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RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND TOOLS OF INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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INTRODUCTION

On 17 January 2019, Vladimir Putin paid a landmark visit to Belgrade. A jubilant 100,000-strong multitude waving the white-blue-and-red flags of the Russian Federation and Serbia filled the streets, many people bused in from across the country to participate. The hosts greeted their distinguished guest with an artillery salute. Crowds grew ecstatic as Putin and President Aleksandar Vučić made their way to St. Sava, the Balkans' largest Orthodox cathedral, completed thanks to a grant from Russia. Just weeks away from the 20th anniversary of NATO's intervention in Kosovo, the hero's reception Putin was given accentuated the two countries' burgeoning ties. Vučić discussed his plans for partitioning Kosovo with Russia's president.

The visit produced an agreement on Serbia's inclusion in the TurkStream project, a pipeline designed to ship Russian natural gas through Southeast Europe bypassing Ukraine. Weeks later, Belgrade was to take four MiG-29s from Russia's ally Belarus, in addition to fighter jets already donated by Moscow. For Putin, the trip to Belgrade scored a diplomatic triumph. Apart from the vigour of the Serbian-Russian partnership, it showcased Moscow's influence across the Balkans, and in European affairs more broadly.¹

Russia's forays into Europe's southeast fuel the perception of the region as a battleground of great powers.² The list of interested parties includes Turkey, China, whose economic clout is on the rise; and possibly the Gulf Monarchies, which have also made inroads into the region.

Of all these, it is Russia that poses the most direct challenge to the West. Unlike other external players, Moscow has wholeheartedly embraced the role of spoiler acting against Western interests. Moscow is vehemently opposed to ex-Yugoslav countries joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and is no friend of the European Union (EU) either, even though its attitude to EU enlargement remains ambiguous.

Russia is also unique in terms of the range of capabilities it brings to bear. Its toolbox spans hard military power, economic instruments—particularly with regard to the energy sector, elements of what analysts define as 'sharp power' (e.g. disinformation and disruption), as well as a degree of cultural appeal or 'soft power' rooted in shared religion and history with a number of South Slav nations.³ Though it lags considerably behind the EU and NATO, Russia has proven an increasingly influential actor.⁴



This paper starts with an analysis of the Western Balkans' place in Russia's strategy. The main contention is that Moscow's paramount objective is balancing the power of NATO and the EU rather than establishing regional hegemony.

The paper then takes a closer look at Russia's toolbox and the instruments it leverages to assert its interests across former Yugoslavia and Southeast Europe as a whole, and ends with several recommendations on how the West should respond to the Russian challenge.



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RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Russian foreign policy pursues three, mutually-related grand objectives. First, **engagement with the outside world as a means of preserving domestic stability, understood first and foremost as stability of the regime.** The governing elite, many of whom have a background in the security services, view global politics as a source of both threats and opportunities. The Kremlin views the West—the US and its European allies—with a great deal of suspicion. There is a belief that the US is promoting a regime change, either in Russia's near abroad, in the Middle East, or in the Russian Federation itself.

Defending the Fatherland against foreign interference, therefore, starts beyond its borders.⁵

The second objective, very much stemming from the first, is **to ensure that Russia retains control over the post-Soviet space.** This does not mean dislodging other players, such as China in Central Asia or the EU in Eastern Europe. Such an outcome would be far beyond Russia's reach. Yet Moscow has shown its willingness to go to considerable lengths to protect its corner. The prime example is Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in East Ukraine,



which has provided Moscow with leverage over Kyiv but has also resulted in significant costs because of sanctions from the West.

The last objective concerns **the preservation of Russia's status as a great power in global affairs**. Though it is not a peer of either the current hegemon, the US, or of a rising China, Russia is equipped with a large nuclear arsenal, a seat in the UN Security Council, and a good chunk of the Eurasian landmass; Russia sees itself as a senior stakeholder in a concert of powers, reminiscent of classic European diplomacy in the 19th century.

