

Russia and the Balkan war

NATO's bombing of Belgrade changes the political balance of forces in Moscow

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The effects of NATO's bombing of Serbia reach far beyond the Balkans. The most immediate and direct consequences affect the unstable inner equilibrium of Russia, and relations between the world's second strongest atomic power and Western Europe.

The attack by NATO on a country that can trace its close ties to Moscow back to the 19th century, and the snubbing of Russian foreign policy this implies, have opened up the trenches of the Cold War once again. This has provided sustenance to nationalist forces inside Russia that are critical of President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Yegeny Primakov's orientation to the West.

As the first bombs fell on Belgrade, the reactions from Moscow sounded as if the clock had been turned back fifteen years. Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov declared, "NATO's military attacks against Yugoslavia clearly mean the world should now bend to the political, military and economic diktats of the USA. They want to create a unipolar world order in the 21st century, where Washington controls the fate of the world's peoples." Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin said that the "attack on Yugoslavia was, in a certain sense, also an attack on Russia".

The Russian Duma (parliament) decided by an overwhelming majority that President Yeltsin has until April 15 to decide on whether to ship arms and military equipment to Yugoslavia. The deadline serves to increase the pressure: on the same day, the Duma will be voting whether to start impeachment proceedings against Yeltsin.

The nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky is even organising volunteers to go and fight in Serbia. The leader of the Communist Party, Genady Zuganov, has demanded that Russia's atomic potential be activated. The military seem to have also come round to this decision themselves. According to Duma President Genady Selesnyov, Russian long-range missiles that had been deactivated for several years have now been programmed for targets in NATO countries.

President Yeltsin has made clear that Moscow does not want to be drawn into the war in the Balkans or provide any weapons to Belgrade--unless provoked into such a course. But the balancing act of the Russian government between its foreign creditors and the domestic opposition is becoming increasingly more difficult. "The more the crisis in Kosovo escalates, the narrower the room for manoeuvre available to the Russian government, which increasingly feels the pressure at home", said Bavarian premier Edmund Stoiber, who met Prime Minister Primakov in Moscow on Thursday.

In the opinion of most observers, if NATO sends in ground forces, Yeltsin and Primakov's room for manoeuvre will become even smaller. "Against this background, the further aggravation of Moscow is unavoidable," commented Germany's main financial paper *Handelsblatt*. The foreign policy spokesman for the Christian Democrats, Karl Lamers, who accompanied Stoiber on his trip to Moscow, said that in such a case

he anticipated a "qualitative change" in relations between Germany and Russia.

The Balkan war has found Russia in the midst of a deep economic, social and political crisis.

In February, the most draconian budget so far was passed. This foresaw some \$26 billion in state expenditure against revenues of just \$21bn. The repayment of state debt will consume \$17.5 billion this year alone. The budget was set against an exchange rate of 21 roubles to the dollar, but since then this has risen to 26 or 27. On April 6, Central Bank chief Viktor Gerashchenko announced that reserves had fallen to a three-year low of \$10.6 billion as a result of the latest debt repayments.

Eight years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the policy of what is generally described as liberal reforms--opening up the country completely to western capital--is not only discredited in the general population, but also in parts of the political establishment. The NATO attack on Serbia has delivered an additional blow to the hope that world capitalism would help with Russia's problems. The "rich uncle from overseas" suddenly looks more like a brutal aggressor.

Under these circumstances, the wasting away of Yeltsin, on whom the Western powers have been relying for years, now seems to symbolise the failure of this perspective. Growing intrigues, the uncovering of various cases of corruption involving his family, and the increasingly panicky dismissal and appointment of high-ranking government officials underline the enormous weakness of Yeltsin's position. The possibility that the impeachment vote might go against him on April 15 is visibly increasing.

The degree to which the bourgeois liberals feel themselves pushed into a corner is shown by the fact that their leading representatives dare not openly support NATO in its war against Serbia. Things looked different during previous attacks mounted by the United States against Iraq, Sudan or Afghanistan. Three leading liberal politicians--Yegor Gaidar, Boris Nemtsov and Boris Fyodorov--made a lightening visit to Belgrade to try and induce Slobodan Milosevic to shift his position. The trip ended in a fiasco.

The nationalists and neo-Stalinists--whose propaganda increasingly takes on patriotic tones--are attempting to make use of the liberals' crisis. They hope to achieve a victory in the parliamentary elections this year, and in the presidential elections next year.

Opposition to NATO within the general population differs fundamentally from that of the nationalists and neo-Stalinists. Working people in Russia have had their illusions shattered since the introduction of capitalism. America, which was presented as the classic example of well-being and democracy, now appears as a force more likely to bring irrational destruction and violence, rather than creative reconstruction. The bombardment of Serbia sharply poses before the majority of the people the question, what are the prospects for the future in the present

international situation?

In contrast, the position of the official parties regarding the war against Serbia is marked by cynicism. Their crocodile tears for the fate of ordinary Serbs merely serve to hide their own political bankruptcy. Condemnation of the imperialist policies of the US is expressed by the same people who have brought Russia to the brink of ruin, and who unleashed the bloody war in Chechnya. Yeltsin's statement, "we now stand morally higher than America" sounds just as absurd as the claim by Clinton and his NATO allies that they began the war out of purely humanitarian concern for the fate of the Albanian population of Kosovo.

