

Headley, James: Russia and the Balkans: Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin. London: Hurst & Company, 2008, 552 pages, ISBN: 978-1-85065-848-1.

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Russia and the Balkans by **James Headley**, a lecturer in political studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand, represents one of the most valuable and instigative books on the topic of modern Russian foreign policy in the Balkans. First published by HURST Publishers Ltd. in the UK in 2008 (ISBN 978-1-85065-848-1), this volume is intended to present a critical assessment of the Russian foreign policy towards Yugoslavia and its successor states in the period from dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992 till Kosovo's independence in 2008. For that matter, the book argues one specific course of the Russian foreign policy by examining its characteristics in the period from the demise of the joint Yugoslav state to the conflicts in the former Yugoslav republics, and from the "war on terror" to current disagreements over the status of Kosovo. In that respect, the author's goal is to demonstrate how the Russian foreign policy in the mentioned period was formulated and applied, as well as to comment on similarities and differences between policies of two Russian presidents – Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin.

Moreover, Headley also aims at explaining appropriate developments and alterations in attitudes of the Russian political elite, most influential political parties, academia and media all of which shared a common idea that the Russian engagement in the Balkan affairs was national responsibility of Russia as a great world power. Thus, the Yugoslav conflicts became not only a tool in political bickering between opposition and government in Russia, but reflected genuinely divergent political and moral views within opposition itself. In that respect, the fact (1) that the Yugoslav conflict took place in an area that the Russian state considered traditionally important for its interests and security, (2) that the conflict in fact represented a 'horror mirror' due to a number of similarities between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and, lastly, (3) that religious element – the one vested in fellow Slavic, particularly Christian Orthodox, nations at war – had

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its relevant influence on the Yugoslav demise, instigated a very heated debate in the late and post-Soviet political circles in Russia. Moreover, this issue became the second most debated political problem, only to be preceded by events taking place in the Russian 'near abroad'. Thus, the author confirms that *specific continuity of approach*, regardless of a policy shift in late 1993, *has reflected the very continuity of outlook of the ruling political elites* which, for that matter, meant that respective changes within Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidency had no significant impact on the policy implemented.

Headley has sectioned the book in **three distinct parts**, preceded by Introductory remarks and followed by a respective Concluding section, divided into several chapters.

I

Part I consists of three chapters, with the **first chapter** introducing historical assessments of the Russian foreign policy towards the Balkan Peninsula with certain attention given to relations between Russia and Serbia. Headley skillfully concludes that both Tsarist Russian and latter Soviet Balkan policies were embedded in primarily securing the Russian (a sense of duty to protect Slavic nations and to control the Straits – Bosphorus and Dardanelles) and the Soviet (to spread communist system) interests in the region. However, this policy has been largely unsuccessful because it was based on wrong assumptions about the importance of the Balkans and, on the other hand, it became impossible for Russia/Soviet Union to implement the policy properly and without major political and economic consequences leading to 'imperial overstretch'. Headley concludes the chapter by stating that historical relations between Russia and Serbia were always guided by perceived interests of the both rather than any often popularized 'brotherhood of the nations' and that, regardless of cultural and religious ties, popular feelings stemming from the historical past had minimal influence on the relations of the two.

The second chapter deals with developments in the Russian foreign policy after 1991 as part of wider policy changes that took place after Russia became an independent state a year later. The author examines liberal internationalist position of the Yeltsin government which set Russia's direction towards establishment of market-based economy, democratic political system and improved relations with the West, especially with the European states whose cultural circle Russia was believed to belong to. The internationalist political stance was formulated on belief in Russia as a great world power having common interests with the Western states. However, this political thinking crippled Russia seriously due to disastrous economic measures ('shock therapies') implemented, as well as Yeltsin's administrative neglect of the 'near abroad' (the

former ‘outer empire’) as the pressing issue. This is the reason which influenced policy shift after the administration came to realize that the Western states did but little to treat Russia fairly as a great power, thus Kremlin went to pursue a more ‘realist’ stance (termed ‘pragmatic realism’) in its foreign policy – a greater assertiveness within the ‘near abroad’ and emphasis on Russia’s great power status without seriously damaging relations with the Western states.

The **chapter three** describes various rival outlooks on strategic interests in the Balkans ranging from supposed Russian interests as related to the region as possible source of land invasion on Russia and geostrategic relevance of the Straits for the regional stability. Moreover, as the author argues, in broad ‘realist’ terms, the Balkans has been understood in the Russian foreign policy as an arena where Moscow had to encounter rise of any major regional power on the one hand, while, on the other hand, it had to face both the Western European states (specifically Germany) and the US (with Western Europe allied in NATO) in their supposed attempt to control the region. Headley also mentions economic factors that played significant role in the Russian Balkans policy – arms and gas exports, and involvement of various Russian companies in the regional economy (both gas exports and Russian companies’ presence in the region have become a powerful tool of the modern Russian foreign policy under the President Putin).

