolton, claims ex-security adviser 'saved salacious stories in order to sell books,' Fox News, June 19, 2020. Available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/media/grenell-bolton-saved-salacious-stories-sell-books>.

<sup>73</sup> See for example: The Washington Post, Serbia and Kosovo sign breakthrough economic accord that is short of normal relations, 4 September 2020, Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-kosovo-serbia-agreement/2020/09/04/b1283f8c-ec0-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-kosovo-serbia-agreement/2020/09/04/b1283f8c-ec0-11ea-99a1-71343d03bc29_story.html).

<sup>74</sup> The Russian Embassy in Belgrade, Telephone conversation between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President of Serbia A. Vučić, 06 September, 2020. Available at: [https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/o\\_telefonnom\\_razgovore\\_ministra\\_inostrannykh\\_del\\_rossii\\_s\\_v\\_lavrova\\_s\\_prezidentom\\_serbii\\_a\\_vuchichem/](https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/o_telefonnom_razgovore_ministra_inostrannykh_del_rossii_s_v_lavrova_s_prezidentom_serbii_a_vuchichem/).

<sup>75</sup> The Kremlin, Telephone conversation with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, September 10, 2020. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/64019>.

<sup>76</sup> See for example: Russian MFA, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko's answer to a media question about the outcome of the Belgrade-Pristina expert dialogue round, September 22, 2020. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/rso/evropejskij-souz-es/1442578/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/rso/evropejskij-souz-es/1442578/); Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Serbia Nikola Selaković Belgrade, December 15, 2020. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1449583/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1449583/); Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Serbia Nikola Selaković, Moscow, April 16, 2021. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1419942/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1419942/); Available at: Statement by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at UNSC briefing on cooperation between the UN and regional organizations, June 10, 2021. Available at: [Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations \(russiaun.ru\)](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1419942/); Available at: Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, June 10, 2021; Available at: [Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, June 10, 2021 - News - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1419942/). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, Belgrade, October 10, 2021. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/1783362/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1783362/).

Ukrainians,” published on July 12, 2021, he openly questioned the borders of other countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union,<sup>77</sup> which was a prelude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022. Within this context, Moscow's diplomatic warfare regarding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue was evidently part of a broader strategy aimed at challenging the West and seizing opportunities for geopolitical maneuvers in Russia's near abroad.

Serbia faithfully adhered to this Russian policy, as exemplified during the crisis in the North of Kosovo in September 2021. When the Kosovo Government decided to reciprocate Belgrade with a ban on license plates issued by Serbia, the Russian Ambassador to Belgrade, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, accompanied by the Serbian Defense Minister Stefanović, inspected the Serbian military forces near the border with Kosovo, on September 26, 2021, which were in a state of elevated combat readiness. Paradoxically, from there, he expressed support for “Belgrade's efforts to de-escalate a very dangerous situation” and accused the EU and the U.S. for “applying double standards and closing their eyes to a situation they did not want to understand, including assigning blame for what was happening.”<sup>78</sup>

Against this backdrop, Kremlin issued a very brief introductory statements on the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić that took place on November 25th, 2021, in Sochi, in despite of the fact that the meeting itself lasted around three hours.<sup>79</sup> According to Serbian TV Pink, as quoted by Radio Free Europe, Vučić left the meeting expressing pride in the military-technical cooperation with Russia. He urgently sought the arrival of specific tactical weapons, particularly anti-tank weapons, emphasizing their importance for Serbia's strategic interests in the near future. Vučić hinted at imminent developments, stating that “there will be other important major things of strategic interest for Serbia in the future, and not in the distant future,” adding, “so we will have the first things before the end of the year in Serbia.”<sup>80</sup> Given Vučić's declarations, it is apparent that discussions with President Putin likely included the upcoming Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border and the potential Russian-Serbian coordination in the Western Balkans, amid

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<sup>77</sup> Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, July 12, 2021. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>78</sup> Euractiv.rs, Northern Kosovo situation sparks international response, September 27th, 2021. Available at: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/northern-kosovo-situation-sparks-international-response/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/northern-kosovo-situation-sparks-international-response/).

<sup>79</sup> Kremlin, Talks with President of Serbia of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, November 25, 2022. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67194>.

<sup>80</sup> Radio Free Europe, Russian, Serbian Presidents Emerge From Meeting With Talk Of Gas Deal, ‘Tactical’ Weapons, 25 November, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-vucic-gas-weapons/31579354.html>

the looming aggression in Ukraine. Notably, one week after Vučić's meeting with Putin, US media reported on Kremlin's military aims toward Ukraine.<sup>81</sup>

In this vein, a noteworthy development in Russian diplomatic warfare against the West and Kosovo was a shift in Moscow's narratives that preceded Moscow's aggression against Ukraine. In two declarations on January 13th and 14th, 2022,<sup>82</sup> Foreign Minister Lavrov compared the two Russian-dominated separatist regions of Ukraine, Donetsk and Lugansk, with the Serbian-dominated northern part of Kosovo. He drew parallels between the Minsk Agreement and the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities, particularly in terms of the rights of the Russian and Serbian populations in these respective territories. Just one day after these statements, on February 15, 2022, the Russian Parliament voted to appeal to President Putin for the recognition of the independence of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>83</sup> Subsequently, on February 21, 2022, Putin officially announced Russia's recognition of the self-proclaimed independence of Donetsk and Luhansk,<sup>84</sup> and compared them with the independence of Kosovo.<sup>85</sup> Eventually, on February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine.

In this context, following the invasion of Ukraine, Russia persisted in drawing parallels between the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities agreement and the situation of Kosovo Serbs, with the provisions of the Minsk agreements for Donbas in Ukraine and Russians in that region, and comparing the independence of these regions with Kosovo's independence. Later these comparisons were extended to Kherson and Zaporozhye regions.

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<sup>81</sup> Washington Post, Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, U.S. intelligence warns, 3 December 2021. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/russia-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/03/98a3760e-546b-11ec-8769-2f4ecdf7a2ad_story.html).

<sup>82</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview on Channel One's "The Great Game" political talk show, Moscow, January 13, 2022. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1794264/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1794264/); Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2021, Moscow, January 14, 2022. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1794396/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1794396/?lang=en).

<sup>83</sup> Anton Zverev and Tom Balforth, Russia's parliament asks Putin to recognise breakaway east Ukrainian regions, February 15, 2022, Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-parliament-asks-putin-recognise-breakaway-east-ukrainian-regions-2022-02-15/>.