The multipolar vision, originally articulated by Yevgeny Primakov during his term as a foreign minister and later as premier between 1996–98, dictates that Russia should be prepared to balance and push back against the US in cooperation with other states in order to obtain a fairer deal. Under Putin, Russia has made strides towards realising this vision. From the intervention in Syria in 2015 onwards, Russia's actions have vindicated its claim of being more than just a regional power confined to the post-Soviet space, as the Obama administration once characterised it.⁶

The Western Balkans are part and parcel of Russia's strategy to establish itself as a first-rate player in European security affairs, along with other major states such as Germany, France, and the UK. Since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the region has been at the forefront of debates on critical issues such as transatlantic relations, the EU's security and defence dimension, and NATO/EU enlargement. Having a

foothold in the Balkans means having a say on those strategic matters, which are of direct consequence to Russia. **Moscow is driven by geopolitics, with other concerns such as economic interests or historic bonds with the South Slavs or the other Orthodox nations playing a secondary role.** It sees the Balkans as a vulnerable periphery of Europe where Russia can build a foothold, recruit supporters, and ultimately maximise its leverage vis-à-vis the West.

There is no doubt that Southeast Europe lies well beyond what Russia considers its privileged sphere of geopolitical interest. **In economic, social, and also purely geographical terms, the former Yugoslav republics and Albania gravitate towards the West.** The EU accounts for the bulk of the region's trade⁷ and foreign direct investment (up to 81.6% of the total stock in North Macedonia and 77% in Serbia).⁸

The Union is also home to sizeable immigrant communities from the region, some of which date back to the 1960s.⁹ **NATO dominates the security landscape, with Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro already in the alliance, North Macedonia at its doorstep, and NATO's KFOR mission underwriting stability in Kosovo.** There is no realistic prospect that those countries would ever consider Russian-led structures such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as an attractive alternative.

Russia's only option is to act in an obstructionist manner to undermine the EU and NATO, making use of the Balkans' own vulnerabilities, whether through nationalism-fuelled dis-



putes inherited from the 1990s, pervasive corruption and state capture, or citizens' distrust in public institutions.

Rather than drawing the Western Balkans into its own orbit, a costly exercise for a nation whose GDP is comparable to that of Spain, Russia is looking for leverage in the region it could then apply to the EU and the US. **Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, or elsewhere is a bargaining chip in Russia's strategic competition with Western powers.**

From Moscow's perspective, projecting power in the Balkans is tantamount to giving the West a taste of its own medicine. If the Europeans and the Americans are meddling in its backyard—Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, or any other part of its 'near abroad'—Russia is entitled to do the same in theirs.

The perception that the US humiliated Moscow during the Kosovo crisis of 1999 is also at play, justifying engagement with the region as a means to right past wrongs. **Russia's so-called return to the Balkans, in no small measure occurring through invitation from local officials, is payback to the West for its own arrogance.** Lastly, active involvement in the region underscores Russia's role in European security, particularly on salient and politicised issues such as NATO's expansion, the talks between Serbia and Kosovo, or the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This awards Moscow the coveted status of a top-tier power, whose interests and networks spread far and wide across the Old Continent and beyond.

Russia can leverage scarce resources to attain maximum payoff (or 'play a weak hand well', as Strobe Talbott once characterised Primakov's strategy), be they diplomatic or commercial gains, or simply confirmation of Moscow's status as an indispensable international actor.¹⁰ Not being bound by any particular ideology or normative aspirations also gives present-day Russia an advantage.

In that sense, today's Russia differs from the Soviet Union, where communist doctrine bore heavily on policy, and also from the pre-1917 Tsarist Empire with its attachment to Orthodoxy and autocracy. Russia enjoys a great deal of room for manoeuvring and negotiates with a variety of actors on the political scene, in business, and in civil society.

Moreover, it uses the entire spectrum of instruments at its disposal—from coercion to co-optation to disruptive interference in other countries' affairs, the latter viewed by Russian policymakers an attribute of any great power.

” Since the early 1990s, Moscow’s engagement in the Balkans has ebbed and flowed depending on the state of its relations with the West.

RUSSIA’S EVOLVING POLICY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

To understand present-day Russian policy in the Western Balkans it is worth tracing its development over time. Since the early 1990s, Moscow’s engagement in the Balkans has ebbed and flowed depending on the state of its relations with the West. Historic bonds and shared identity play a secondary role to strategic considerations. Moscow has acted as both partner and rival to the EU and the US. Russian policy can be seen as having gone through three stages.

