

President Putin and the Diplomacy of the Aragosta

By Xhavit Shala

"I would like¹ to congratulate President Putin² for he was the only one who caught fish,"³ President Bush told the journalists following the informal meeting with President Putin in Kennebunkport, Maine on July 2nd. And the reports from the meeting do indicate that the only one who "caught any fish" out of this meeting was President Putin, even though people close to the two "elephants" had warned that not much was to be expected from this event.

Recently, President Putin has become subject of intense accusations from the international and domestic press for violations of human rights, pressuring of the opposition and the liquidation of opponents. He has been criticized for using Russian energy and gas as pressure tools against Europe, for reinstating a foreign policy of permanent tension. He has been accused of increasing the power of the FSB (the successor of the KGB) over the Russian government and the country. And most recently he has been criticized for threatening to use the veto to block the independence of Kosova at the UNSC.

The meeting at the private villa of the Bush family, a place where President Bush had not invited any other head of state, helped Putin to boost his ratings in the face of growing international pressure arrayed against him. A few months ahead of Russian parliamentary elections and a year ahead of presidential elections, the meeting and the reception accorded by the Bush dynasty, will help Putin score a victory in the elections home. It will also help him accelerate his efforts to amend the Russian Constitution or to finding other ways of remaining in power. The Russian daily "Komersant" confirmed these plans just a few days ago. According to the paper, "the Russian Constitution allows Putin to run again for office if he will take a brake after having served two terms." This was the real fish that Putin caught in the U.S.

The Bush-Putin meeting and the diplomacy of the aragosta⁴ disappointed the Albanians in general and the Albanians of Kosova in particular. The "Kosova file" was not included into the list of major issues to be discussed. According to Steven Hadley, the U.S. National Security Advisor, "there are many ideas about Kosova that are in circulation and that the two leaders have said that they would like for Foreign Ministers Rice and Lavrov

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² The article was published in the daily "Koha Jonë" July 10, 2007;
<http://www.acnss.com/html/studime/0907putin.htm>.

³ James Coomarsamy BBC, Washington- BBC July 3, 2007.

⁴ The Bush-Putin meeting in Kennebunkport, Maine, was also referred to as the diplomacy of the aragosta because of the rich menu with aragosta reserved for the Russian guest by President Bush.

to oversee and continue these talks to see if they could find a solution to move them forward."

President Putin has softened his opposition to the U.S. plans to set up a new Anti-Rocket defense system in Europe. He has, however, made no concession on Kosova and the parties have only agreed "to let the talks continue." The statement made by Steven Hadley makes no mention of any limited timeframe for the talks.⁵ "There is no doubt that passing this problem along to the Foreign Ministers is a failure for the American diplomacy and marks a step backwards," Daniel Server of the U.S. Institute for Peace, said after the Bush-Putin meeting.⁶

The Russians were able to effectively postpone the timetable for the resolution of the Kosova status. The postponement presents the Russians with a symbolic victory as it demonstrated to the world that the U.S. takes notice of Russia and do take into serious consideration their position on international matters.

The Europeans seem to have been disappointed by the Bush-Putin meeting also. They were expecting the U.S. to make clear to Putin that the West would prefer a U.N. resolution on Kosova but if Russia continued to oppose it, the US and several other European partners would move ahead with recognizing the independence of Kosova unilaterally. The Americans should have made it clear to the Russians that if independence was not achieved at the UNSC, they would move to bring it about outside of the UN. The Europeans hoped that the U.S. pressure would push the Russians to soften their position and would make it possible for the Ahtisaari package to be approved at the UNSC, thus opening the way to the EU mission to set up quarters in Prishtina. Contrary to European hopes, President Bush did not consider it appropriate to exert pressure on a guest and he made no mention of timelines for Kosova's status.

While there is no evidence to demonstrate a change in the US position on Kosova as reiterated by President Bush during his visit to Tirana, the tactical position embraced by the American during the meeting with President Putin seems to have alarmed the Europeans. European politicians recognize that any postponement of the Kosova status resolution could lead to the eruption of violence⁷ and a growing Russian influence in the

⁵ Steven Hadley, US National Security Advisor said after the meeting that President Bush and Putin would have "Secretary Rice and Minister Lavrov to follow and continue the talks to see if they can find a solution."

⁶ Daniel Server: Kosova sidelined by other issues in the Bush-Putin summit-"VOA" interview by Ilir Konomi, 4.7.2007.

⁷ Naim Maloku, Deputy Speaker of the Kosova Parliament: Delays in the status definition could create the conditions that may lead to the creation of illegal military formations in Kosova. I am saying this even publicly but circumstances may create the conditions that may lead the more radical elements among the Albanians who could organize themselves and create problems for the security of Kosova and the region. (Radio Free Europe, June 22, 2007.

region.⁸ Russian influence in the region is growing thanks to the energy expansion and the politics of unconditional cooperation that Russia has employed.

The rise of Russian influence in the Balkans would undermine the EU's position in a region where any crises would directly affect more the EU than Russia and the U.S. It was for this reasons that Brussels reacted harshly against Russia as the meeting between Bush and Putin was coming to a close. "Russia defends its own position and interests but Kosova is a European matter and we have made it clear to Russia that we are interested in resolving this problem. The future of the Balkans depends on the EU and not on Russia," Kristina Galak,⁹ the spokesperson of the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana, said. We can only hope that the Europeans have renounced the policy of finding pretexts not to act as was the case during the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia. Throughout the conflicts of the 90's, the EU was a paralyzed body and it was the U.S. that had to take the lead.

The Bush-Putin meeting seems to have awakened Brussels to its responsibilities on resolving the Kosova status. With this in mind, the EU countries with a seat in the UNSC will undertake the initiative to submit to the Security Council another draft resolution in the coming ten days. Their goal is to get approval for an EU led-mission that would replace UNMIK. To neutralize any Russian action to veto the resolution, they have proposed renewed talks between Prishtina and Belgrade. If the resolution were to pass, the EU mission to Kosova would become official. This would provide the Europeans with an added opportunity to keep the situation under control. The EU mission would also facilitate any unilateral recognition of Kosova's independence by the U.S. and other EU countries. In case the resolution fails, the United States and the EU must consider moving ahead with determining the status outside of the UN, a solution used when the air assault against Serbia was launched in 1999. Otherwise, if the U.S. and the EU will continue to rely on the diplomacy of the aragosta, it will be hard to save Kosova from the ensuing violence and keep the Balkans from being swallowed by the Russian crab.

⁸ Patrick Moore, Status delays increase Russia's influence in the Balkans"- Radio Free Europe/ July 1 2007.

⁹ Kristina Galak: The EU will assume responsibility and bring about a decision on Kosova," Galak, spokesperson for EU Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana. Radio Free Europe/ July 3, 2007