<sup>84</sup> BBC, Ukraine: Putin announces Donetsk and Luhansk recognition, February 21, 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-60470900>.

<sup>85</sup> Kremlin, Vladimir Putin answered media questions. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67838>.

This was coupled with efforts to undermine the credibility of Western mediation in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue.<sup>86</sup>

On the other hand, a landmark Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia was reached on February 27, 2023. This EU-brokered Agreement that envisions, among other things, the “de facto” recognition of Kosovo by Serbia and Kosovo’s membership in international organizations,<sup>87</sup> is facing sabotage from Russia. Few days before reaching the agreement, Russian Ambassador to Belgrade, Kharchenko, stated that a rightful solution for Kosovo could not occur without the involvement of Russia and China. He viewed it as a Western attempt to provide Serbia with a way to recognize Kosovo and join international institutions, particularly the UN. Harchenko expressed doubt that this plan could serve as a solid foundation for further discussions.<sup>88</sup> Following the agreement, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova emphasized that it does not make possible for Kosovo to gain membership in international organizations, like the United Nations. She accused EU mediators and the United States of longstanding efforts to undermine the international legal framework for the Kosovo settlement, outlined primarily in the UNSC Resolution 1244. According to Zakharova, they aim to pressure Serbia into accepting the “notorious Kosovo statehood.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See for example: Russian MFA, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statements and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary Peter Szijjarto, Moscow, July 21, 2022. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1823197/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1823197/); Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the UN Secretary-General’s statements on the referendums in the Zaporozhye and Kherson regions and the Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1832119/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1832119/).

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s news conference on European security issues, Moscow, December 1, 2022. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/press\\_service/photos/meropriyatiya\\_s\\_uchastiem\\_ministra/1841407/](https://mid.ru/en/press_service/photos/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/1841407/); Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions at the Primakov Readings International Forum, Moscow, December 7, 2022. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1842506/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1842506/); Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions during a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan following talks, Moscow, March 20, 2023. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1858773/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1858773/).

<sup>87</sup> EEAS, Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, February 27, 2023. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en).

<sup>88</sup> Tanjug, Bocan-Harčenko: Rusija je podrška Beogradu - nema pravednog rešenja za KiM bez nas i Kine, February 12, 2023. Available at: <https://www.tanjug.rs/srbija/politika/13549/bocan-harcenko-rusija-je-podrška-beogradu-nema-pravednog-rešenja-za-kim-bez-nas-i-kine/vest>.

<sup>89</sup> See for example, Russian MFA, Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, March 9, 2023. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1857501/#3](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1857501/#3); Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, March 23, 2023. Available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1859387/#q16](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1859387/#q16).

Against this backdrop, Serbian President Vučić refused to sign the Agreement on the path to normalization<sup>90</sup> and stated that he would not endorse Kosovo's membership in the United Nations.<sup>91</sup> The major blow to the agreement occurred on December 15th, 2023, when Serbia formally refused to abide by it, as conveyed in a letter addressed to the EU by the Prime Minister of Serbia, Brnabić.<sup>92</sup>

A very precarious momentum for the regional security occurred on September 24, 2023, when a terrorist action conducted by a Serb paramilitary group operating from Serbia – little green men – took place in Northern Kosovo. This resulted in the death of one Kosovo police officer and three attackers, whose sporadic presence President Vučić had already announced a year ago in his speech to the Serbian Parliament.<sup>93</sup> After this event, the first foreign official that President Vučić met was the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko.<sup>94</sup> After a meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko criticized the Pristina authorities, accusing them of continuing violence, particularly blaming Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti for pursuing a course that threatens areas inhabited by Serbs. He asserted that the West encourages such actions and criticized the dialogue in Brussels, labeling it a cover for the real events in Kosovo, devoid of any meaningful results. Russian Ambassador also expressed dissatisfaction with the KFOR-led NATO mission, claiming that they not only failed in their duties but also aided police forces in violence against “civilians” during recent clashes in northern Kosovo.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See for example: N1, Vučić: Nisam potpisao, jer neću da pravim pravne sporazume sa Kosovom, March 19, 2023. Available at: <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vucic-nisam-potpisao-jer-necu-da-pravim-pravne-sporazume-sa-kosovom/>.

<sup>91</sup> See for example: Politika, Vučić: Nikada neću pristati na priznanje i ulazak Kosova u UN, o svemu ostalom možemo da pregovaramo, February 28, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Jelena Nikolić, Serbia formally refuses to abide by EU-brokered agreements with Kosovo, Euraktiv, December 15, 2024. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/serbia-formally-refuses-to-abide-by-eu-brokered-agreements-with-kosovo/>.

<sup>93</sup> KoSsev, Vučić: Po prvi put se pojavila lica u uniformama na Severu, sve žene sišle da ih pozdrave i kažu ‘dobrodošla sloboda’, September 13, 2023, <https://kossev.info/na-barikadama-se-pojavila-lica-u-uniformama-sve-zene-sisle-da-ih-pozdrave-i-kazu-dobrodošla-sloboda/>

<sup>94</sup> Danas, Zašto se predsednik Srbije, nakon sukoba u Banjskoj, prvo sreo sa ruskim ambasadorom: Hteo da pokaže da i Srbija ima saveznike, September 26, 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ruski-ambasador-vucic-banjska-sukob/>

<sup>95</sup> Danas, Kako ruski ambasador vidi tragediju u Banjskoj i scenario dešavanja u UN?.

### III. Russia's interests in the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue

From the official discourse and diplomatic actions of Moscow, it is not easy to discern what the Russian Federation really wants from the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. However, as indicated in the previous section, Moscow is clear on what it does not want from the dialogue process in the Brussels. Namely, the Russian Federation does not want the process of dialogue to be completed successfully according to the designs of the West. This would imply closing the most acute remaining problem of the dissolution of Former Yugoslavia, without Russia's direct involvement as part of the "international efforts." Three implications would transpire for the Russian Federation from such a scenario. First, this would be a clear demonstration of the Russia's diminished influence in the world affairs. Second, this would lead to the consolidation of Kosovo's statehood and regional security. Third, closing of problems with Kosovo would be a big boost for Serbia's orientation towards the West and, consequently, for abandoning of the Russian orbit where Serbia currently navigates.

