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Serbia holds a position few others in Europe can match – but is yet to find how to use it

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'Serbia certainly holds a position that few other states in Europe can match: it is a country that is seeking EU membership, and yet also has long standing close ties to Russia. However, it needs to be clear about how best it can leverage this to bring about meaningful results,' LSEE's James Ker-Lindsay argues in an interview with the Serbian weekly Svedok. In a conversation with journalist and LSE student Milan Dinic, he discusses the country's relationship with Kosovo, Russia, and the European Union.



Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, in the 1st row, in the centre, leaving the residency of the Serbian Prime Minister

As the head of the OSCE, how will Serbia, which is itself doing all it can to enter the EU and not to recognize the self-proclaimed Albanian state in Kosovo, manage to balance between Russia and the West in the Ukraine crisis?

In some ways, Serbia's chairmanship of the OSCE has come at an ideal moment. It has certainly been facing strong pressure to align its positions with the EU. This has obviously divided the country and even the government, which sees an almost equal split between those who support EU integration and those who hold pro-Russian sympathies (54% and 52 per cent according to a recent poll). The OSCE chairmanship offers an opportunity to take a more neutral line for the year ahead.

However, Serbia must also be clear about what this means. While it may be able to avoid adopting EU sanctions on Russia, it must also be careful not to be seen to be trying to capitalize on the fact that sanctions have been put in place and expand its business ties with Moscow. If it wishes to be neutral, it must really behave in a truly neutral manner.

Would you have any advice which strategy should Serbia use the chairmanship of the OSCE for achieving its goals? Which are the assets Serbia has, if any?

Serbia certainly holds a position that few other states in Europe can match. It is a country that is seeking EU membership, and yet also has long standing close ties to Russia.

However, it needs to be clear about how best it can leverage this to bring about meaningful results. It is not a major power that can exert pressure on any actor. It therefore needs to think carefully about what exactly it wants to achieve, and what exactly it is able to achieve.

I am not sure whether officials have come up with a strategy as yet – although, then again, it is still early days. One would just hope that Belgrade does try to use the opportunity it has been given to do something, rather than just see it as a chance to avoid taking difficult decisions. In other words, I hope there Serbia has some ambition for the chairmanship.

Given the circumstances, do you think that in 2015 Serbia will more openly and directly be told it needs to treat Kosovo de facto as a country? We have heard the Latvian FM, the country which now holds the EU presidency, a few days ago talking about relations between “Serbia and Kosovo” and not “Belgrade and Pristina”.

It is clear that things are certainly moving in that direction. Germany, in particular, barely even bothers to hide the fact that it does not see Serbia entering the EU until it recognizes Kosovo.

Of course, some would say that the EU cannot force Serbia to recognize Kosovo. After all, it is not united on the issue and some of the members still do not recognize it. This is true. However, it is important to remember that each individual member can set its own conditions for the entry of new members. Look at the way Greece has stopped talks with Macedonia. While the EU may not be able to adopt a formal position requiring recognition, Berlin can still say that it is not willing to import a territorial issue into the EU and that Serbia must accept an independent Kosovo if it wants to join.

In view of this, and the fact that many other members would like to see the Kosovo issue resolved, there is quite clearly a growing sense that Serbia should start to prepare itself for the inevitable decision to recognize an independent Kosovo at some point before accession. In the meantime, the ongoing expectation is that the process of normalization will provide a mechanism for Serbia to gradually accept Kosovo's statehood in real terms.

How do you view recent comments by president Tomislav Nikolic – that Serbia should directly initiate speeding up the Kosovo issue and that he will spearhead a new platform? PM Vucic, on the other hand, seems not to be in favour of that.

Like many others, I am waiting to see what is proposed in this new platform; but more out of curiosity than out of a belief that it will change anything. I think it is important to stress that any attempt to reopen the status issue will be strongly resisted by the EU, as well as by the United States. As we saw back in 2010, when Serbia sought to introduce a new resolution after the ICJ opinion, the EU (or at least the vast majority of members) believes that the time has now passed for such negotiations.

While I would be the first to accept that Serbia has rarely been giving a fair hearing over Kosovo, especially during the Ahtisaari talks, it is also important to recognize that Belgrade has repeatedly missed opportunities to present plans for a final agreement. As a result, the time has now passed for more talks on the status issue or variants of it, such as partition. Indeed, even the status of the Serbian community in Kosovo has now effectively been settled following the April 2013 agreement.

There are still some issues that need to be sorted out, but the idea that a real discussion on status can now be held is simply unrealistic. I think that the Prime Minister realizes that trying to open up new talks at this stage would not only be pointless, but could be counterproductive inasmuch as it will serve to create tensions with the EU that could harm Serbia's integration.

You recall that one part of the Serbian strategy on Kosovo involved the formation of the Community of Serbian Municipalities in the north of the province. However, it still has not been established. Do you think that nothing will come out of that?

It is disappointing that so little has been done on the issue. I remember saying at the time the agreement was reached that it was important that a clear, and strong, structure was defined for the association as soon as possible. It really was a case of acting while the international will to see a solution in Kosovo was at its peak. At that point, I think it would have been possible to put in place a relatively powerful institution. However, this did not happen.

To my mind, and as with the status process, this is yet another example one how Serbia and the Serbian community have delayed taking a decision and failed to take advantage of a situation; thereby weakening their position. Now I think that the resulting body is likely to be rather weaker than it could have been.

How can the experience of Cyprus – which on its own territory has a self-proclaimed state, help Serbia on its EU path? Can any parallels be drawn?