II

Part II is comprised of **chapters four** to **nine**, with chapters **four** and **five** introducing Slovenian and Croatian quest for independence and the liberal internationalist phase in the late-Soviet/early-Russian foreign policy. Headley confirms that, while the Yugoslav conflict was getting increasingly internationalized, the secessionist republics of both Yugoslavia and USSR broadened their ties and acted in each others’ support (as given through examples of establishing relations between Slovenia and Croatia with the Baltic republics, Georgia and Ukraine). Moreover, the author claims that, since the Serbian leadership headed by Milosevic tacitly supported the Moscow putsch of August 1991, after the failure of the said coup d’état Kremlin became wary of Milosevic (though both Belgrade and Kremlin knew that having reasonably good relations, despite many disagreements, goes in favor of the both). Thus, in this period Moscow, understanding danger of similar conflicts at home due to stark resemblance of the ‘mirror effects’, was trying to influence resolution of the Yugoslav crisis through UN and CSCE, because it was member of these organizations, rather than NATO or EC. And, while domestic opponents, these being ‘national-Bolsheviks and national democrats’ (as labeled by Kozyrev, the then-head of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), of Moscow’s liberal internationalism were

becoming more influential, it took only several months for Russia to introduce a change to its foreign policy. Unfettered internationalism, as it proved to have yielded no fruitful results in the previous period, was gradually changed into a policy of keeping NATO out of Yugoslavia while maintaining good relations with the West.

Chapters six and seven are dedicated to the transitional phase (summer of 1992 till the end of 1993) and formation of the ‘Great Power Concert’ that introduced specific changes to the Russian Balkans policy. This phase also reflected failures of the previous internationalist phase and it saw greater foreign policy involvement of the President Yeltsin. Thus, Moscow engaged in a more aggressive diplomacy and started advocating its *neutral stance*. Moreover, this neutral stance, which should not be interpreted as ‘pro-Serb but rather non anti-Serb’ according to Moscow, allowed Kremlin to emphasize importance of negotiations which included Russia as a great power with both its ‘*duties and rights*’. Thus, Russia clearly stated that it had its ‘own views and its own voice’ that needed to be addressed by the West in any attempt to solve the Yugoslav crisis. Starting from the London Conference to the demise of the Vance-Owen Peace Plan and the Sarajevo crisis, Russia formulated its positions on the Yugoslav conflicts on the following grounds: (1) no force to be used to enforce any peace settlement, (2) any planned use of force to be impartial, and (3) the force used may only be legitimized by UNSC (which addressed Kremlin’s fears of NATO having its own ‘showdown’ and consequent ‘resurrection’ in Bosnia). However, majority of Russian actions undermined serious efforts of the West to enforce peace settlements, and significantly contributed to European doubts about US interventionism. On the other hand, as the Bosnian conflict escalated, and though all major powers in the beginning also refused any large-scale interventionist actions, Kremlin was gradually pushed aside with the Western decision to finally forcefully intervene.

Chapters eight and nine argue the end of the Bosnian conflict and the Russian role in it. While this conflict was primarily settled with the American decision to use force against the Bosnian Serbs (holding, during most of the war, about 70 per cent of the Bosnian territory under their control) by coercing them to relinquish parts of occupied territories and agree to a peace treaty, Kremlin was largely ignored in this period by its Western partners due to its constant objections, which for that matter seemed senseless repetitions without any viable solution offered, to the Western actions. Moreover, it was the American-led air-strikes and rather intense diplomatic activity, coupled of course with considerable loss of territories by the Bosnian Serbs due to Muslim and Croat offensives and cessation of Belgrade support for Pale, that finally produced a peace treaty largely comparable to the one presented by the Contact Group a year

before. In the end, Russia's decision to take part in the peace-force in Bosnia saw improved relations between the partners in Kremlin and NATO, and set ground for the Russian peace-keeping operations in Bosnia.