Stage 1: Engagement

The presidency of Boris Yeltsin (1991–2000) was marked by war in the former Yugoslavia. By engaging diplomatically in the conflict, Russia attempted to balance its interests against

those of the US and NATO and stake a claim for the post-Cold War security order in Europe. Ultimately, Moscow suffered a series of setbacks, notably its failure to avert the American-led intervention in Kosovo.¹¹

Stage 2: Retrenchment and relaunch

Vladimir Putin’s first two terms as president started with a retrenchment and then, in the mid-2000s, a relaunch of Moscow’s Balkan policy, which continued throughout Medvedev’s tenure. Putin presided over the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Kosovo and Bosnia in 2003. But by the middle of the decade, thanks



to the Kosovo status talks and ambitious energy ventures such as the South Stream natural gas pipeline, Russia made a strong comeback, strengthening ties with local actors and positioning itself as an interlocutor for the EU and the US. At the same time, Moscow did not try to bloc NATO enlargement and shrugged off the alliance's 2009 expansion to include Croatia and Albania.

Stage 3: Standoff

The Ukraine crisis of 2013–14 and the resulting standoff between Russia and the West ushered in a third stage. In the summer of 2014, the South Stream gas pipeline project was effectively cancelled as Europe's interest in resolving the long-standing legal dispute between Gazprom and the European Commission expired.¹²

Russia struck back by mobilising political and civil society actors to push against both the US and the EU. Russian-sponsored and pro-Russia media stepped up their anti-Western information campaign.¹³

Leaders such as Aleksandar Vučić, then Serbian Prime Minister (now President), and Milorad Dodik, then President of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, vowed to preserve their strategic links to Russia. In October 2014, Vladimir Putin was accorded a royal treatment in Belgrade where he was the guest of honour at a military parade marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Yugoslavia's capital from Nazi occupation. Serbia stepped up its defence and security cooperation with the Russians

even as it deepened ties with NATO. Nationalist groups from the Western Balkan countries sent monitors to the independence referendum held in Russian-occupied Crimea.

There were multiple reports of volunteers from Serbia and other parts of former Yugoslavia fighting alongside the forces of the self-proclaimed peoples' republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DNR/LNR) in Eastern Ukraine.¹⁴

Though Russia's primary objective of halting NATO expansion has proven a tall order, Moscow has managed to score some diplomatic points. In 2014, along with (North) Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia declined to join in the Western sanctions against Russia.

Even members of NATO and the EU in ex-Yugoslavia, such as Slovenia and Croatia, have been eager to upgrade their economic cooperation with Moscow.¹⁵ The TurkStream pipeline, a downscaled version of the South Stream project that is to run through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary, revived the allure of Russian investment in the region.

In short, Russia continues to deploy economic incentives to advance its objectives in addition to employing forms of covert or sharp power, such as providing support for radical groups or information campaigns.

” Russia uses many different instruments to assert its interest: hard military power, manipulation of economic ties, interference in other countries’ domestic politics and targeted information campaigns to influence public opinion.

RUSSIA’S TOOLBOX

Indisputably, Russia uses many different instruments to assert its interest. These include hard military power, as demonstrated in the interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria; the manipulation of economic ties; interference in other countries’ domestic politics through various allies, affiliates, and proxies; and targeted information campaigns to influence public opinion.

The Russian toolbox includes *coercion*, *co-optation*, and *subversion*. Coercion refers to the use of punishment, such as military force or economic sanctions or the threat thereof, to shape the behaviour of other states. *Co-optation* works through the extension of incentives to political and business elites and individuals in strategic positions aimed at creating relationships of dependence, which in turn provide Russia with advantage. Lastly, subversion is di-

rected at society at large rather than at specific actors, and is geared towards undermining adversaries rather than compelling another party to abide with Russian preferences.

Coercion

As a rule, coercion through hard power is of lesser significance for the Western Balkans than for other regions exposed to Russia. Moscow has no boots on the ground in former Yugoslavia but its military holds influence in the wider region of Southeast Europe, particularly in Black Sea littoral countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, which have been confronted with the build-up of Russian forces and capabilities over more than a decade.¹⁶ At the same time, soft coercion verging on disruption



and interference in domestic affairs is far from rare. A case in point would be the support Russia has given to nationalist activists in pro-EU and NATO countries such as Montenegro and North Macedonia. Peaceful political action (anti-government demonstration) could spill over in violence. Other examples of soft coercion, practised in the post-Soviet space and in the Balkans include trade embargoes and cyber-attacks.¹⁷ Montenegro, once Russia's best friend in ex-Yugoslavia, became a target in the final lap before it joined NATO in 2015–17.¹⁸