The specific political objectives of Russian Federation *vis-à-vis* Kosovo-Serbia dialogue are intertwined and four-folded: *First*, to undermine Kosovo's statehood, which means to undo the effects of Ahtisaari Plan, and the Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legality of proclamation of independence of Kosovo. *Second*, to discredit Western policies towards the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and to boost as much as possible the role of UN. This implies by default regaining active role of Moscow in this process. *Third*, to strengthen Russia's role in the Balkans, particularly through maintaining Russian influence in Serbia, and among anti-Western actors in the region. *Fourth*, to garner benefits in Ukraine and Georgia, through a transactionist policies whereby Kosovo is used as a bargaining chip (this aspect shall be treated separately).

In this light, Moscow's official narrative is that the issue of status of Kosovo remains an unresolved conflict, which can be solved only through negotiations between Prishtina and Belgrade based on a solution acceptable for Serbia.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, notwithstanding the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, which confirmed that the proclamation of independence of Kosovo was not in contradiction with the UNSC Resolution 1244, Moscow portrays an opposite interpretation, claiming that by virtue of this Resolution Kosovo continues

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<sup>96</sup> Russian MFA, Transcript of Remarks and Response to Media Questions by Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at Joint Press Conference with Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremic, Moscow, July 17, 2008. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/1590415](https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1590415).



to be a territory under UN administration and with an unresolved final status.<sup>97</sup> This position has been clearly articulated by the Foreign Minister Lavrov, as highlighted in the previous section. Thus, few weeks after the beginning of the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia in Brussels, Lavrov stated that, “Russia supports the position of Serbia, which is based on the international legal realities confirmed in UN Security Council Resolution 1244. It is from this vantage point that we approach the dialogue that was begun between Belgrade and Pristina in accordance with the UN General Assembly Resolution adopted in September 2010. We are also in favor of nobody trying to belittle the role which pursuant to this resolution is allotted to the UN Mission in Kosovo.”<sup>98</sup>

Within this strategy, Russia’s support for Serbia on the Kosovo case has been consistent and unconditional. Serbia is not only the traditional ally of Russia, but it is the most important – if not the sole – hope that Moscow will have its nose in the Balkans. As the Foreign Minister Lavrov reassured its Serbian counterpart during his visit to Moscow in July 2008, “Russia will support any decision, any solution which will be acceptable to Belgrade. This position of ours is fundamental and remains in force.”<sup>99</sup>

On the other hand, another objective of Russia is to discredit the role of EU and US in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue process and to (re)claim a more prominent role for the UN Security Council – where it has a veto power. As emphasized above, Moscow lost any formal leverage over this process in 2010, when, in the wake of the ICJ Opinion, the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia was transferred under the EU’s umbrella. Since the beginning of war in Kosovo, in 1998 and up to the proclamation of Kosovo’s independence, in 2008, Russia has been part of the international efforts towards the Kosovo crisis. By taking openly one-sided position, Russia has sidelined itself from collective international actions in all decisive moments, throughout the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. Yet, as Dimitar Bechev rightly emphasized and as highlighted in the preceding part, more than once, Russia was forced to compromise and bandwagon with the West – for example, by authorizing *ex post* Western interventions at the UN Security Council

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<sup>97</sup> Russian MFA, Comment by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation in Relation to the Adoption by UN General Assembly of a Resolution on the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Kosovo, Moscow, September 10, 2010. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1597928/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1597928/?lang=en).

<sup>98</sup> Russian MFA, Remarks and Replies by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic, Belgrade, April 19, 2011. Available at: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1701838](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1701838).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

and joining NATO peacekeeping missions such as IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo.<sup>100</sup>

It remains to be seen whether this history will be repeated in the context of the current dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia. Russia has followed ambivalent attitude towards this process. As Lance Davies underlines, Moscow has argued constantly that only Security Council has “procedural authority to shape a negotiated outcome that upholds key principles of international law and safeguards Moscow’s voice in decision making.”<sup>101</sup> Vladimir Putin has occasionally expressed Moscow’s position, by underlining that Russia supports “a viable and mutually acceptable solution from Kosovo-Serbia dialogue should be based on Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council.”<sup>102</sup> Along these lines, in an interview with the Serbian media, in 2018, Foreign Minister Lavrov lamented that “Nobody cancelled UN Security Council Resolution 1244. This should be the starting point.”<sup>103</sup> This has been the deliberative position of the Russian Federation, expressed consistently, particularly during the periodic meetings of the Security Council on Kosovo. Russia deliberately avoids mentioning the ICJ Opinion, which confirmed expressively that the proclamation of independence of Kosovo was not in contradiction with the UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

In parallel to emphasizing the purported role of the UN as a final arbiter in the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia, Russia has blamed the West for the setback in the dialogue. The messages of support for breakthroughs and progress in this process were rare and lukewarm. Attempts to portray the EU as incapable to lead the dialogue process and the West as one-sided, were expressed by Moscow in many occasions, particularly in reaction to important developments in the dialogue or in relation to Kosovo. Lately, when the Serbian opposition started peaceful street protests against alleged massive electoral fraud by Aleksandar Vučić, in December 2023, Russian Federation accused the West for staging a coup against the government in Belgrade. Minister Lavrov and Russian Ambassador to Serbia qualified this

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<sup>100</sup> Russian MFA, Comment by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation in Relation to the Adoption by UN General Assembly of a Resolution on the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Kosovo, Moscow, September 10, 2010. Available at:

[https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1597928/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1597928/?lang=en).

<sup>101</sup> Davies, Lance.2021. “A hybrid offensive in the Balkans? Russia and the EU-led Kosovo-Serb negotiations,” *European Security*, Vol.31(1), 2022, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Kremlin, Press statements following Russian-Serbian talks, December 2017. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/56418>.

<sup>103</sup> Russian MFA, Interview of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, for the Serbian news agency Beta, February 2018. Available at: [https://veleposlanistvorusije.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/foreign\\_minister\\_sergey\\_lavrov\\_s\\_interview\\_with\\_serbian\\_information\\_agency\\_beta](https://veleposlanistvorusije.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/foreign_minister_sergey_lavrov_s_interview_with_serbian_information_agency_beta).

event as punishment of the West against Serbia, “for refusing to recognize Kosovo and to impose sanction on Russia.”<sup>104</sup>

Advancing its posture in the Balkans is another dimension of Russia’s approach towards the conflicting relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Moscow perceives Balkans as an important element of the grand picture of its relations with the West, particularly with the US. Therefore, in a historical perspective, whether Moscow acted as a spoiler or partner in the Western efforts in the Balkans has varied. This depended largely on Russia’s general relations with the Western countries at particular point in time and, within this prism, whether their interests converged or conflicted in the Balkans.

