The Yugoslav Crisis and Russian Policy: A Field for Cooperation or Confrontation?¹

Zlatin Trapkov

Russian Foreign Policy in the Balkans in the 1990s

Russian policy with respect to the Yugoslav crisis has followed the same evolution as the foreign policy of the country as a whole. Immediately after the end of the Cold War, Russia made a tremendous shift towards cooperation with the West on all basic issues of world politics. At the same time, there remained elements in Russian policy, which could be considered to a certain extent as the prolongation of the behaviour of the ‘empire’. Without entering into the whole complexity of factors that influence the policy-making process in Russia, this duality reflects the political and cultural debates and struggles, which have dominated Russian society since the last century: supporters of a Western orientation vs. supporters of the so called ‘specific Russian way’. The latter have been very often influenced by the ideology of Panslavism. This discussion unfolds within the broader framework of one of the basic disputes in Russian society: does Russia belong to Europe or to Asia according to its culture and system of values?

During the period of 1991-1993, Russia’s policy in former Yugoslavia was vacillating between two poles - from unconditional support for the West to a completely independent stance and activities often not coordinated with the other out-of-the-region partners. For a long time, Russia’s policy created the impression of being inconsistent and chaotic. The discontinuity resulted essentially from internal considerations and was influenced by the different tendencies and views on the future of Russian society.

Since 1993 Russia has been pursuing a more pragmatic and considerably more consistent policy. Independence from the Western position has been demonstrated in many respects. Simultaneously it has corresponded strictly with the actual interpretation of national interests of the country. President Yeltsin needs international success for domestic
political reasons. The Yugoslav crisis can be seen as one of the venues for influencing internal problems through foreign policy actions.

The development of Moscow’s policy is matched by a change in Western assessment and position on the crisis. Western interest seems to be declining because of the lack of success of its diplomacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The authority and ability of regional and global organisations and powers to solve similar crises were overshadowed by doubt. A process of searching for new approaches and new partners in solving the Yugoslav crisis has begun. Perhaps this is another reason to take Russia’s position more into consideration.

Despite the severe internal political struggle in 1993, Russian diplomacy succeeded in maintaining active positions in former Yugoslavia and proved its ability to influence the processes that were developing particularly on the Serbian side. Stable links were established with the parties and with all other partners involved. The West has taken into consideration the advantages of Russia’s participation and has by that time accepted the necessity to comply in some cases with its position. This is the first convincing success of Russian diplomacy.

In 1994, Russian foreign policy was being shaped in a very different internal political context. The new constitution has given more power to the president and more independence for the parliament. On the other hand, nationalistic and other similar political formations reached a decisive success in the 1993 parliamentary elections. The support for the ‘presidential’ constitution and the victory of the nationalists should be interpreted as a vote for a new and powerful Russia, united by a strong central administration. New corrections of the foreign policy course seemed inevitable.

The real consequence from the changes in policy is the increased influence of the so called ‘neo-imperialist’ element in shaping and exercising the political strategy. The following foreign policy priorities emerge:

- strengthening of Russian influence in the so-called ‘near abroad’, with respect to the rights of Russian minorities and the stability especially in the former Baltic and Asian Soviet republics;
- establishing a new system of European security corresponding to Russian interests, with modified roles for NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as for the former Warsaw Pact allies;
- restoring the economic potential and influence of the country by attracting Western investments to Russia, gaining back traditional
Yugoslav Crisis and Russian Policy

foreign markets (for example on the international arms market) and winning new ones, including in the West.

Russian Foreign Policy in the ‘Far Abroad’

According to some assessments, the Yugoslav crisis remains outside the priorities of Russian policy. It may be true, if we compare the efficiency of the policy in ‘near’ and the diplomacy in ‘far’ abroad. At the same time the Yugoslav crisis plays a leading role on the ‘lower level’ of policy-shaping process - within the parliament, the Russian army, the orthodox church and the Russian intelligentsia, in the social consciousness as a whole.

At the beginning of 1994, this so-called ‘lower level’ influenced the declaration of President Yeltsin on Russian policy in former Yugoslavia. The Russian President clearly proclaimed that Russia has the right to play an independent role in the crisis.

What are currently the main aspects of Russia’s policy towards the countries involved in the Yugoslav crisis?

The current policy towards Serbia - traditionally the most important element in Russia’s Balkan policy - is a function of the Russian position on the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this situation, this position comprises a difficult balance of contradictions, and cannot be explained by the traditional support for Serbia extended in exchange of its loyalty.

Croatia has declared that it is a part of the ‘Western European civilisation area’. The Russian policy is carried out here again mainly in the context of the Yugoslav crisis. At the ‘Croatian’ stage, the pro-Western element prevailed in Russian diplomacy, while at the next - the ‘Bosnian’ - the balance seems to have tilted in favour of the pro-Serbian factors. This erodes Croatia’s trust in Russia’s policy, but the credit is still not exhausted, thanks to the coordination of the policy with the West and the search for just and acceptable compromises for all parties involved.

