

How Long Will Belgrade Seesaw Between NATO and Russia?

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"We intentionally set the bar too high for the Serbs to comply. They need some bombing and that's what they are going to get." This was how then-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described the draft peace agreement during a break at the conference in Rambouillet (February 1999).

At the time the Yugoslav delegation had stated its willingness to concede many points, with the exception of independence for Kosovo (which was nonnegotiable for the Albanians). But the Yugoslavs did not see the [final draft](#) of the accord until the last day of the talks, and as it turned out, two-thirds of that document was entirely new to them (and they were presented with it literally only a few hours before the signing deadline). In particular, one of the newly introduced chapters (no. 7, appendix B, p.79) called for NATO troops to be deployed not only in Kosovo but throughout the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Moreover, alliance personnel would, in this case, "be immune from the Parties' jurisdiction in respect of any civil, administrative, criminal, or disciplinary offenses" and would "enjoy, together with their vehicles, vessels, aircraft, and equipment, free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY including associated airspace and territorial waters." (para.6-8)

Feeling like they were being asked to accept terms of occupation and surrender, the officials from Belgrade refused to sign the agreement. NATO then treated this rebuff as a *casus belli*: after the Serbian government definitively rejected the ultimatum thrust upon them in the document, the alliance began missile and bomb strikes in Yugoslavia on March 24, 1999. It is telling that even Henry Kissinger later called the draft of the Rambouillet agreement "a provocation, an excuse to start bombing."

✖ As a result, NATO's 78-day Operation [Allied Force](#), which was never approved by the UN Security Council, damaged or destroyed 89 factories and industrial plants, 48 hospitals and infirmaries, 70 schools, 18 kindergartens, 9 university buildings, 4 dormitories, 82 bridges, 35 churches, and 29 monasteries. At the time the government put a price tag of \$100 million on the damages inflicted on the country's infrastructure and economy. But the biggest tragedy was that during the bombing campaigns (which employed banned cluster bombs and shells plated with depleted uranium), approximately 2,000 civilians were killed and another 10,000 seriously injured.

Paradoxically, on Feb. 12, 2016, the Serbian parliament [ratified](#) a new agreement with NATO that included terms very similar to those demanded in Rambouillet 17 years ago. In other words, the bar that at the end of the 20th century Belgrade considered to be "set too high" and which they could not stomach even as a cost of war has now been accepted – little by little, unobtrusively, and almost meekly – over the past decade by Serbia's new leaders.

In particular, the [Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the NATO Support and Procurement Organisation \(NSPO\)](#) on Logistical Support Cooperation requires the government in Belgrade to allow NSPO staff: to move freely throughout the country (article 10, paragraph 2), access to public and private facilities (article 11, paragraph 1), and diplomatic immunity under the Vienna Convention (article 10, paragraph 1), as well as to exempt the alliance's property and representatives from customs duties and taxes (article 10, paragraphs 4 and 5).

This agreement was signed back in September 2015, but received almost no media coverage, and thus the "alarm bells" [only went off for the public](#) after it was ratified in February 2016. Responding to popular discontent and criticism from his opponents, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić asked, "If we're going to demand that NATO protect Serbs in northern Kosovo, how can we at the same time not allow it to enter northern Kosovo?"

But in fact, this rhetorical question is nonsensical (and not just because NATO has its own airfields in Kosovo as well as Camp Bondsteel, the second-largest American military base in Europe). NATO has never played any role in protecting Serbian interests in Kosovo.

Here's an example. On Nov. 3, 2013, local elections were held in northern Kosovo for the first time under the authority of the government in Pristina. By the end of the day, voter turnout in many cities ranged from 5% to 14%. Because the Serbs did not want to take part in legitimizing the self-proclaimed republic, a campaign was launched to boycott what they called the "Albanian elections" ("šiptarske izbore"). Violence erupted in the evening: a group of men wielding bats pulled up in a black jeep without a license plate and broke into a polling station in Kosovska Mitrovica, smashing the ballot boxes (it is interesting that the police and OSCE staff had left that station half an hour before the attack). Although the leaders of the boycott campaign were neither involved nor complicit in that incident, Belgrade, Pristina, and Brussels blamed them for it and even claimed that the low voter turnout was the result of public "intimidation" by opponents of the election. A new election date was set for Nov. 17.



Nov 17, 2013. Elections in Kosovska Mitrovica held under the gunpoint of KFOR.