Having included Podgorica in its counter-sanctions in 2014 in tit-for-tat for the Montenegrins siding with Western sanctions, Russia imposed a visit ban on Prime Minister Milo Djukanović (now President) and on the leadership of the governing Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), as well as restricting import of local wines. Russian officials discouraged travel to Montenegro yet did not follow through on threats to cancel the visa-free regime.¹⁹

Co-optation

Co-optation is Russia's instrument of choice in the Western Balkans. Moscow has built partnerships and alliances with local power holders in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina's Republika Srpska. Motivations for choosing to work with the Russian state, or its proxies and subcontractors, differ; some benefit from direct monetary gain in the form of rent, others gain advantage in terms of managing the inter-state balance of power at the regional or domestic levels. Thus, Serbia has aligned with Russia to gain leverage over the Kosovo issue but also because succes-

sive governments sought to draw benefits from investment and business ties, no doubt including kickbacks and side payments.

Russia has also proven an indispensable ally for Milorad Dodik in the effort to consolidate his grip over Republika Srpska and resist pressure from the West, from the major Bosniak parties favouring greater centralisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and from the opposition in the Serb-majority entity.²⁰

Subversion

Subversion, generally executed through covert means, is often referred to as 'hybrid' or 'political warfare'. The term is widely debated by academics and experts. There is no agreement, for instance, whether hybrid action is a step in an escalatory ladder towards the direct use of armed force ('kinetic action') or a tactic that can be implemented in parallel or independently without necessarily reaching the threshold of overt military aggression.

Subversion is exemplified by tactics such as (dis)information campaigns and open or covert support for radical anti-Western actors (parties and civic associations).²¹ In the Western Balkans, the best example is furnished by efforts to block the accession to NATO by Montenegro (in 2015–16) and North Macedonia (in 2017–18). In both cases, Moscow fanned the flames of internal crises to thwart NATO's expansion.

One benefit of *subversion* is its low cost. Russia does not have a long-term plan for the Balkans, aside from obstructing the West, and is not pre-



Trebinje, Bosnia-Herzegovina. 10.11.2014: Poster of Milorad Dodik

pared to expend scarce economic and military resources and run risks, such as a direct confrontation with NATO. What it does instead is exploit weaknesses and blind spots in Western policy to claim a co-equal status and possibly generate leverage that could be used as a strategic bargaining chip with the US and Europe.

Another merit of subversion, as well as of co-optation, is that it is amenable to outsourcing. Indeed, Russian influence works through both formal and informal channels. State institutions such as Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the tip of the iceberg. Multiple other players, both within the state and outside it, are also involved. In the case of Montenegro, for instance, there is reason to believe that the main institution in charge was Russian military intelligence (GRU), overseen by Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian Security Council and former head of the Federal Security Service (FS-

B).²² United Russia, the governing political party, is also active in nurturing links to sister parties in the Balkans, such as the signatories of a 2016 declaration against NATO expansion.

Private actors play an equally important role. The understanding that Russia is locked in a 'political war' provides justification for the state, on occasion, to mobilise assets and players nominally outside the public realm. These include influential Russian businessmen (for example, the 'Orthodox oligarch' Konstantin Malofeev, or Ivan Savvidis in Greece and Sergey Samsonenko in North Macedonia), who are dependent, one way or the other, on the patronage of powerful figures within the state hierarchy. From the perspective of the Kremlin and the Russian state more broadly, 'outsourcing' influence in the Balkans to non-state, or rather, parastate actors is beneficial as it ensures 'plausible deniability'.



” At the end of the day, Russia owes its popularity to the fact that certain Balkan politicians and business elites have chosen to inflate Russia’s image and, whenever suitable, smear the West.

INSTRUMENTS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Diplomatic alliances

Russia’s opposition to Kosovo’s independence has been at the heart of its alliance with Serbia. Belgrade has enlisted support from Moscow to equalise the balance of power with Prishtina, which has traditionally been backed by the US and leading EU/NATO countries.