Russia’s policy towards Macedonia is not as active as it is towards other states on the territory of former Socialist Federate Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In 1992, the Russian president Boris Yeltsin recognised Macedonia during his visit to Bulgaria. It was a difficult decision. Potentially, it could divide the supporters of the so-called Slavophile-orthodox political ‘stream’ in Russia. But this important act was evidence for the growing understanding of the necessity to preserve the regional balance, by stimulating the independence and integrity of the Republic of Macedonia. Moscow showed that it was quite aware that
interests of all Balkan countries and of many out-of-the-region states are focused on Macedonia.

Russian policy is most active in the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because of the interacting interests of three ethnic groups, of the rest of the former Yugoslav republics and of many other countries, the situation is extremely complicated. Efforts to regulate the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina have become the core of Russian policy. They were coordinated with those of Western countries through the mechanisms of the Contact Group and in the Security Council of the UN. At the same time, the strategic goals of Russia have been defended accordingly: preventing a spill-over effect; preserving Serbian interests to an acceptable extent; increasing Russian influence in the Balkans as an integral part of Europe.

Russian diplomatic activities after the NATO ultimatum in April 1994 was an example of the new foreign policy. Taking a decisive position against the ultimatum and preventing the use of force against Serbs, Russia reached a new level of success. It exists a broad understanding that it is her role, coupled with NATO’s threat of military force, that created a new situation in which possibilities for peace became more realistic. Beyond any doubt, Moscow found its place among the few big Western countries, to which most hopes for solving the crisis are linked.

It is of particular interest to analyse the activities of Russia in the Security Council concerning the problem of the participation of ‘blue helmets’ from the Republic of Turkey in UNPROFOR. At first sight, its position seemed to be rather inconsistent and chaotic again. Yet a closer analysis shows its correspondence with one of Russia’s main foreign policy priorities, i.e. to get international recognition for its policy in the so-called ‘near abroad’. The principle of non-intervention of neighbouring countries in the crisis - a position supported by the majority of the countries, bordering on the former SFRY - did not suit Russia’s interest and ambition to influence some processes in the countries on the territory of the former Soviet Union, including by means of peace-keeping operations.

The peace plan of the Contact Group gave birth to a new situation on the territory of the former SFRY. Perhaps it is the most important effort of out-of-the-region countries to coordinate their policy and vision on the future of the republic. The involvement of Russia has become even more evident by the ‘shuttles’ of Kozyrev and General Gratchov in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. After the refusal of Bosnian Serbs to accept the peace plan, Russia preserved her important role thanks to her success in isolating Pale from Belgrade. This was not only ‘face saving’.
The isolation brought the process out of the stale-mate and opened vast perspectives for diplomatic activities. The agreement of the Western partners to ease sanctions against Serbia if the border to Bosnia remained closed could be evaluated as another successful Russian step.

The Russian position against the use of military force to solve the crisis gains support among the countries bordering on the conflict area, and corresponds to a great extent to the Western European point of view. This position gained more and more supporters and which may be seen as a success of the Russian diplomacy in this region. Two other Russian goals - persuading her Western partners to apply the principle of equal treatment of all sides in the conflict, and easing the economic sanctions against Serbia became more and more realistic.

**Cooperation or Confrontation**

It is impossible to predict the unpredictable. This famous saying fully applies to the future Russian foreign policy in the Balkans because of the coincidence of both internal and external factors influencing Moscow’s position. One can mention the coincidence of the social-political situation and the competing views on Russia’s role in the world as examples for internal factors. The complex of processes, constituting and related to the crisis, and the fragile ties within the Contact Group, would be examples for external factors.

It shouldn’t be excluded that a possible further complication in the crisis would strengthen the influence of the ‘nationalistic’ factor in Russia’s policy. In its current appearance, it is pro-Serbian. Intensification of the military actions in Bosnia would lead to a possible increase in the influence of the army on Russia’s policy. At the same time, a possible decrease in tension and a success in the process of regulating the crisis would strengthen the influence of the forces supporting the policy of dialogue and cooperation with the West. Russia should help the reintegration of Serbia in the European and global structures of cooperation, which corresponds to the policy of the majority of Balkan countries neighbouring the former SFRY. They are interested in establishing a climate of cooperation in the region as soon as possible, recognising that this is an important precondition for economic prosperity and security and for accelerating the process of European integration. Similarly, the improvement of the economic situation in Russia would reinforce the positions of President Yeltsin and his government, and their
policy in the Yugoslav crisis would most probably remain within its present parameters.

In a general and more distant perspective, a number of different questions are being raised. Would Russia support an eventual ‘Great Serbia’, and to what extent? Would Moscow be ready to cooperate, and under which conditions, with a ‘Balkan confederation’ or a ‘Balkan CIS’ on the territory of the former SFRY? How would an eroded balance and international recognition of ‘ethnic cleansing’ reflect on the coordination of policies within the Contact Group? To what extent do interests of the countries involved correspond to the future stability in the region and in Europe?

Each answer depends on many factors. These factors will change over time. To draw a conclusion: the basic question, whether the Yugoslav crisis will be a field for cooperation or confrontation among Russia, USA, Western Europe and the Balkan states is still open.

The answer to this question will largely frame the future of the Balkans.

Note

1. This article conveys personal views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Bulgarian Government

(Paper received in October 1994)