Russia is aware that it cannot assert prominent role in the Western Balkans, in a way in which it will shape the course of events. It can do so only in partnership with the US and European countries. In absence of such a common agenda, the only alternative for Moscow is to disrupt the Western agendas in the Western Balkans.

Within this general milieu, the major geopolitical objective of the Russian Federation is to delay and obstruct the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic structures in the Western Balkans. Moscow has never been at ease with the idea of Balkans anchoring firmly in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Consequently, the major objective of Russia has been to obstruct as much as possible the integration of the Western Balkans countries in the Euro-Atlantic structures, particularly in the NATO.

As Maksim Samorukov of Carnegie Moscow Center succinctly observes, although Russia opposes overtly only NATO expansion in the Balkans, it practically objects to the EU enlargement in this region as well. NATO expansion is seen as a direct threat primarily because of Moscow’s fear that once the entire Balkans is included in NATO structures, the path will be set for the Alliance to expand towards the former Soviet space, which means Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. On the other hand, Russia does not officially oppose the inclusion of Balkans in the EU, but in fact it has interests to delay and obstruct this process as much as possible, particularly with regards to Serbia. Moscow is aware that once Serbia is integrated within the EU, Belgrade has to align its foreign policy with the EU – which, among other things, means

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<sup>104</sup> Interview of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’ with Sputnik and Russia 2, quoted in N1info.rs, December, 2023. Available at: [Lavrov: West tried to make Serbia choose between sanctions on Russia, coup d’état \(n1info.rs\)](https://n1info.rs/en/serbia-foreign-policy-lavrov).

imposing sanctions on Russia, imposing visa regime for the Russian citizens, cutting intensive military and security cooperation with Russia.<sup>105</sup>

Serbia and nationalist Serbian political forces in the region are the most valuable leverage that Russia has to assert influence in the Western Balkans and to pursue its objectives of disrupting NATO's firm grip over the region. It has to be mentioned that the traditional narrative that explains the strategic relation between Serbia and Russia through ethno-religious kinship, or historical factors, is flawed. Indeed, neither in historical records, nor in religious terms, Russia is closer with Serbia than with the other Slavic Orthodox countries of the Balkans, such as Bulgaria, Montenegro or Macedonia. All these countries are part of NATO and yet have normal relations with Russia. They never put themselves into any crossroad between Russia and the West, in the way that Serbia does. Hence, the bond between Serbia and Russia is primarily reflection of the fact that Serbia enjoyed unwavering and unconditional support from Moscow throughout the bloody wars in Former Yugoslavia. That support of Russia was unconditional but not for free of charge. Namely, Serbia has been perceived by Moscow as a "roadblock" for Western expansion in the Balkans. Alexander Dugin, the influential Russian far-right political philosopher, who is often labeled as "Putin's brain," praised Serbia for "awakening the multipolar world" by fighting against NATO. He gave this statement while visiting the exhibition dedicated to this war, called "Defence 78," in a company with the former Chief of Intelligence of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin.<sup>106</sup> Actually, Serbia has neither capacity, nor ambition, for setting in motion any kind of multipolar world. Yet, Serbia has proven to have the will and the capacity to serve as Russia's instrument towards the goal of disturbing Euro-Atlantic enlargement in the Balkans. Serbia does so either through instigating instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo, or through maintaining close military, political and economic cooperation with Moscow. In appearance, Serbia is pursuing a "multi-vector" foreign policy. Yet, in reality Belgrade clearly leans towards Moscow, while, during the accession talks with Serbia, that begun in 2013, the EU has opened 21 out of 35 chapters.<sup>107</sup> Consequently, as already emphasized, the EU forfeited an indispensable leverage over Serbia's foreign policy direction.

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<sup>105</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, debate on U.S.-Russia Competition in the Western Balkans, Washington, March 2020. Available at: [U.S.-Russia Competition in the Western Balkans \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U.S.-Russia-Competition-in-the-Western-Balkans).

<sup>106</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, Posting of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, November 2019. Available at: <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/tekst/14739/profesor-dugin-srbi-su-1999-probudili-mnogopolarni-svet-14739>.

<sup>107</sup> EU in Serbia, Chapters Opened and Closed. Available at: <https://europa.rs/chapters-opened-and-closed/?lang=en>.

### *Attempts by Russia to draw parallels between Kosovo with Ukraine and Georgia*

The military aggression against Ukraine produced two effects for Russia's policies towards Kosovo. *First*, Russia lost any interest of cooperating with the West on the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and became more disruptive in the region. This aspect has been analyzed above. *Second* aspect is reinvigoration by Moscow of "Kosovo precedent," to justify, once again, its aggressive war against Ukraine. Putin referred to the case of Kosovo, first in illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and then again for justifying the whole-scale military aggression in Ukraine and the recognition of independence of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, in February 2022 (it had also done so for justifying the annexation wars against Georgia in 2008). In justifying the decision to declare the independence of Crimea, in March 2014, which subsequently "integrated" with Russia, the Crimean Parliament<sup>108</sup> and their master in Moscow<sup>109</sup> referred to the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on Kosovo.

In 2022, Putin again tried to create another "Kosovo precedent" with the aim to justify its "special military operation" – a designation that Russia gave to its total military aggression against Ukraine. "The republics of Donbas had the same right to declare their sovereignty, as Kosovo, since the precedent was set. Right? Do you agree with this?" Putin asked cynically these accusatory questions to the apologetic UN Secretary General, Antonio Gutierrez, during a meeting in Moscow, on April 25, 2022.<sup>110</sup>

Russia's position and arguments on this issue have been confusing and inconsistent. This aspect has been underscored in the preceding section of this analysis. Occasionally, Russia tried to draw parallels between Kosovo with Crimea, Eastern Ukraine and the Russian-occupied territories in Georgia. Occasionally, Moscow claimed that these situations are different. Moscow tried to identify difference between Kosovo and Crimea by arguing that "in Crimea, no prior resolution had been passed by the Security Council to provide the basis for a specific

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<sup>108</sup> Russia Today, Crimea Parliament declares Independence from Ukraine ahead of Referendum, March, 11 2014. Available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-parliament-independence-ukraine-086/>.