It has been instrumental in keeping Kosovo out of international bodies such as the United Nations and its agencies. Russia assisted Serbia in referring the unilateral declaration of independence by the Kosovars to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).²³ But the move proved

counterproductive. The court’s 2010 advisory opinion that the declaration had not violated international law led to Serbia’s shift towards the EU as a mediator between Belgrade and Prishtina.²⁴ Though the decision came as a major setback for Russia, it was not ejected altogether from the Kosovo dispute as the UN Security Council (UNSC) still plays a role in discussions. Russia’s July 2015 veto of a UNSC resolution describing the massacres at Srebrenica as genocide served to remind political players of its diplomatic weight.²⁵ Russian support also accounts for Serbia’s refusal to join the Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea.²⁶



Russia has taken advantage of the crisis setting between Belgrade and Prishtina, as the 'normalization' talks overseen by the EU since 2013 have ground to a halt.

In January 2017, Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi accused Serbia of plotting 'a Crimean scenario' in Serb-majority municipalities in the North. The remark was occasioned by a train painted in Serbian colours and Christian Orthodox symbols, carrying the slogan 'Kosovo is Serbia' in 20 languages;²⁷ the train was donated by the Russians. Having previously opposed the opening of a regular line between Belgrade and Kosovska Mitrovica, Kosovo authorities stopped what would have been the first train on this newly reopened route at the border. Kosovo cited such pressure as a reason to transform the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into an army.²⁸

With this action, Russia demonstrated its capacity to act as a spoiler, fanning the flames of Serbian nationalism to trigger a strong reaction by the Kosovo leadership, itself under pressure from radical opponents of the dialogue with Serbia.

The dynamic changed in the summer of 2018 after Thaçi and Vučić floated an initiative for a territorial swap in exchange for Serbia's recognition of Kosovan statehood. The plan in question has generated controversy both in the Balkans and within the EU.²⁹

For Russia, it has been just the opposite: an opportunity. The Kremlin neither opposes nor supports the partition of Kosovo. But in the meantime, the normalisation talks presided over by Mogherini have practically frozen. Serbia is

ramping up pressure on Kosovo by encouraging countries to derecognise it as a state.³⁰ In taking a hard stance, Vučić has tilted closer to Moscow, which is supporting the effort.

Another unexpected gain was that for the first time a Kosovar leader, President Thaçi, publicly reached out to Putin; the two had a brief meeting in Paris on 11 November 2018 during commemorations marking the First World War centennial.³¹ In addition, unlike Germany and France, the Trump administration in the US has been open-minded about partition.³² In other words, Kosovo, historically a focal point for transatlantic cooperation, has proven to be a somewhat divisive issue.

Russia has also been nurturing relations with Republika Srpska. For instance, it supported President Milorad Dodik against the West in 2016 when he staged a referendum to designate 9 January as 'Statehood Day' for the predominantly Serbian entity.³³ Stopping short of encouraging secession, Moscow has done its utmost to prevent the Peace Implementation Council from censuring the Bosnian Serb leadership.³⁴ Dodik, currently a member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's tripartite presidency, has made no secret of his links to Malofeev and the Night Wolves (described below).³⁵

Arms' transfers and security cooperation

Since concluding a defence cooperation agreement with Serbia in 2013, Russian and Serbian soldiers have been training together on a regu-





Banja Luka, RS/Bosnia. 01.09.2019. Day of Republic of Srpska.

lar basis, both in Serbia and in Russia.³⁶ After lengthy negotiations, Moscow agreed to donate six surplus MiG-29 fighter jets, thirty T-72 tanks, and thirty BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance vehicles to Belgrade.³⁷

Pro-government media have been hailing the deal as a step towards evening the balance with neighbouring Croatia (an adversary in the wars of the 1990s), which has been modernising its armed forces with support from the US. The MiGs were delivered in October 2017. Between August 2018 and February 2019, Serbia procured several more MiGs from Belarus, Russia's principal ally within the CSTO where Belgrade holds observer status.³⁸

Russian assistance spotlights Serbia's policy of 'sitting on two chairs', to use US Deputy Assistant Secretary Brian Hoyt Yee's phrase.³⁹ Bel-

grade has an Individual Partnership Agreement (IPAP) with NATO and has contributed to a number of missions under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Serbian officials point out that in 2016 their army carried out 200 activities with NATO and the US, as opposed to just 17 with Russia.⁴⁰ Interoperability with NATO has moved forward as a result.⁴¹

