

US pressures Balkan countries to cut ties with Russia

Paul Mitchell
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US President Barack Obama conducted a four-day trip to Europe last month, during which he sought to intensify the campaign against Russia that began with the US-backed fascist-led coup in Ukraine in February.

The aim was to pressure Washington's European allies, who have been reluctant to impose sweeping economic sanctions on Russia because of the consequences for their own economies.

Further US sanctions were imposed on July 17 targeting major banks, defence companies and energy corporations, including Rosneft, Russia's largest publicly traded oil company.

US pressure is also being stepped up in the Balkans region. Although it has intervened continuously in the region going back to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the NATO war in the 1990s, there is added urgency given that many of the Balkan countries maintain close economic and political relations with Russia.

Efforts for a renewed offensive in the Balkans to counter Russian influence will increase at the August 28 top level conference dedicated to the integration of the Balkans into the European Union (EU), and at the September NATO summit in Wales.

The August 28 conference is being organised by Germany, which is determined to retain and extend its interests in the Balkans. It was the first Western country to recognise the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, which precipitated the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Balkan Wars. German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared, "Germany will invite all Balkan states to a conference at the end of August to make it clear that we want to support each other and look to the future together."

Speaking about the Balkans conference, Corina Stratulat, senior policy analyst at the Brussels-based

European Policy Centre, told the online news-site EurActiv that there was a "pressing need to deal with the unfinished business in the Balkans".

"Although peace has taken hold of the region, Balkan countries are still not all in [the EU] and certainly they are not all transformed as we had envisioned," she added.

Stratulat explained that the EU enlargement policy had stalled since the accession of the Eastern bloc in the mid-2000s, and that the crisis in Ukraine "might also be another reason that Germany and the EU are renewing their interest in the Balkans, where Moscow is also lurking."

More forceful than Stratulat's comments were those penned in a June 26 *Foreign Affairs* article, "Why NATO and the EU Must Reopen Their Doors to the Balkans", by Edward P. Joseph and Janusz Bugajski.

Joseph is a former Deputy Head of the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe Mission in Kosovo and a Senior Fellow at the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University. Bugajski is the former Director of the New European Democracy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He has been an adviser on East European affairs for the US Department of Defense and chairs the South-Central Europe area studies programme at the Foreign Service Institute of the US Department of State.

The authors declare, "Instead of deferring to the hesitant position on the Balkans favored by European nations—such as Germany—...Washington needs to spur the continent to action, pressing the case for serious engagement on both broad geopolitics and regional stability."

They insist that, "Intensified cooperation in the Balkans between the United States and its European

partners—as well as the inclusion of all remaining Balkan states within NATO—will help to stabilize a still-uncertain region while containing Russia’s geopolitical appetite.”

“Further indecisiveness and the absence of stronger US leadership will only embolden Russian President Vladimir Putin to pursue his options in the Balkans”, they conclude.

Joseph and Bugajski criticise the EU for allowing Serbia’s continued progress towards membership of the bloc, even though it has refused to impose Western sanctions on Russia and praised Russian President Vladimir Putin’s public initiatives for resolving the violence in eastern Ukraine. Following his July 7-8 meeting in Moscow with Putin, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic repeated his government’s intention to pursue EU membership at the same time as maintaining “its good, friendly relations with Russia.”

The authors point out that, “Moscow largely controls Serbia’s oil industry and has its sights on neighboring Croatia’s state energy company, which could give it command over the flow of natural gas from the Adriatic Sea into Central Europe.”

The sabotaging of the South Stream pipeline that will bring that natural gas from Russia, bypassing Ukraine, is a major US aim. In June, Bulgaria was forced to suspend construction of its section of the pipeline after threats of sanctions from the EU and US.

However, Bulgaria has now reversed its decision, Serbia has just signed an agreement to start construction and Italy, Hungary, Greece, Slovenia, Austria and Croatia are still backing the project.

Joseph and Bugajski contrast the EU treatment of Serbia with its attitude to “little” Montenegro, which imposed sanctions “in the face of withering criticism” from Russia. Last year it rejected Moscow’s calls for a new strategic relationship, including a new Russian naval base at Bar. They call for Montenegro to be allowed to join NATO—its application was rejected again last month—in order to “stave off a potential Moscow beachhead on the Adriatic” with a “dejected and disappointed” Montenegro more susceptible to Russia’s “dubious financial enticements.”

With regard to Macedonia, Joseph and Bugajski insist, “with so much at stake, it is high time for a revived international effort at breaking the stalemate that keeps it out of NATO and the EU.” They call for

“strong-arm” pressure on Greece to drop its veto on accession because of a dispute over the name Macedonia, which it wants reserved for a region in Greece.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Joseph and Bugajski call for a “concerted push” from the US in the country, which is split into two virtually independent entities—the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb Republic. The two authors declare, “Now is the time for Washington to select from among the many suggested reforms and spur Berlin to present concrete options to Bosnian party leaders.”

They call for increased pressure on Milorad Dodik, the “divisive” leader of the Serb Republic, whom Russia has “courted...with an award for advancing “the unity of Orthodox nations” and a credit line of about 95 million dollars.”

Whether Joseph and Bugajski’s demands will come to fruition is difficult to determine. The major European imperialist powers have so far backed the US aggression against Russia but there is no doubt that this is creating tensions and fissures across Europe which are of an explosive character. The major powers with the US to the fore are exerting massive pressure on the Balkan countries and in the process inciting the same sort of ethnic and nationalist divisions that set the fuse for the first imperialist world war.



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