<sup>109</sup> Kremlin, Address by the President of the Russian Federation, March 18, 2014. Available at: [eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889](http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889).

<sup>110</sup> Russian News Agency TASS, Putin cites precedent of Kosovo in explaining recognition of DPR, LPR, April 2022. Available at: [https://tass.com/politics/1443661?utm\\_source=bing.com&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=bing.com&utm\\_referrer=bing.com](https://tass.com/politics/1443661?utm_source=bing.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=bing.com&utm_referrer=bing.com).

legal solution. Hence, a referendum based on the free expression of Crimea's residents was the obvious legal alternative.”<sup>111</sup>

Indeed, attempts to draw parallels between Kosovo and the separatist regions of Ukraine occupied by Russia are misleading and manipulative. Kosovo was a constitutive federal unit of the Yugoslav Federation – a country that has dissolved. In 1999, NATO intervened to stop the unfolding genocide of Belgrade against the people of Kosovo and this intervention was preceded by several UNSC resolutions that were adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In contrast to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO troops entered Kosovo with the authorization of the UNSC Resolution 1244, adopted under the provisions of the Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The Resolution 1244 put Kosovo under the international administration and Kosovo declared its independence after eight years of UN Administration and around three years of an internationally-led process for determining Kosovo's final status. The proclamation of independence of Kosovo was based on the proposal put forward by the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General, Martti Ahtisaari. On July 22, 2010, the International Court of Justice issued an Advisory Opinion confirming that the adoption of the declaration of independence of Kosovo was in conformity with international law.

None of these conditions are met in the territories of Ukraine (and Georgia) occupied by the Russian Federation. The self-proclaimed independence and subsequent annexation of Crimea, and the self-proclaimed declarations of independence of Donetsk and Luhansk were direct outcome of the aggressions that the Russian Federation committed against Ukraine, in 2014 and 2022. This illegality of Russia's actions against Ukraine and of the separatism in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk are confirmed by several resolutions of the UN General Assembly.

Yet, the real intentions of Moscow are not to build arguments but to have bargaining chips. Tradeoffs are typical mode of functioning of the transactionist strategy that Moscow pursues vigorously towards Kosovo.

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<sup>111</sup> Russian MFA, Media interview. May 15, 2015. Available at: [http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset\\_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/1279577](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/rs/-/asset_publisher/GLz7aPgDnSfP/content/id/1279577).

#### **IV. Security dimension, military cooperation and economic interests of Russia in the region**

Security aspect of Russia's involvement: The open ethnic issues in the Western Balkans presents primarily a security problem for the Euro-Atlantic community. Conflicting relations between Kosovo and Serbia, secessionist policies of the Serb entity in Bosnia and the deep polarization between the pro and anti-Western camps in Montenegro are the most acute security problems in the Euro-Atlantic backyard. Hence, Western Balkans presents the only terrain where Moscow can play a direct influence in the (in)security dynamics of the West.

In this milieu, Russian Federation has two direct interests: first, to prevent stabilization of the region within the Euro-Atlantic parameters. Second, to strengthen Moscow's overall influence over its proxies in the region, and particularly over Serbia.

As to the first goal, stability of the Western Balkans brings this region closer to the Western structures and this goes contrary to Moscow's interests. Moscow has exploited every major political crisis in the region – in addition to Kosovo – to accuse the West and to strengthen Russian influence in the region – particularly among the Serbs. Thus, in 2015 massive protests erupted in Macedonia in 2015, following the publication of audio-recordings revealing corruption scandals of the former government of Nikola Gruevski – an authoritarian leader with the pro-Moscow's leaning. Russian Federation accused the West for staging yet another “colored revolution against legitimate authorities” and “conspiring to destabilize the Balkans.”<sup>112</sup> Even more dangerous was the scenario that was played in Montenegro throughout 2015-2016. Initially, Russia supported the anti-government protests in October 2015, as thousands rallied in the capital Podgorica against NATO membership. One year later, in October 2016, on the eve of the parliamentary elections, authorities announced that they had foiled a plot to overthrow the government, assassinate Prime Minister Milo Djukanović and derail Montenegro's entry into the Atlantic Alliance. According the Prosecution, alleged conspiracy was led by security officers from Serbia, instructed by the GRU, Russia's military intelligence, and in contact with the anti-NATO opposition of Montenegro.<sup>113</sup> Since April 2022, when the three-decade old rule of pro-Western leader Milo Djukanović came to an end, Montenegro entered a period of deep political instability. Most importantly, the anti-Western

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<sup>112</sup> Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (ed.), “The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries,” *South East European Studies*, Vol. 20, 2009, p. 197.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

political bloc has been emboldened, while the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro has continued its political activities which are inherently anti-independence of Montenegro. The latest government of Montenegro, created in October 31, 2023, has received the backing of the pro-Russian political parties and, in return, the staunchly anti-NATO politician Andrija Mandić was elected as speaker of the Parliament. Despite the assurance of the new Prime Minister Miloško Spajić that Montenegro's pro-EU and NATO commitments remain unwavering, there is good reason to fear the unpredictable trajectory of this country. Russia has persistently tried to exhibit malign influence in Montenegro, through propaganda, support for the pro-Serbian political forces and Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro – the latter has been instrumental particularly in mobilizing support behind the ideology of Orthodox pan-Slavism under Russian leadership.<sup>114</sup>

The subversive activities of Russia are more vivid in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Moscow has provided unwavering support to the secessionist policies of Serbian nationalist leader, Milorad Dodik, aiming to destroy the functionality of the Bosnian state.<sup>115</sup> Lately, on January 9, 2024, *Republika Srpska* has organized a military-type of parade to celebrate the day of this entity – notwithstanding the previous decision of the Constitutional Court that banned the celebration of this day as unconstitutional. What is more, the leader of the Serbs of Bosnia, Milorad Dodik, has continued his provocative rhetoric vowing once again to work for disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>116</sup> It should be reminded that Bosnia and Herzegovina is candidate country for the EU membership since December 2022 and in December 2023 the European Council has even decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a member of the Partnership for Peace programme with NATO since 2006, and in 2010 it was invited to join the Membership Action Plan.