However, Russia is able to maintain its influence over the Serbian security sector, notably through maintenance and service contracts attached to the transfer of the second-hand MiG-29s (manufactured 1989–91) and the Mi-17/35 helicopters.⁴²

We should not overlook the communications effect of those weapons deliveries, which have been covered in great depth by the pro-Vučić media (described below). The government in-

sists that over time Serbia will become a hub for the maintenance and repair of Russian-produced helicopters; Serbia's defence industries, which have been stagnating since the collapse of Yugoslavia, will receive a new lease on life.⁴³

Russia has been helping Republika Srpska's semi-covert efforts to upgrade the entity's police force into a military force in all but name. Since the mid-2000s, Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces have been integrated, one of the (qualified) state-building successes under the Dayton constitution. Though the 2,500 automatic rifles purchased by RS came from next-door Serbia, there were reports of Russian advisors providing anti-terrorism and crowd-control training to the new units.⁴⁴

There have been fears on the part of Bosniaks and Bosnia watchers in the West that Russia would supply advanced weaponry such as helicopter-mounted Igla 1-V anti-aircraft missiles, bringing the police force one step closer to militarisation.⁴⁵ On 9 January 2019, Banja Luka hosted a military-style parade to celebrate its 'Statehood Day'. The ceremony was attended by the Night Wolves, a Russian biker group with links to the Kremlin, though no Russian officials were present.⁴⁶

The event was hardly unprecedented. A similar parade first took place in January 2017, right after Dodik's referendum, bringing back painful memories of the war in the 1990s.⁴⁷

Humanitarian assistance

Humanitarian assistance is another tool in Moscow's toolbox. This potent political instrument has been used to justify Russia's involvement in and support for pro-Russian forces in recent conflicts such as in South Ossetia in Georgia and in Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine. Such aid serves Russia's interests in the Balkans as well. In December 2011, for instance, the Russian government despatched a twenty-five-vehicle convoy carrying power generators, food, blankets, and other supplies—284 tons in total—to Kosovo Serbs who had taken over the border crossings to Serbia and set roadblocks across the northern region in defiance of the government in Prishtina and EULEX, the EU mission.⁴⁸

The standoff put the spotlight on the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center (SRHC), located at the airport of Niš—a Serbian city not far from Kosovo, which was channelling some of the aid. The decision to create the SHRC was made during President Medvedev's visit to Belgrade in 2009 and formally launched in October 2011.

From the outset, officials from the US State Department and analysts have suspected it of being an intelligence outpost under the guise of a disaster preparedness and response operation.⁴⁹ Tellingly, it was Sergei Shoigu who opened and initially oversaw the SRHC; at the time he headed the Ministry of Extreme Situations and today he is the Russian Federation's Minister for Defence. The ministry took charge of sending supplies to the rebellious Kosovo





Photo from the Facebook page of the Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Center (SRHC)

Serbs. For years, Moscow has been demanding that Belgrade grant SRHC personnel the same status enjoyed by NATO troops under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed in 2015,⁵⁰ pointing at SHRC's involvement in tackling wild-fires in 2013 and floods in 2014 as proof that the centre has a purely humanitarian mission.⁵¹

It is hard to overestimate the effect of Russian assistance on public opinion in Serbia, and to some degree on its neighbouring countries. Moscow's aid during natural disasters generated a great deal of media coverage. It has been instrumental in entrenching the image of Russia as a large donor, on par with the West.⁵²

A public opinion poll from July 2018 commissioned by Serbia's Ministry of European Integration showed that 21% consider Russia a top

source of financial assistance compared with 24% indicating the EU and 17% indicating China (the survey allowed multiple answers). This is a far cry from reality. According to statistical data for the period 2002–16 quoted by the same ministry, the EU has contributed €2.96 bn, while the US gave €696 million, Germany gave €368 million, and China gave a mere €31 million. Russia is not amongst the top nine donors.⁵³

Economic connections

Trade and investment account for a substantial part of Russia's leverage in the Balkans. On the surface it is easy to discount Russia's economic presence. While the Russian Federation supplies gas and crude oil to the region, it is not a significant export market or a purveyor

of foreign direct investments (FDI) or other forms of financial transfers. For instance, Russia accounted for 4.9 percent of FDI in Serbia in 2014, 4.6 percent in 2015, and 3.9 percent in 2016.

