

SOLUTION PROCESS IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF INSECURITY: KOSOVO IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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The military operation targeting the eastern cities of Ukraine, which Russia launched on the morning of February 24, 2022, still continues with high tension. During the war, which has lasted more than two years now, the Russian state has had to fight against international pressure and sanctions, as well as the Ukrainian army. However, the decreasing likelihood of the Moscow government achieving the desired result in the war over the prolonged period is an indication of the weakening of economic, diplomatic and political tools. In particular, Moscow, which has become more sensitive to the sanctions of the European Union and the USA, is expected to follow destabilizing policies in the Balkans in the near future. In this way, Putin will want to break the collective pressure of his Western colleagues with the environment of impotence and insecurity in their close circle.

Moscow's use of the turbulent politics in the Balkans to display an attitude that is contrary to the goals of the West is not a new dynamic in the international system. However, it can be said that the Russia-Ukraine War placed greater importance on the geopolitical balance in the region than before. In this new atmosphere, we can talk about two main issues that test the politics of the Balkans. The first of these is that the environment of insecurity created by the war has made the European Union's Balkans expansion a necessity. For the integration of the Balkans into the EU, the conflicts in the region must be resolved urgently. It can be said that the second fundamental test was that the war forced the governments of the region to choose a clear side between the West and Russia.¹ In this context, the parties will want to make allies in the Balkans through oppressive or peaceful means. While this new conjuncture is interpreted by some as an opportunity to solve deep-rooted problems in Balkans politics, such as the problem between Kosovo and Serbia, it is interpreted by others as the Balkans being on the verge of a major political crisis.

Russia's Trojan Horse: Serbia

Considering the historical ties and bilateral relations between Russia and Serbia; there are expectations that Russia can use Serbia to pursue its interests and expand its sphere of influence in the Balkans. The basic structure used by Moscow in this bilateral relation can be summarized as gaining the support of the Serbian people through pan-Slavist public diplomacy and creating solid political, economic and energy ties. In addition, it can be said that Russia, which pursues a pro-Serbian

foreign policy both at the UN and diplomatic relations regarding the recognition of Kosovo, which is Serbia's national issue, has a respected place in the country's politics. In this context, it would not be wrong to expect that Russia will pursue a foreign policy in which Serbia will be used as a "Trojan horse" in a scenario where it will want to adopt destabilizing policies in the Balkans.

On the other hand, President Aleksandar Vučić strives to maintain a foreign policy that takes into account Belgrade's own

¹ Pol Bargués, et. Al. "Time to Re-engage with Kosovo and Serbia: Strengthening EU Foreign and Security Policy amidst Internal Contestation", JOINT Reseach Paper 12, Aralık 2022. s. 6.

national interests and does not favor being Russia's "Trojan horse" in the Balkans. It can be said that the basis of this Serbian foreign policy, which contradicts Russia's goals through Serbia, is an approach that includes various perspectives. So much so that the Belgrade government voted against Moscow within the scope of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine, and in the ongoing process allowed Western states to use Serbia as a transfer point for non-combat military equipment going to Ukraine. In addition, the agreement reached in April 2024 to purchase warplanes from France can be interpreted as a policy followed by Serbia to move away from Russia, its traditional arms supplier.² On the Russian side, there is a possibility that the Moscow government may use the example of Kosovo's declaration of independence as a precedent for the separation of Donetsk and Luhansk. In this context, it can be said that both states are pursuing a multifaceted policy, going beyond the traditional Russia-Serbian relations.

Although Serbia can break away from its traditional shackles and take anti-Russian steps in foreign policy, it does not follow policies that are completely parallel to the West. Even in a foreign policy approach that has various aspects and depths, completely severing ties with Russia is not a rational decision, and this results in Serbia not being able to fully support EU and US policies. So much so that the Belgrade government refuses to implement EU sanctions against Russia at the expense of de facto suspension of EU accession negotiations. Not only that, in May 2022, it signed a three-year contract

for Russian gas at a high discount, in other words, it preferred the challenges in the political arena to the challenges in the energy sector.³

However, the atmosphere in the Balkans forces the regional governments to choose a clear side between the West and Russia, and it is not clear to what extent Serbia can continue this versatile and multidimensional foreign policy. In this context, it is among the possible possibilities that Serbia will choose Moscow's side in foreign policy. So much so that the existence of a strong political tendency in Serbia, which can be described as far-right, combined with Russian public diplomacy, makes it increasingly difficult for President Alexander Vucic to remain on rational ground. Considering such environment, allegations that the Western world is trying to solve the problems in order not to lose Serbia, sometimes at the expense of violating its neutrality, also find a place in the public opinion.