On that day Kosovska Mitrovica was literally inundated with soldiers and police, armed to the teeth and even driving armored vehicles (they included NATO's KFOR troops, the EU Police Mission, and the Kosovo police force)! All this is to say that nothing prevented the alliance from interfering in events in northern Kosovo when it had something to gain from doing so. However, at that time its role was to deter peaceful protests and demonstrations of the strength of the local Serbian population. This was an example of an election (which had been initiated by the EU) that was literally held at gunpoint. Despite being pressured and threatened with layoffs and the loss of benefits payments from Belgrade, as well as other dirty little games – only 22.8% of the voters ultimately showed up to the polls. But that did not stop the EU from recognizing the elections as valid, despite the fact that in February 2012, Brussels had refused to accept the results of a referendum in northern Kosovo in which 75.28% of the voters turned out and 99.74% of them voted against recognizing the government of the "Republic of Kosovo."

It is a fact that after NATO troops entered Kosovo, approximately 210,000 people were forced to leave (according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees), and over 300 Serbs were killed and 455 went missing just during the five-month stay of the international peacekeeping force. In addition, during the infamous wave of violence that took place March 17-19, 2004, NATO representatives passively allowed Albanian extremists to burn more than 900 Serb homes and to set fire to, severely damage, and desecrate 35 Orthodox monasteries (many of which date back to the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries and some are even under the protection of UNESCO), while also driving over 4,000 Serbs from the region.



Partnering but not joining

Serb leaders never tire of assuring their citizens that they have no aspirations to join the NATO Alliance. “Serbia has no plans to enter NATO, it wants to be militarily neutral,” stated Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić once again (on March 2, 2016), commenting on the opposition parties’ demand that a referendum be held on the issue. The head of the government does not think that there is a need for the public to vote on the matter. And it’s true that the people’s will would be easy to predict, because according to the latest public surveys, which were conducted in January and February of this year, only 10.5% of Serbian citizens support the idea of NATO membership, while 79.1% are opposed (10.4% declined to answer). A recent study by IPSOS revealed a similar pattern: only 7% hold a positive opinion of the alliance.

This was precisely why the ratification of the agreement was only covered by the media after the fact, and President Tomislav Nikolić hurriedly signed the ensuing law (confirming the treaty) on Feb. 19, the day before a scheduled protest to demand its veto. Immediately after many thousands of protesters flocked to an anti-NATO rally in Belgrade on Feb. 20, President Nikolić published an article titled, “[Why I Signed the NATO Law](#),” in which he tried to convince the public that the legal underpinnings and prerequisites for the statute had been established ten years earlier when Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program. Overall, the article resembles an attempt to shift the bulk of the responsibility for the rapprochement with the alliance onto the shoulders of previous administrations. But let’s look at how this process unfolded, in order to grasp the significance of the agreement and get an idea of what the future realistically holds for Serbia.



2000 “Bulldozer” revolution in Belgrade opened the Pandora box of unconstitutional revolts in target states.

It all began right after the first-ever “electoral revolution,” which broke out in Belgrade in October 2000 (with Washington’s support). During this revolution, Slobodan Milošević – the president of what was then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, but who had fallen from favor in the West – was deposed. The new government quickly redirected the country’s foreign policy toward the ideal of European integration – which meant that Serbia was then predestined for assimilation into Europe’s security architecture, which is tightly bound to NATO.

The first turning point was the July 2005 agreement with NATO to allow transit for the purpose of conducting peacekeeping operations (this was primarily needed so that KFOR forces could pass through Serbia). In a way this was a precursor to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which was a key document that was signed in Washington in near secrecy in January 2014 by Nebojša Rodić, the then-minister of defense, and was just quietly and without public debate [ratified](#) by the Serbian Parliament in July 2015.

According to the SOFA, Belgrade will offer the alliance the opportunity to use Serbia's military infrastructure, to train its soldiers at Serbia's Jug military base, to bring the legal framework regulating defense into line with EU rules, and to introduce the standards of NATO and the Bologna Process into the military education system for Serbian officers. The agreement also includes a detailed description of the legal issues affecting the status, powers, and responsibility of both the military personnel arriving from overseas as well as the servicemen in the host country.

The next step was the signing in January 2015 of the operational document known as the [Individual Partnership Action Plan \(IPAP\)](#), which dictates a broad spectrum of cooperation between Serbia and the NATO Alliance – not only in regard to security and defense, but also pertaining to the issues of human rights and economic, domestic, and foreign policy, including the prospect of European integration. It may seem baffling, but Serbia has even pledged to “[i]ntroduce a public information strategy on cooperation with Euro-Atlantic structures through PfP with the aim of gaining public support,” which means that Serbian taxpayers must shell out from their own pockets to pay for the propaganda directed against them. (!)