While there may appear to be some parallels, in reality they are very different situations.

In the case of Cyprus, all 28 members of the EU accept the territorial integrity of the Republic of Cyprus. Not a single member accepted the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Therefore, when it was admitted to the EU in 2004, there was an understanding that the whole country had joined, but that the *acquis communautaire*, the EU's body of laws, could not be extended to the Turkish Cypriot controlled areas. The EU was thus willing to accept this anomalous situation and provided Cyprus with a guarantee that it could not be held liable for the failure to implement the *acquis* in those areas not under its effective control.

This is not the case with regard to Serbia and Kosovo. 23 out of the 28 members recognize Kosovo as independent. They are not going to follow the Cyprus example, which would mean that they in fact believe that Kosovo is still a part of Serbia. The problem is that no one quite knows how best to handle the Kosovo situation. This still need to be worked out. It actually far more complicated than people generally realize.

What does the EU and the West, actually, want from Serbia? To de facto (and at some point formally) recognize Kosovo, accept the dismantling of Republika Srpska, and take a firm stance against Russia?

I think the EU is actually rather clear on what it wants. First and foremost, it is clear that the vast majority would like Serbia to accept the independence of Kosovo. In fact, I think it is probably safe to say that even the 5 non-recognisers would be happier if Serbia did so as it would allow the matter to be removed from the EU agenda and restore EU unity. If Serbia is willing to accept an independent Kosovo, then so can they. Interestingly, though, I think it is now less likely that Slovakia, Romania and Greece will recognize Kosovo than it was a year ago. This is due to the events in Ukraine and rising concerns over international law.

As for Russia, there is clearly a great deal of variation of opinion within the EU over how best to handle the issue of relations with Moscow. On the one hand, there are many states that take a very tough line. Others want to be more conciliatory. However, there are nevertheless agreed positions. At a minimum, the EU expects Serbia to abide by these; even if it naturally gravitates towards the body of opinion in the EU that favours engagement over confrontation.

Regarding Bosnia, I simply see no reason to believe that the EU is determined to dismantle Republika Srpska. Rather, the EU wants to see reforms put in place that will allow Bosnia to proceed along the path of EU integration. This is vital for the country and all its citizens. Bosnian Serbs will benefit from EU accession as much as everyone else. Serbia is obviously a vital partner in this process. The EU therefore expects it to play a constructive and supportive role in such efforts.

Are Serbs still viewed as the bad guys for whom it is, therefore, just to pay the ultimate price for peace and stability in the Balkan region?

Yes and no. I don't think that Serbia faces the same negative situation it did even just five years ago. On the whole, I think that there has been a gradual improvement in the way that outsiders tend to view the country. This is largely due to the way that Serbia has been willing to engage with the EU over Kosovo.

However, one must also recognize that this improvement in perceptions is very fragile. It does not take much for the old stereotypes to re-emerge. We saw this recently with the incident over the drone at the Serbia-Albania football match. Interestingly, on that occasion, the burden of blame for the incident was not placed solely on Serbia, as one might have expected in the past. Instead, both countries were presented badly in the media. This is hardly progress for the region!

What will the following year bring for Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina? Do you think that there will be a stronger push for unification of the Bosnia and is that a good solution for regional stability?

The big change that has occurred is that, following a British and German plan presented towards the end of last year, the EU is now moving away from insisting on immediate political reform. I think that this is an important step forward.

The economic conditions in Bosnia are dire. Urgent steps are needed to improve the economic and social conditions people face. Pressurizing the politicians while people suffered was not bringing about results (although it seemed at some points that change from below was possible). However, it is important to stress that this does not mean that political reforms have been abandoned. They haven't. More to the point, they can't be abandoned. Bosnia simply cannot hope to join the EU with its current structures. Real political reform will be necessary if Bosnia is to proceed along the path of EU integration. However, the immediate reform priorities lie elsewhere.

How will the outcome of the presidential elections in Croatia affect that countries relations with Serbia and others in the region?

The most important thing is that relations between Serbia and Croatia do not undergo any further setbacks. Tensions have certainly grown over the past year or so, for example over minority language rights in Croatia. Looking ahead, there are other potential problems on the horizon. One thing to watch is the forthcoming ICJ judgement on the genocide case brought by two countries against each other.

My greatest concern is that Croatia may decide to turn its back on its earlier commitment not to block Serbia's EU accession path. Already, there have been some worrying suggestions that this may well happen. While Serbia should certainly not give in to blackmail and accept unreasonable conditions from Zagreb, it is also important that Belgrade does not exacerbate tensions. Croatia is in the EU. Serbia isn't. Croatia gets to block Serbia, not the other way round.

How do you view the case of Vojislav Seselj and what he has been through in the Hague? Do you think his return will and new political engagement will change things in Serbia and the region?

Like many others, I have been extremely critical about the way that the ICTY has operated. It is utterly outrageous that it has taken so long to try those accused. Last year saw one of the longest criminal trials in British history. It lasted eight months. Cases at the ICTY go on for years. I realize that they are complex, but so are many that come before the British courts. This is not justice, not least of all for the surviving victims and the relatives of those killed. They deserve a chance to move on with their lives.

As for Seselj, I was amazed and disappointed by the decision to release him and let him return to Serbia. He is an unreconstructed nationalist; an extremely unpleasant and potentially dangerous troublemaker. He offers nothing to the country. I just hope that his influence is minimal. He is a symbol of a past that Serbia needs to put behind it.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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