Military and security cooperation between Russia and Serbia: Another instrument of Russian influence in the regional stability is related to its close military and security cooperation with Serbia. After the outbreak of the opposition protests in Serbia over serious allegations for

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<sup>114</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies, Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics, May 14, 2019. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro-weaponization-and-exploitation-history-religion-and-economics> .

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Balkan Insight, Defiant Bosnian Serbs Celebrate Banned Holiday, Honour Hungary's Orban, January 9, 2024. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/09/defiant-bosnian-serbs-celebrate-banned-holiday-honour-hungarys-orban/>.



electoral fraud, in December 2023, Prime Minister Brnabić gave credit to Russian secret services for informing the Serbian authorities for the “preparation of the unrest from the foreign (i.e., Western) intelligence services.” This was reiterated by President Vučić who expressed gratitude to the foreign intelligence – alluding on Russian secret service – and accused “one Western country for preparing a Maidan scenario in Serbia.” Next days, pro-regime media in Serbia accused openly Germany for plotting to stage a Maidan-type of scenario against the regime of Vučić – this accusation was sternly denied by Berlin.<sup>117</sup> This episode confirmed, once again, the close cooperation of the intelligence services of Russian Federation and Serbia – even following the resignation of the staunchly pro-Russian former head of the intelligence service of Serbia, Aleksander Vulin.

On the other hand, Serbia and Russia have experience constant increase of their military cooperation, which has taken place in three forms. First, since 2011, Russia operates a “humanitarian base” in the city of Niš in Serbia (some 100 km close to Kosovo border). It does not take deep analysis to understand that the last thing that Kremlin would be invested in is to conduct humanitarian operations in the Balkans! It is widely believed that this base is used for spying activities, primarily against NATO operations in the region.<sup>118</sup>

The second form of close military cooperation between the Russian Federation and Serbia is through the arms procurement contracts and donations. This form of cooperation has increased progressively since 2017 and this included, among others, donation by Russia to Serbia of four MI-35 helicopters and thirty armored reconnaissance helicopters, BRDM-2MS vehicles, thirty T-72S tanks; purchase of six air defense systems, Kornet portable anti-tank guided missile.<sup>119</sup>

The third form of military cooperation between the Russian Federation and Serbia is through frequent joint military exercises. Since 2014, the joint military exercise between Russia and Serbia were common, sometimes involving other Russian proxy, namely Belarus. Thus, in 2014 the joint military drill called “SREM-2014,” was held in Nikinci, close to Belgrade. It was estimated that 197 Serbian and 207 Russian armed forces participated in this exercise, mostly paratroopers, during which parachute descent of transport vehicles was demonstrated,

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<sup>117</sup> European Western Balkans, The narrative of the “new Maidan,” an old tool of Serbian authorities to discredit anti-regime protests, December 28, 2023. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/12/28/the-narrative-of-the-new-maidan-an-old-tool-of-serbian-authorities-to-discredit-anti-regime-protests/>.

<sup>118</sup> Euroactive, Russia opens “humanitarian” base in Serbia, 18 October 2011. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-opens-humanitarian-base-in-serbia/>.

<sup>119</sup> See, Nebojša Vuković. “Војна сарадња Србије и Русије – стање и перспективе,” *Међународна политика* (“Military Cooperation Between Serbia and Russia – Situation and Perspectives”), 2023 (1187), pp: 59-80.

with participation of different models of airplanes and helicopters.<sup>120</sup> Since 2015, the trilateral military exercises with suggestive name “Slavic Brotherhood” have been organized regularly. In addition to the Armed Forces of Serbia and Russia, members of the armed forces of Belarus also participate in this military exercise. Every year, the host of these drills has been a different country, and in 2016 and 2019 these drills were organized in the territory of Serbia. Serbia was absent from the exercise in 2020, due to a strong political pressure from the West, but the next year, Serbia again participated in this joint military exercises with Russia and Belarus. As announced on the website of the Serbian Ministry of Defense, “it is a tactical exercise of special units with live shooting.”<sup>121</sup> In the last exercise from 2021, Serbia was represented by about 100 soldiers, over 300 were from Belarus, and about 500 soldiers of the Russian Federation. Also, joint Russian-Serbian exercises have many years of tradition BARS exercises (Brotherhood of Airmen of Russia and Serbia), i.e. flight tactical exercises in which Russian and Serbian pilots exchanged experience and knowledge in the field of combat use of aircrafts.<sup>122</sup> In the same year, the armed forces of Russia and Serbia have completed the joint military air defense exercise called “Slavic Shield 2021.”<sup>123</sup>

Overall, it is estimated that, when it comes to joint activities, the military cooperation between Serbia and the Russian Federation grew progressively year after year, so that in 2021 there were around 90 military-related activities that were realized.<sup>124</sup>

Economic interests of Russia in the Balkans: Russia does not have any particular economic interest in Kosovo, but it does so in Serbia, as well as in other countries in the region. Business and politics, oligarchs and politicians are intertwined in Russia. Russian investments came in many forms, namely through public companies, such as Gazprom and Lukoil, or private companies, which are usually owned by oligarchs with close links to Kremlin. Also, Russian investments in the Balkans have often been channeled through third countries. One such prominent example is Russian mining company Solway, which operates in North Macedonia and which is registered in Switzerland. As a general approach, Russian investments have

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<sup>120</sup> Radio Free Europe, Belgrade Plays Down Joint Military Exercise With Russia, November 14, 2014. Available at:

<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-plays-down-russia-military-exercise/26692231.html>.

<sup>121</sup> Vuković, *op.cit.*

<sup>122</sup> Ministry of Defence of Republic of Serbia, International Flight-Tactical Exercise “BARS 2021,” October 11, 2021. Available at: <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/17931/medjunarodna-letno-takticka-vezba-bars-2021-17931>.