III

Part III is intended to cover the post-Dayton period in Russia's Balkans policy and to show that Moscow's attitudes have not changed regardless of Primakov changing Kozyrev as PM. **Chapters ten and eleven** account for the period from the end of 1995 till the beginning of the Kosovo conflict in 1999. Continuity of the Russian 'realist' attitude is to be summed up in the following way: (1) keeping integrity and sovereignty of all Balkans states, (2) preventing uninvited Western intervention in the region, (3) conducting 'balanced policy' towards all ethnic groups and full implementation of the Dayton agreement in Bosnia, (4) maintaining UN control over Balkan peace-keeping, (5) improving relations with FR of Yugoslavia and its reintegration into international community (this being part of a wider 'realist' strategy in a 'multipolar world' where search for allies among all states regardless of their internal regimes was a must), and (6) cooperating with the West so as to serve the Russian foreign policy interests best. As for Bosnia, Russia continued to use the same line as before the conflict ended: it tried to side with the Western partners against nationalists in Bosnia, but refused to engage in any (coercive) actions that it saw unfit in order to achieve these ends.

Lastly, the rise of tensions in Kosovo and even in Serbia proper with large-scale opposition demonstrations against Milosevic did not introduce major shift in the Russian policy towards FR Yugoslavia as its major Balkan partner. Even from the point of view of the Russian policy towards the West, in key aspects there was no change whatsoever. As other major powers, Russia also failed to develop from the beginning a coherent and coordinated response to the Kosovo crisis due to inertia and lack of coordination in its foreign policy establishment. Thus, its policy went to favor a return of Kosovo's autonomy within FR Yugoslavia while trying not to damage relations with either Serbia or Albania. In that respect, this muddled policy of considering Kosovo to be an internal matter and, on the other hand, asking for rights of Kosovo Albanians to be respected, continued till large-scale conflict started in Kosovo. This meant that Belgrade was not given a clear signal by Moscow what was permissible in the case of Kosovo, though, as Headley argues, Moscow was often wrongly perceived, and I would add overrated, as exercising considerable influence over Belgrade. In short, as in the case of Bosnia, Russia joined with its Western partners in diplomatic offensive to settle the crisis, agreed on specific actions, but

refused any coercive operations that would have real leverage to deal with the problem on the ground. In that respect, Moscow's Kosovo policy reflected its Bosnian stance and, moreover, also indicated that Russia, as it became clear from consequent diplomatic talks, would not prevent NATO from engaging into military operations against FR Yugoslavia. Besides inflammatory rhetoric on the side of the Russian politicians, mostly targeting peaking domestic intolerance of the West, and Kremlin's occasionally uncooperative attitude in the UN, Russia did not seriously disrupt its relations with the West in this period.

The concluding chapters **twelve** and **thirteen** summarize the Russian attitudes towards the Kosovo conflict and present analysis of the Russian post-Kosovo interests in the Balkans. As Moscow refused to support NATO's actions against Yugoslavia and as considerable strain was put on relations of the two due to Kosovo crisis, Kremlin realized, though rather late, that it should exert growing diplomatic pressure on Belgrade in order to facilitate Serbian acceptance of NATO's key principles. Though Moscow denounced military actions against Belgrade, it soon realized that NATO was determined to continue until Milosevic was prepared to cease his actions in Kosovo. Yeltsin government opposed air strikes against Yugoslavia predominantly due to domestic public opinion, though this *does not in any way imply that it supported such actions tacitly*. It was rather the case that Russian leadership genuinely opposed the intervention; however the very inconsistency of the Russian foreign policy shows that, while Moscow was engaged in searching for diplomatic solution and agreed to put pressure on Belgrade for a deal on Kosovo, it, on the other hand, refused to take coercive measures in order to achieve these ends. More so, actual inconsistencies in the Russian views contradicted to Moscow's own actions during the first Chechen war. For that matter, probably there were members of the Yeltsin government who believed, *though never publicly admitted*, that force had to be used against Milosevic. As with Bosnia, Russia saw NATO's actions through lens of wider international relations and feared a global impact of Allied victory in Kosovo especially if Russian 'near abroad' was taken into account.

Finally, impact of the Kosovo conflict on the Russian foreign and security policy became evident soon. The doctrinal developments were embodied during 1999 and 2000 in the new foreign and security policy thinking and they coincided with Putin taking presidency amid new Chechen campaign that paved his way to Kremlin. The new President took an original course towards the Balkans by trying to establish good relations between Russia and all Balkan states mostly through fostering stronger economic (gas exports, privatization and sale of various companies to Russian owners, proposals for building new gas and oil lines) and military ties (arms exports). The new course by Putin was furthermore implemented in Kremlin's foreign policy

towards the Western partners by emphasizing common interests and 'war on terror' as its core issues. The President skillfully seized the moment after 2001 to extend unconditional support to the US in its antiterrorist fight which allowed Moscow to close its Chechen debate for good by exterminating all resistance to the Russian rule in the province. In a similar way, Russia, emboldened by its economic growth, found increasingly more power in confronting the West over several intriguing issues of modern international relations such as status of Kosovo or situation in the Caucasian republics. With more gailwind in its sails, Moscow even staged its own 'Kosovo-inspired humanitarian' war in the Caucasus without any major destabilization of relations with the West. Thus, it seems that Kremlin introduced certain changes in its foreign policy, though in its core still guided by traditional values and ideas, over the last couple of years and managed to use serious inconsistencies in the Western foreign policies to its own advantage.