All of the above documents, in addition to the recent Logistical Support Agreement, so firmly tie Belgrade to the alliance that no particular purpose would be served by officially joining it (which at any rate would be impossible because of the negative opinion of the alliance and the unresolved problem of Kosovo). As the editor-in-chief of the magazine [Nova srpska politička misao](#) (“New Serbian Political Thought”), Đorđe Vukadinović, has aptly stated, “although Serbia has not officially entered NATO, NATO has effectively entered Serbia.”

“Geopolitical split”

Yet at the same time, and despite the escalating Euro-Atlantic propaganda, Russia's popularity in Serbia is growing, and the idea of “European choice” is gradually losing its devotees. This is backed up by a study from the company Ipsos: in 2014 54% of the public would have voted in favor of EU membership, but by early 2016 that number had dropped to 48%; and while 46% of respondents expressed a positive opinion of Russia in 2014, this year that number has risen to 72%!

A survey conducted by the weekly Vreme (“Time”) not only came up with an almost identical number – 50.9% – after tabulating the responses about European integration, but the news magazine also included the question “Do you support an alliance with Russia?” to which 67.2% answered affirmatively (18.8% were opposed and 14% declined to answer).



Anti-NATO rally in the centre of Belgrade, Feb
20, 2016

And finally, according to the most recent study conducted by a Serbian NGO, the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), which is funded by Western foundations and states, on the eve of the snap elections for parliament (scheduled for April 24th), 71.6% of the public is against the idea of “Serbian membership in the EU and NATO” (with 11.2% “in favor” and 14% “undecided”), and 55.2% of the electorate have indicated their preference for the “traditional affiliation with Russia” (with 19.2% “against” and 21.5% “undecided”).

In this context, the oft-delayed signing of the agreement to grant diplomatic status to the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš (as was recently granted to the NSPO) looks very suspect. It’s worth remembering that in May 2014, when Serbia was hit by a devastating flood, Russian rescue teams were the first to arrive and in only two days managed to evacuate more than 2.000 residents (including over 600 children) from the flood zone, while the Russian Ministry of Emergency Management delivered over 140 tons of humanitarian relief to Serbia (as well as to Bosnia and Herzegovina). According to the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, the real problem lies in Germany’s desire to prevent any expansion of Russian influence in the Balkans. The periodical [stated](#) that “Merkel telephoned Serbian Prime Minister Vučić, urging him not to sign such an agreement because Berlin is afraid that this center could become a permanent base for Russian espionage.” At an April 1 press conference hosted by the foreign ministers of Serbia and Russia, Sergey Lavrov made an interesting statement, “Over the years of this center’s operations we have responded to this type of fear and grumbling by inviting the EU and US to visit the center and see for themselves what the staff are doing. As might be expected, the EU has refused our invitations. They know that their claims are false.”

Serbian government officials continue to chant the phrase “military neutrality” at every opportunity, like a mantra. This is because a [2007 parliamentary resolution](#) made reference to NATO’s negative role in recent Serbian history while announcing a “decision to proclaim the Republic of Serbia’s military neutrality toward existing military alliances until such time as a referendum is held that will render a final decision on the matter.”

However, under international law – specifically the Hague Conventions of 1907 – during wartime it is “forbidden to move troops or convoys of either munitions of war or supplies across the territory of a neutral Power.” In other words, in the event of a regional or international conflict, NATO’s Logistical Support Agreement could invalidate Serbia’s neutral status. In addition, the very idea of EU integration presumes a “common policy toward security and defense” – which is also somewhat inconsistent with euphemisms such as “military neutrality.”

The questionable principle of “balance” has also been turned on its head in regard to military cooperation: in 2015 only two Russian-Serbian joint exercises were conducted, while the Serbian army took part in 22 exercises alongside NATO. And even this limited cooperation with Moscow was sharply condemned by the EU. Maja Kocijančič, a spokesperson for the European Commission, denounced Serbia’s consent to Moscow’s proposal to hold two special-forces joint exercises in 2016: “Under the current circumstances, such a joint military exercise [between Serbia and Russia] would send the wrong signal.”

The new government that will be formed after the April 24 elections won’t have it easy: the rapidly growing estrangement between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia means that Belgrade will eventually emerge as a geostrategic fault line. When, figuratively speaking,

the earth begins to shift under the feet of the Serbian elite, no virtuoso “geopolitical splits” will allow them to avoid answering key question – whose side are they on, anyway?

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