<sup>123</sup> Airforce Technology, Russia and Serbia conclude Slavic Shield joint air defence exercise, October 19, 2021, Available at: <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/russia-serbia-conclude-slavic-shield-exercise/?cf-view>

<sup>124</sup> Vuković, *op.cit.*

tended to concentrate in strategic sectors, such as energy, oil and gas, real estate.<sup>125</sup> Lukoil, for example, is present in Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro, and Russia accounts for the bulk of deliveries of gas to Bosnia, Serbia and North Macedonia, and is a significant supplier of crude oil to Serbia.<sup>126</sup> According to figures of the European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators, Russia's energy influence is greatest in Serbia, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it supplies close to 100 % of gas needs and owns several assets, such as the Lukoil petrolstations network.<sup>127</sup>

There are many concrete examples of interrelation of economic investments with political agendas. Thus, the Serbian Petroleum Industry (NIS), from 2022 has Gazprom as its major shareholder (with 50%). This company has made investments and sponsorship of the pro-Kremlin media, civil society and other social segments in Serbia.<sup>128</sup> These economic activities of the Russian state-owned companies takes place side-to-side with the active presence in Serbia of the Russian media, such as Sputnik. The national gas company, Srbijagas, has long been considered as the preserve of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), which is the Milošević's party and a trustable coalition partner of Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).<sup>129</sup> Russia is even more active with economic activities in the *Republika Srpska*, in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Benefiting from strong connections with the pro-Russian leadership of this entity, Russia is now the largest investor in the *Republika Srpska* (€547 million over the period 2005–2016). Five Russian-owned companies (energy and banking) account for fully 42 percent of the revenue of all foreign business.<sup>130</sup> On the other hand, economic sanctions imposed against Russia, in reaction to aggressive war in Ukraine, have not inhibited close economic cooperation between Serbia and Russia. Quite the opposite. One of the examples took place on 29 May 2022 – at the time when the EU was pressing for sweeping bans on Russian energy – the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, announced that his country had signed an agreement on

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<sup>125</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies and Center for the Study of Democracy, *Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington DC, October 13, 2016. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/kremlin-playbook>.

<sup>126</sup> Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (ed.), "The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries," *South East European Studies*, Vol. 20, 2009, p. 195.

<sup>127</sup> European Parliament, *Russia and the Western Balkans Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference*, June, 2023. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747096\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).

<sup>128</sup> Jovana Lazić Knežević and Norman M. Naimark, "Serbia, Russia, and the New Great Game: After twenty years of uneasy peace in the Balkans, Belgrade is moving closer to Europe--but also displaying Russian-style autocracy while flirting with China," *Hoover Digest*, 2020(4).

<sup>129</sup> Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, *op. cit.* p. 196.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

a new 3-year gas contract with Russia.<sup>131</sup> Another important figure is given by the Russian newspaper *Komercant*, according to which at the end of 2023, there were nine thousand Russian companies registered in Serbia (from six thousand that were registered in 2022).<sup>132</sup> This was just one segment of the wider and intensive cooperation that is taking place between Russian Federation and Serbia since the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

## V. Implications for Kosovo's integration prospects in international organizations

Full integration of Kosovo into international system is determinant for the stability of this country and, as such, is indispensable for successful conclusion of the dialogue process between Kosovo and Serbia. The Brussels Agreement of February 27, 2023 envisages that Kosovo and Serbia mutually acknowledge that non can serve as the representative of the other in the international arena, and that Serbia will not oppose Kosovo's potential membership in any international organization.<sup>133</sup> While Belgrade has concurred with this formulation, as described above, it maintains its opposition to Kosovo's membership to the United Nations and UN Agencies.

This stance also aligns with Russian interests, as it would be uncomfortable for Russia to object to Kosovo's UN membership if Serbia were to acquiesce. Nevertheless, even in the absence of Serbian opposition, it cannot be presumed that Russian Federation would refrain from exercising a veto at the UN Security Council, which is a necessary procedural step for Kosovo's membership in the UN.<sup>134</sup> The primary rationale lies in the Kremlin's inclination to factor Kosovo's membership into Russia's interests in its near neighborhood, namely in Crimea, as well as other areas in Ukraine and Georgia that are unlawfully recognized by Russia. The secondary consideration is that Kosovo's accession to the UN would inherently trigger a revision of the UNSC Resolution 1244, and, in conjunction with the conclusion of the UN

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<sup>131</sup> Briefing of the European Parliament, *op.cit.*

<sup>132</sup> Danas, Rusi sve aktivniji u otvaeanju firmi po Srbiju, January 5, 2024. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/komersant-srbija-firme-rusija>.

<sup>133</sup> European Union External Action Service, Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, February 27, 2023, Brussels. Available at: [https://www.eas.europa.eu/eas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia\\_en](https://www.eas.europa.eu/eas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en).

<sup>134</sup> UN Charter, Chapter II, Article 4.2. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-2>.

Interim Administration Mission, it may consequently impact the mandate of KFOR (Kosovo Force).<sup>135</sup> Moreover, this implies that without explicit recognition from Serbia, Russia would forfeit its influence over Kosovo and, consequently, its leverage on Belgrade. This loss would significantly curtail Russia's destabilizing capabilities in the Balkans. Thus, under the prevailing circumstances, which hinge on epilogue of the war in Ukraine and the destiny of Putin's regime, membership of Kosovo in the United Nations is highly infeasible. Furthermore, owing to the consensus-based decision-making structure within the OSCE, for analogous reasons, Russia will block any attempt by Kosovo to pursue membership in this organization, before attaining United Nations membership. Hence, Kosovo's participation in international organizations, prior to obtaining UN membership, will be confined to entities where Russia lacks veto power, including UN Agencies, Interpol, and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

On the other hand, given that NATO<sup>136</sup> and European Union<sup>137</sup> membership does not necessitate United Nations membership, Russia holds no decision making influence over these two organizations, both of existential significance for Kosovo. However, Kosovo's integration process into NATO is impeded by the non-recognition of Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. Additionally, Cyprus, along with the mentioned countries, hinders Kosovo's integration into the European Union. The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the Declaration of Independence of Kosovo unequivocally stated that it did not violate international law. However, with the exception of Greece, other non-recognizing states argue that the declaration of independence was in breach of international law due to the absence of Serbia's consent and the lack of authorization by the UN Security Council.<sup>138</sup>

Ironically, the positions of these EU countries that still do not recognize Kosovo's independence denies Kosovo the prospect of NATO and EU membership. Consequently, this fact grants Russia a considerable influence in the EU-facilitated dialogue process and

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<sup>135</sup> UN Security Council: Resolution 1244 (1999), Annex 2. Available at: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1244>.

<sup>136</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty does not mandate UN membership for its signatories. Italy and Portugal, as founding countries of NATO, were not members of the UN until the end of the year 1955, meanwhile, the Western Germany, which joined NATO in the year 1954, was not member of the UN until the year 1973.

<sup>137</sup> Lisbon Treaty does not require UN membership for its members, see: Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union. Available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_1&format=PDF).

