



by Jovan Kovacic

Dark Clouds Over Serbia

US and Russia struggle for influence

Maria Zakharova, the public mouthpiece of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, made the biggest and most chilling impression when she scolded the US Ambassador to Serbia **Kyle Scott** for his comments on the future of Serbian-American relations.

Zakharova's words were a strange departure from the standard diplomatic practice as a foreign ministry does not usually comment on the statements of ambassadors of a rival power and made in a third country with no reference to its own state. Pundits say there is more of this to come and will only get worse as US-Russian tensions grow and their fight over influence in the Balkans intensifies.

Noting the current excellent relations between the US and Serbia, Scott said in an interview with a Serbian daily that "It is finally the time to move forward and improve our relations and we have very good foundations to do so. We share the same vision of Serbia becoming a deserving member in the European Union."

This did not sit well with Moscow as Zakharova offered a sharply-worded retort, saying, "The US must first apologise for the (1999) bombing Yugoslavia, pay for damages to the families of the killed and wounded in the attacks, and only then ask from others to look into the future." The message was loud and clear that Moscow is following the growing ties between Washington and Belgrade closely and will not look kindly on the growing rapprochement between White House and the Serbian government.

Washington's engagement

Until a few years ago the firm belief in Washington was that the Kosovo issue had already been resolved and that the Western Balkans will plod along en route to becoming a member of the EU. During that period, Moscow made an unprecedented effort in the history of Serbian-Russian relations to win hearts and minds. The Kremlin had alarming success with Serbia's population, largely because they pressed the issue without ever being in competition with a third party. Russia's support for Serbia in the UN Security Council, which included blocking Kosovo's membership in the UN, gave Moscow significant leverage in Belgrade. At the same time, Serbia's

diplomacy went into overdrive and prompted 15 countries to revoke or annul their recognition of Kosovo. When Russia opened Belgrade outlets for its two propaganda outlets – Russia Today and Sputnik – and after **Donald J. Trump** was elected president, the Americans finally woke up to the current realities in the Western Balkans.

Washington is now saying it will accept any arrangement that Belgrade and Pristina can reach. Trump has followed this up by appointing a Balkans veteran, **Mathew Palmer**, as special envoy to the troubled region to reinvigorate the stalled talks between the Serbian and Kosovar sides. He already holds the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for the region in the State Department's Bureau for Eu-

line its foreign policy and commitments with those of Brussels.

The 100th anniversary of the Serbian flag flying over the White House to commemorate the bravery of the Serbian soldiers in World War I was a media topic in Serbia for days. The bilateral goodwill also included a commemoration of the 75th anniversary of Operation Halyard when 500 American pilots were saved by their World War II Serbian allies.

This was not welcome or good news for Moscow, which has already suffered embarrassing defeats at the hands of the West in both Montenegro and North Macedonia. Zakharova's ominous statement indicates that Moscow will not cede its last remnants of patronage in the Balkans without a fight. This will un-

government to decide. Interesting times, not that anyone expects this to really happen. Similar public suggestions have been the main drivers behind Belgrade's increasingly friendly relationship with the Visegrad Group - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

In another body blow, **Dr. John M. Nomikos**, the Director at the Research Institute for European and American Studies in Athens, said in an interview that the number one problem for the Western Balkans is not Islamic extremism, but rather the Albanian organised crime syndicates that control most of the drug trade, trafficking and money laundering in Europe and also cooperates with Islamic extremists in Albania and Kosovo.

Observers worry that organised

as a state comprising two entities – the Bosnian-Croat Federation and the Republika Srpska – made up of the country's three main ethno-religious groups of Muslim Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats.

Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, immediately warned in his patented firebrand manner that the Serb regions of Bosnia could move towards secession if the SDA follows through with its proposal.

The international community's top representatives in Bosnia also echoed Dodik's condemnation. **Valentin Inzko**, the High Representative, slammed the SDA's resolution as it failed to gain the consent of either the Serbs and Croats. Inzko and the OSCE accused the Bosniak party of knowingly stoking ethnic tensions.

Bosnia also experienced its first gay pride parade earlier this month. With a large police presence on the streets, hundreds of Sarajevans defied threats of violence by conservative Islamic groups to march, sing, and wave rainbow flags in the predominately Muslim city. Bosnia is the last of the former Yugoslav republics to hold a gay pride event.

Belgrade also held a large, now routinely peaceful pride march this month, which was attended by Serbia first gay prime minister, **Ana Brnabic**, and her partner **Milica Durdic**.

EU hopes to act as go-between to avoid political impasse

Embattled Serbian opposition has only partially welcomed an initiative by **David McAllister**, the Chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, for the European Parliament to mediate with the Serbian authorities in the hope of staving off an election boycott that is due early next year. Denying any wrongdoing, the ruling SNS party, which steadily polls above 50%, has welcomed the initiative and has also called for OSCE to immediately send a team and check the opposition's demands.

Observers say that those parties urging the boycott and claiming that six months are not enough to resolve all the issues even with EU and OSCE involvement are simply covering up their lack of voter support and vision, hence the lukewarm welcome to the EP initiative.



US Senator Ron Johnson shakes hands with Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic after a press conference in Belgrade.

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rope and Eurasia. Negotiations have been frozen since Pristina imposed a 100% tariff on all Serbian imports, a major contravention of the regional free trade CEFTA agreement. Serbia has enthusiastically welcomed the US' change of heart as well as its renewed involvement in the peace process, which has included floating the idea of holding an international conference on Kosovo which would include the US, EU, Russia, China, and Turkey - all which have vested interests in the region.

This downgrades Moscow's leverage over Belgrade, which consistently reiterated its commitment to becoming a member of the EU. Serbia has, so far, refused to join the ranks of current members of the EU to impose economic sanctions on Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea, but has also said clearly it is aware that joining the European Union means Belgrade must stream-

doubtedly be seen as a foreboding dark cloud hanging over the locals of the region.

Rethinking the Kosovo question

Pristina has thus far turned a deaf ear to the demands of its erstwhile mentors – the US and EU – that it must lift the tariffs bringing the government down. Elections are scheduled for October 6 and already the US and EU have said they hoped the new government will revoke the tariffs to reopen the talks with Belgrade.

Czech President **Milos Zeman** recently told his host, Serb President **Aleksandar Vucic**, that his country should rethink its recognition of Kosovo. Zeman's Prime Minister **Andrej Babis** rejected the idea out of hand, but later backtracked saying he could not make such a decision on his own and would leave it to his

crime rings in Kosovo could play a detrimental role in the peace process simply because they are not interested in having a modern, transparent, and law-abiding state with an independent judiciary and uncorrupted police force.

Worrying signs in Bosnia

Not to be outpaced in the quest to dominate the regional spotlight, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Bosnia and Herzegovina's leading Bosniak party, may have opened Pandora's Box after adopting at its recent congress a resolution calling for the reorganisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a unitary republic with Sarajevo as its political, administrative, cultural and economic center. The proposal is a violation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords that ended Bosnia's brutal three-year civil war. Dayton specifically defined Bosnia