ASSESSMENT

The book summarized in the previous section certainly stands for one of the most intriguing accounts, well substantiated and thoroughly researched, of the modern Russian policy in the Balkans. It successfully illustrated how the Russian Balkans policy was influenced by the Yugoslav conflicts and, on the other hand, how Moscow's foreign policy response evolved from early liberal internationalist phase, over 'realist' 'great power' politics, to a more pragmatic approach after 2000. Among these, only the 'realist' notion (based specifically on science of geopolitics) came to symbolize a specific ideational reaction to the early liberal internationalist phase rather than international events, and this 'realist' view for a number of years prevailed Kremlin's policy.

The author has addressed a variety of different sources which allowed him to define the Russian Balkans policy from divergent perspectives. References provide extensive information not only on the topic at hand, but also on the related issues. Thus, Headley went into two specific directions: on the one hand, he presented and analyzed a specific course in the respective foreign policy from the point of view of its formation and application (level of the ruling political elite as policy-/decision-makers) in the international environment, while on the other hand, he dedicated his attention to addressing the domestic Russian politics and manners in which political parties, public opinion, media and intelligentsia influenced the said foreign policy. In that respect, Headley has also successfully touched upon domestic influences on Moscow's Balkans policy, and moreover, managed to clarify them and establish a relation to domestic political situation in Serbia in the given time. This insightful portrayal shows how certain political structures, these

being mostly in the Russian opposition, found their counterparts in the ruling Serbian elite and nationalist opposition and supported pro-nationalist, 'pro-Serb' and primarily anti-Western views. From that point of view, relationship between Moscow and Belgrade has always been guided by interests of the both rather than any professed and often popularized view of the 'brotherhood' between the nations sharing numerous strong cultural and religious ties. Thus, the book demystified often popularized notions of the Russian influence in the Balkans, especially in terms of the Russian relations with Serbia.

Headley has also accomplished to show how ambiguous the relationship between Moscow and Belgrade really was, and that Kremlin's influence over the Milosevic government was certainly overrated. Furthermore, the author clearly pinpointed the exact issue with the Yugoslav crisis and affirmed that it was the Western diplomatic offensive and coercive military actions, led by the US, which finally ended the conflict in Yugoslavia and stabilized the region. Moscow's actions were, though at certain times consistent and succinct, in general rather elusive and contradictory because it was perceived that Kremlin and the West had divergent interests in a 'multi-polar' world (most importantly, European security structure was among the most challenging issues). Thus, Russia sought to satisfy an array of diverse goals, first of which being ascertaining and maintaining Russian influence as the 'great world power' which troubled its relationship towards the West and disabled Kremlin from successfully influencing the resolution of the Yugoslav crisis. Unfortunately enough, the Russian policy-makers hardly ever understood that their own policies failed by large thus Kremlin's political elites were constantly revolving in a circle of 'great power' politics where Moscow had '*rights and responsibilities*' to act (ironically enough, Moscow always had, for that matter, fewer direct interests in the Balkans than any Western country).

With a skillfully conducted analysis and vast majority of sources used in order to substantiate his claims, Headley introduced a book which is easily followed and understood. Based on large-scale research of different sources, the writer accomplished to concisely and methodically argue his claims examining considerable data. Lastly, I would like to highlight that Hedley's volume has certainly had a very positive impression on me as a reader simply because it points towards a number of extensive sources which allow the reader to further explore the topic on one's own. This very diversity also directs the reader to investigate relevant information not only on the topic of the modern Russian Balkans policy, but also on several different topics related to the Russian engagement in the Balkans such as the historical account for the Russian/Soviet engagement in the Balkans, domestic politics of both Russia and Serbia, international

intervention in the former Yugoslavia and Western diplomatic offensive in order to contain the Yugoslav crisis. From this point of view, the book fills a major gap in the literature on the topic at hand. It obviously achieves its target and, moreover, stands for indispensable source of information on the modern Russian policy in the Balkans. Thus, I warmly recommend it as an extremely useful and rather interesting volume of political literature.