Solution Process in an Environment of Insecurity

It is expected that Moscow will want to carry out destabilization activities in the Balkans in order to break the sanctions of the European Union and the USA, especially due to the protracted Ukraine war. Russia's historical ties with Serbia in the region and the fact that Belgrade is one of the rare actors in the region that does not yet have an EU partner indicate that Russia can use Serbia in these destabilization policies. A policy of destabilization through Serbia will certainly target the already tense Serbia-Kosovo relations. However, if the current situation

² Serbia to boost defence industry cooperation with France, President Vucic says, Reuters, April 2024.

³ Putin ve Vucic anlaştı, Sırbistan Rusya ile doğal gaz sözleşmesini yeniliyor, euronews, Mayıs, 2022.

is evaluated from a different perspective, it can be claimed that this environment of distrust and urgency created by Russia serves as a catalyst for both international and conflict actors.

It is obvious that the war between Russia and Ukraine had a significant impact on the European Union, and on this occasion, the project of including the Balkans into the EU gained serious importance. So much so that, taking into account all possible reactions from Serbia, the green light was given to Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe in March 2024.⁴ The most important reasons why the mentioned integration project was disrupted by Serbia and Kosovo are the fact that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 was not recognized by many international actors, including Serbia and Russia, and the situation of the Serbian minority living in the northern cities of Kosovo. These disputes, which must be overcome as a prerequisite for EU accession negotiations for both states, have become urgencies that need to be resolved as a result of Russia's threat to the geopolitical balance in the Balkans. Hence, this situation both increased international pressure for a peaceful solution and set the stage for new initiatives.

In addition to Russia's aggressive policies, another event that raises hopes for a peaceful solution is that there will be no major local or international elections for either Serbia or Kosovo until 2025. In this case, both actors have some room to be flexible in making concessions and reaching an agreement. Considering that there is a more willing period in the foreign policies

of the EU and the USA to resolve the Serbia-Kosovo conflict, the conflicting actors are expected to make some concessions either under international pressure or within a rational framework.

In this context, the signing of an agreement on normalization between Kosovo and Serbia on March 18, 2023 revealed that both Serbian President Alexander Vucic and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti were not very fond of the agreement. At the same time, some articles of the agreement in question are interpreted as a tendency for both leaders to cross their red lines. For example, article 4 "Serbia shall not object to Kosovo's membership in any international organization." is a condition which is far from the policy that Belgrade has firmly defended for years. Similarly, Kurti's acceptance of Article 7's commitment to provide an appropriate level of self-government for the Serbian community in Kosovo and the possibility of Serbia providing financial support for this unity is unexpected.⁵ Lastly, the reason why the two leaders were not subjected to serious criticism from the opposition in domestic politics can be interpreted as a simple procedural trick: the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina was put into implementation phase without being signed.

Expectations and Realities

It is an undeniable fact that the war between Russia and Ukraine poses a security threat to the Balkans and the West. In this context, optimistic expectations are that serious steps can be taken on issues that preoccupy Balkans

⁴ PACE committee recommends that Kosovo* be invited to become a member of the Council of Europe, Newsroom, Council of Europe, March 2024.

⁵ Denisa Kostovicova, "Brothers no more? What the EU's diplomatic breakthrough on Kosovo means for Serbia-Russia relations", LSE, 7 Mart 2023.

politics by using this environment of security and instability. In other words, the Balkans and the West have the opportunity to turn the crisis into an opportunity. However, when this war period is considered through the Serbia-Kosovo issue, although there are efforts towards normalization, no concrete progress has been made in the conflict between the parties. On the contrary, the conflict between the two states continued to escalate, creating a scenario in which positive expectations were not reflected in real dynamics.

Considering the complex structure of Balkans politics and the diversity of actors who have a say in politics, it would not be right to blame this failure on a single actor or action. In this context, several problems can be listed that refute the idea that the Russia-Ukraine war will be an ignition force for the solution of the problems. The first of these stems from the structure of the agreement under which the Presidents of Serbia and Kosovo pledged to move towards normalization on March 18, 2023. This agreement, which is most optimistically interpreted by analysts as the two leaders crossing their red lines, contains serious problems in terms of binding and legal aspects. So much so that both Vucic and Kurti avoided grand gestures and signatures that would make the articles of this agreement binding in international law. The structure of the agreement in question, which does not put states under responsibility, left the normalization process to the personal preferences of the two leaders, thus creating an atmosphere in which both leaders expected the first sacrifice from the other party. Considering both the public

opinion in the countries and the right-wing nationalist ideologies of both leaders, no steps were taken for normalization and the meeting held on March 18, 2023 could not go further than an insincere policy of gaining time.