The war on the Balkans is also viewed as an opportunity to divert attention from the burning social problems at home. In the words of the liberal newspaper *Expert*, "the war in Yugoslavia gives Russia a chance to emerge from its own crisis." Behind the nationalist propaganda, new attacks on workers' living standards are being prepared. Primakov has already announced stern measures to strengthen the economy. He says it is necessary to "mobilise the entire inner resources of the economy... No leniency will be shown to those who oppose the discipline and orders of the Cabinet".

In this respect, the policies of the nationalists and the communists are hardly distinguishable from those of the liberals. They also have no answer to the burning social and economic questions. They are counting on obtaining new credits from the International Monetary Fund, and state bluntly that the negotiations with the IMF will yield success only if Moscow takes a hard line towards NATO.

In the final analysis, the increasingly nationalist course of Russian foreign policy can be traced back to the actions of the Great Powers themselves, who are less and less willing to take cognisance of Russian concerns when pursuing their own international aims.

The actions of NATO in the Kosovo conflict amount to a series of humiliations for Moscow. According to Karl Grobe, a leading political columnist in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, "[these] could not be swallowed, even by an essentially stable government constellation on the river Moskva". Russian endeavours to produce a compromise solution have been repeatedly and rudely rejected. The refusal to seek a UN mandate for the military action has blocked Russia from having any say. "The leading Western power and all too many of its satraps treat Russia as a *quaint* as a superfluous accessory of their world policy and economic globalisation, that Moscow must just accept," writes Grobe.

Above all, it is the US and Britain who have systematically snubbed Moscow. On the other hand, France and Germany have repeatedly attempted to integrate Russia into the solution to the Kosovo conflict. The German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, is in constant telephone contact with his Russian opposite number. The recent attempts to reach a negotiated settlement instigated by Prime Minister Primakov, who travelled to Belgrade, stemmed from a direct initiative of President Chirac. The German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, who did not want to risk a conflict with the US, then blocked this.

The German press is constantly pointing out the dangers that a confrontation with Russia would bring. A typical article in the influential political weekly *Die Zeit* warns "the Americans" against "repeating the mistake of Austria in 1908". At that time, Austria's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina antagonised Russia--which had been weakened by its defeat against Japan. Russia did "everything in order to open up new fronts against Austria in the Balkans. Russian politicians fanned the nationalist embers and encouraged the peoples of the Balkans to rise up against their oppressors. This ended with the assassination of the crown prince [Ferdinand] and the First World War."

The same newspaper points out that the first signs of a new Russian foreign policy are already discernible. They quote the words of the deputy Foreign Minister, Alexander Avdeyev: "A new foreign policy will create the conditions for the rebirth of Russia." They add that Foreign Minister

Ivanov is travelling to Tehran to negotiate the delivery of civilian nuclear technology to Iran, a country virtually outlawed by the US, and to discuss the consequences of the conflict in Kosovo. Defence Minister Sergeyev is visiting Beijing to consult on a joint defence reaction to a new American missile defence system.

The worries troubling German politicians and journalists about the dawning of a new Ice Age in relations with Moscow arise not only from the fact that German businesses and banks are more exposed by a stronger presence in Russia than any of their rivals. A cooling of relations would have disastrous consequences for the political stability of Europe and the extension of the European Union eastwards, on which the political and economic strength of Germany largely depends.

The war over Kosovo reveals new fault lines and conflicts of international proportion. The ruthless behaviour of NATO against Serbia throws up the question that this might be a model for future relations with Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union.

Since 1991, the US and European governments have relied on Boris Yeltsin. They supported him in 1995 when he acted with the same brutality against Chechnya that is currently displayed in Milosevic's treatment of the Albanian Kosovars. However, in the last eight years, Yeltsin has been unable either to establish a functioning economy or create a stable political system. When he departs the political arena, it will, in all probability, be the nationalists and neo-Stalinists who seize the political helm. Under such conditions, would it not make more sense to work for the collapse of Russia, encourage national contradictions, and then intervene militarily under the pretext of pursuing "humanitarian" motives, in order to carve out individual regions or occupy them, as happened in Yugoslavia?

There is no lack of suitably explosive matter to be found on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze is seeking a violent solution to the ballooning conflict with Abkhazia similar to that of Milosevic in Kosovo. He fears that NATO might transfer its policy to his country, that is already at the centre of a conflict of interests regarding oil in the Caspian Sea. The same problem confronts Azerbaijan and its unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. That country possesses the greatest oil reserves in the region, but lacks any direct access to the world market.

In the former Soviet republic of Moldova, tensions are coming to a head with the breakaway Dnestr republic. This is where the Russian minority in Moldova lives, and where almost the entire industry of the country can be found. Following the withdrawal of Russian troops from East Germany, most of the defence equipment they brought with them was stationed here. The ethnic discrimination against Russians living in the Baltic republics should also not be forgotten; this has strengthened nationalist tendencies inside Russia. In addition, media sources state that Islamic organisations in the Volga region of southern Russia are supporting NATO's attacks on the Serbs.

An intervention by NATO inside the former Soviet Union, along Yugoslavian lines, would have unforeseeable consequences. Nevertheless, this is the logic of the war that is presently escalating in the Balkans. A researcher at the Hamburg Institute for Peace Studies and Security Policy writes in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, "if NATO acts without any [UN] mandate, grave conflicts between the West and Russia can be predicted. Moreover, in many regions of the world the law of the jungle will replace the rule of law. The possible consequences for world peace would be disastrous."



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