<sup>138</sup> For example see: Edward Joseph at al, From Crisis to Convergence: A Strategy to Tackle Instability in the Balkans, January 2022, Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/SAIS%20FPI%2C%20WWICS%20Report%2C%20From%20Crisis%20to%20Convergence%2C%20Strategy%20to%20Tackle%20Balkans%20Instability.pdf>

contributes to destabilizing the situation in the region. The dependency of Kosovo's NATO and EU membership prospects on Serbia's and/or Russia's consent for Kosovo's independence provides Russia with significant leverage over Serbia, hindering progress toward full normalization of relations with Kosovo. Given these circumstances, it is challenging to envision the EU successfully facilitating a legally binding agreement between Kosovo and Serbia that would pave the way for Kosovo's integration into NATO and the EU, as this contradicts the vital interests of the Moscow's in the Balkans. Russia's influence in the dialogue will diminish when Kosovo attains candidate status for the EU membership and a NATO membership plan. At that point, the relevance of Serbia's recognition of Kosovo or of Russia's consent for Kosovo's UN membership will diminish. This, however, is contingent on a shift in the current positions held by the five EU non-recognizers.

## **VI. Conclusion and key findings**

Since the nineteenth century, Balkans has been a geopolitical terrain of interplay of interests between Russia and the Western powers. In some crucial political moments, interests of Russia concurred with the Western powers – or at least with some of them – and in some others they clashed.

The process of dissolution of former Yugoslavia and, within this context, the issue of conflict between Kosovo and Serbia is not different. Yet, perhaps for the bad fortune of all sides, for most parts of the late 1990s and up to the current moment, Russia has perceived the West (i.e., the US and major European countries) as the rival in the Balkans. Thus, since the outbreak of the war in Kosovo, in 1998-1999 and until today, Kosovo has become a mirror featuring the declining influence of Russia in the Balkans and in international arena in general.

As outlined in this paper, the major source of animosity of the Russian Federation with the West in the post-Cold War period is the eastward expansion of the Euro-Atlantic structures – particularly NATO. Russia perceives NATO through a Cold War lenses and is in the permanent quest to be recognized as a superpower. Within this paradigm, Russia strives to have an outpost of its interests in the Balkans, which means having a pawn within the Euro-Atlantic terrain. For this purpose, Russia relies heavily on exploiting mainly Serbian nationalism and Orthodox pan-Slavic ideology. In Moscow's geopolitical calculator, Balkans serves two purposes: first,

to hit the West at its weakest link in the Euro-Atlantic backyard and, simultaneously, to solidify its hegemonic ambitions in the “near abroad.” However, Kosovo and Ukraine have demonstrated that Russia’s efforts to achieve its ambition for a global superpowers status that balances the West are just an unrealistic endeavor.

***Key findings:***

The major finding highlighted in this paper is that Russia has not followed a consistent regarding Kosovo – Serbia dispute. Rather, its position has varied and fluctuated owing to the evolving context of Russia’s relations with the West.

In a concrete term, there are eight major findings that explain the position of the Russian Federation throughout the dissolution of Yugoslavia, including the process of dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia that is taking place within the EU umbrella and with active US support:

*First*, during the Yeltsin era, the approach of Russia towards the crisis in Former Yugoslavia in general, including Kosovo, reflected Moscow’s perplexities with regards to Russia’s position in the profoundly new international setting emerging with the ending of Cold War. Russia’s policies towards the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, including Kosovo, during this period were shaped by two factors: first, Russia’s general relations with the West; second, the worldviews of the key foreign policy decision-makers in Moscow (i.e., Kozyrev v. Primakov).

*Second*, with the outbreak of the war in Kosovo, Russia was part of all major international efforts to solve the crisis. Thus, Russia supported three UNSC resolutions on Kosovo, adopted under Chapter VII of the Charter, but refused to allow the Security Council to explicitly authorize NATO intervention to stop mass atrocities in Kosovo. With the ending of war in Kosovo, in June 1999, Russia voted in favor of the UNSC Resolution that provided for withdrawal of the entire state and security apparatus of FRY/Serbia from Kosovo and placed Kosovo under international administration (including NATO-led peace enforcement mission).

*Third*, Russia did not accept ultimate outcomes of international peace efforts on Kosovo, manly in reaction to its general discontent with the West. Thus, Russia played key role within the Contact Group during the Rambouillet Conference, in February 1999. Yet, Russia withdrew its support to the Rambouillet Accords, by not participating in the signing ceremony in Paris. The same scenario was repeated during the Vienna talks on the final status of Kosovo, in 2006-2007. Russia was an active part of this process but refused in the last moment to endorse in the

UNSC the proposal for the status settlement of Kosovo, presented by the UN Envoy, Martti Ahtisaari.

*Fourth*, while being outside of the negotiation table, in the EU-facilitated dialogue that started in March 2011, the major goal of the Russian Federation has been to prevent and obstruct the successful conclusion of the dialogue process, by attempting to discredit the EU and the West, and to reclaim that role for the UNSC.

*Fifth*, Moscow does not see the process of dialogue in isolation from its general geopolitical goals in the Balkans – particularly from that of keeping Serbia and the Serbs within the Russian orbit and obstructing EU and NATO expansion in the region. Despite being in the process of negotiating EU membership, has refused to align its foreign policy with that of the EU in relation to Russia.

*Sixth*, the war in Ukraine has revealed the depth of relations of political, security and economic relations between Russia and Serbia, which have been further solidified with the coming into power of the coalition of Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party and Dačić's Socialist Party in 2012. Russia strives to use the Kosovo case, namely NATO's 1999 intervention and the proclamation of independence in 2008, as bargaining chips for garnering benefits in Ukraine and Georgia, to legitimize its annexation wars.

*Seventh*, the lack of unanimity within the Euro-Atlantic Community towards Kosovo – with five EU countries still not recognizing Kosovo's independence – has created more maneuvering space for Russia to obstruct Western efforts and to engage persistently in undermining Kosovo's statehood and destabilizing the region. This space is created by the fact that for the integration of Kosovo in the EU and NATO, prior membership in the UN is not necessary, where Russia holds a veto power in the Security Council.

*Eighth*, an important leverage for Russia to impact the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue is its power to block Kosovo's membership in the UN and OSCE – Kosovo's unimpeded membership in international organizations is one of the key pillars of the Brussels/Ohrid agreements of 2023.