

Serbia: A legacy of war

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If it is an inherent contradiction that all we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history, then this would apply to few countries more than Serbia. Twenty years after the Bosnian war that saw atrocities perpetrated by Serb forces on ethnic and religious grounds, the country's interior minister Aleksandar Vulin has suggested again the creation of a single 'Serbian state' that would reignite the still bubbling tensions between Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia. This shows that Serbia is still constrained by looking to the past for all the wrong reasons, meaning that its present will remain in a state of compromise – with associated difficulties for social and corporate life alike.



The remarks by Minister Vulin confirm that Serbia has not given up on the idea of unifying on ethnic grounds those it deems to be Serbs under a 'Greater Serbia' – parallels perhaps to be drawn with Russia's ongoing quest to subjugate Ukraine on similar ethnic grounds. However, this poses two problems. Firstly, aside from its tone-deafness, it will do nothing to lighten the legacy of the Balkan conflict still within living memory and will not reassure Serbia's Bosnian and Croatian neighbours that Serbia can be trusted as a partner or even a neighbour. Secondly, it directly contradicts the Dayton Agreement that brought an end to the war in 1995 and runs counter to the view expressed by nations and global institutions that the current separate and tripartite arrangement is the only one possible to secure even a modicum of peace. It is thought that Serbia's President, Aleksandar Vucic, shares the view of Vulin but for political reasons cannot say this out loud. If the Serbian political elite are broadly of this mind, however, then Serbia risks falling even further into instability. At present, there is suspicion and antagonism towards anything connected with Croatia and Bosnia. Pushing openly for a 'Greater Serbia' once again would tip the scales into outright hostility which serves no-one.

It is hardly a paragon of virtue already. Serbian politics is a mire of non-accountable ministers and cronies matched only by the lack of transparency in the conduct of their business, with all media of note heavily favouring the government by choice or necessity. The Council of Europe's 'GRECO' organisation has called for twenty-four separate measures, covering all aspects of public and political life from the President

downwards, to be implemented in an attempt to mitigate corruption – not least the mandatory introduction of integrity checks for anyone in public life, establishment of an anti-corruption strategy across law enforcement bodies, and the extension of the Law on Lobbying to cover those at the top political levels. Serbia has a year to implement these – but if the current record is anything to go by, most measures will simply be ignored. Serbia's record on transparency is the worst in the region and government graft and corruption passes largely unchallenged domestically, while repression and human rights abuses grow, creating the conditions for a klepto- or narco-state within Europe. EU accession looks the furthest away it has ever been.

And there is one last complication – Russia. Serbia has thus far been extremely vocal about its support for Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, and such a stance could make future business difficult, particularly if sanctions are extended or a violent new phase be reached. If Serbia is one of Moscow's few remaining friends in Europe, there is likely to be a commensurate upswing in Russian criminal and influential activity in-country as a result – which is a problem that businesses can certainly do without, even if divorced from the host of security- and politically-driven problems already present.

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