The second big problem is that regional actors such as the USA and the European Union fail to manage the normalization process systematically, decisively and impartially. At this point, it can be said that the scales of international mediator institutions have shifted towards Belgrade for the sake of not losing Serbia for a certain period, and these actors have set goals that will disrupt Russia in the short term, instead of focusing on permanent solutions to regional crises. This situation not only broke the trust of the Pristina government but was also criticized by the Western world. The highest embodiment of the criticism from the Western wing was the Joint Declaration on Kosovo, published by many senior politicians and MPs. In this declaration targeting the EU, the USA and the UK, it was stated that the current approach towards Serbia-Kosovo relations was unsuccessful, and the lack of pressure applied to Serbia. At the same time, the importance of returning balance and proportionality in relations with Kosovo and Serbia was emphasized.⁶ If we look at the other side of the coin, according to the Belgrade government, inviting Kosovo to the Council of Europe is an unacceptable and also an unfair decision. According to Serbian nationalist groups, this attitude is evidence that the international community has recently preferred Kosovo to Serbia, and Serbia is being tried to be left alone in the international system. As seen from both perspectives, mediator actors in the

⁶ "Joint Statement on Kosovo", Kyiv Post, 6 Ağustos 2023,

<https://www.kyivpost.com/post/20260>, (Erişim tarihi: 13 Ağustos 2023)

region, far from turning the situation of necessity created by the Russia-Ukraine war into an opportunity, pave the way for regional crises by violating the principles of neutrality and proportionality with hasty policies.

Another issue that can be considered as the cause of the second problem is that regional great powers may have different attitudes about the future of the Russia-Ukraine war. The European Union thinks that crises will cause heavy costs and, within the framework of this concern, wants the war to end as soon as possible through dialogue between the parties. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Washington administration, which pursued a more flexible foreign policy, had an attitude that wanted the war to be prolonged. At this point, the USA wants to provoke Russia in various geographies and wear out Moscow through conflicts. In this context, it is thought that Russia's presence at any size would cause it to lose power in a conflict over the Balkans. At the same time, we can talk about the construction of an atmosphere that will remind other states that the USA, which will provide the security needs that will arise, is the boss and savior of the international system. The division within these two most important external actors in the Balkans naturally does not make it possible to solve the problems in the region with common, sincere and determined policies.

Finally, an evaluation made on the leaders says that the normalization process is nothing but a dream. It is known that Serbian President Alexander Vucic, a former ultranationalist, has close relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Aiming to pursue a foreign policy with different aspects and depths as a rational actor, Vucic's Serbia has been one of the

rare states that refused to impose sanctions on Russia in war against Ukraine, even though it claimed that it wanted to take Serbia into the EU. At this point, even if Vucic is sincere in his goal of EU membership, it is known that public opinion attaches serious importance to relations with Russia, and in this context, Russia's soft power stands as a serious obstacle to the normalization process. On the other hand, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti has proven to be a formidable interlocutor for negotiators to work with, always prioritizing Kosovo's gains. So much so that Kurti is the founder of the "Decide It Yourself" party, which advocates that Kosovo reach a solution by considering its own interests rather than through foreign intervention. In this context, Prime Minister Albin Kurti is particularly uncomfortable with the American and European Union influence in his country that can affect decision-making mechanisms, and therefore it cannot be said that he always has a positive agenda with the Western society. In other words, at a time when two right-wing nationalist leaders are facing each other, and especially when the sanctioning power of the EU has weakened, it seems difficult to take concrete steps towards normalization.

In conclusion, it is still unanswered whether the armed struggle between Russia and Ukraine will serve as a catalyst for the solution of historical problems in the Balkans or whether it will drag the Balkans into greater political turmoil as a result of Russia's destabilizing policies. Although it is a rational expectation that the atmosphere of insecurity and urgency created by the war will strengthen the dialogue between the parties, it has not yet been possible to make concrete progress in the solution phase. When the insincerity of both regional mediators and the parties to

the problem is taken into account, the success of the normalization process seems difficult in the near future.

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