The EU's share is between 70 and 80 percent.⁵⁴ Russian capital corresponds to around 10 percent of the economy, largely thanks to the Serbian oil and gas company NIS. In Montenegro, where Russian individuals and businesses play an outsized role in the real estate and tourism sectors, Russia's share fell from a high of 29.4 percent in 2006 to 5.5 percent in 2015 when measured in terms of corporate revenues.⁵⁵

Yet, on closer inspection, it is apparent that Russia holds leverage. Though it spends only a small fraction compared to the EU, Russia tends to invest in politically sensitive areas. As a report by the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies notes: 'Russian companies in [Central and Eastern Europe] have tended to be concentrated in a few strategic economic sectors, such as energy and fuel processing and trading, whereas EU countries have a more diversified investment portfolio that spans different manufacturing subsectors.'⁵⁶

The oil and gas sector is a case in point. Russia accounts for the bulk of gas deliveries to Bosnia, Serbia, and North Macedonia, and is a significant supplier of crude oil to Serbia. In addition, Russian oil companies have a solid foothold in oil refining, and in wholesale and retail sales.

There are both formal and informal dimensions to Russia's presence in the region.

Russia deals formally with governments and public companies, for example, Gazprom and national gas utilities such as Srbijagas, MER (North Macedonia), and Gas-Res (Republika Srpska). Informally, Moscow's influence is advanced by private investors, who, although legally distinct from the Russian state, are nonetheless dependent on its good graces and therefore susceptible to political pressure.

As observed by Bobo Lo: '[I]n many instances, [Russian investors'] motivations are principally commercial. But it would be naïve to disregard the geopolitical dividend. While Russian companies are not mere instruments of the Kremlin, their participation in these often fragile economies can and does serve wider purposes.'⁵⁷

A case in point are the Lukoil filling stations in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, supplied from the Neftochim refinery near the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Burgas. Russian investors are also present in the real estate sector (e.g. on Montenegro's coast), and in tourism, retail, and banking. In Montenegro in 2016 up to one-third of foreign companies were Russian-owned.⁵⁸ Some, although surely not all, of the investors in question are connected to the Kremlin and to the upper echelons of Russian politics and business.

As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, gas sales to Serbia are carried out through opaque intermediate business entities, which raises suspicions of side payments. Gazprom is Srbijagas's near exclusive supplier and, together with Turk-Stream, will acquire a 51% majority stake in a critical piece of Serbia's infrastructure.





Belgrade, Serbia - 29.04.2017. Gazprom headquarters in Serbia.

In Bosnia's Republika Srpska, the sale in 2007 of the only local refinery to a Russian bidder, Zarubezhneft, without a tender has also been a matter of controversy.⁵⁹ It was overseen personally by Milorad Dodik, who was prime minister at that time. As a result, Russia is now the largest investor in Republika Srpska (€547 million over the period 2005–16).

Five Russian-owned companies (in the energy and banking sectors) account for a full 42 percent of all foreign business revenues. In April 2014, the cash-strapped Bosnian entity negotiated direct budgetary support from Moscow to the tune of €270 million; this was at a time when the joint state of Bosnia and Herzegovina was struggling to secure a conditions-heavy loan from the IMF. However, the Russian transfer fell short of the €500–700 million President Milorad

Dodik had promised. Attempts to secure funding from Russian banks fell through.⁶⁰

TurkStream, the planned natural gas pipeline, opens a new chapter in energy relations between the Western Balkans and Russia. Serbia has declared its readiness to start construction. Gastrans, the company in charge, is 51% owned by Gazprom. Once completed, TurkStream would have an annual capacity of some 13.88 billion cubic meters, likely perpetuating Russia's monopoly of the Serbian gas market. In contrast to other countries in Southeast Europe, Serbia has lagged behind in terms of diversifying supplies.

Furthermore, the TurkStream project threatens to re-open a dispute with the European Commission over the application of the EU's anti-trust rules.⁶¹

Though Serbia is not a member of the Union, it has committed to aligning its legislation and policies with the EU. If the Commission rules that TurkStream Serbia violates the so-called Third Energy package, that ruling will be an additional hurdle for the ongoing accession talks.⁶²

Influence over domestic affairs

Russia has considerable influence over domestic politics in several Western Balkan countries. In addition to official government-to-government contacts, Moscow has established ties with a range of parties that have an anti-NATO and Eurosceptic bent. For instance, the governing political party, United Russia, invited the following parties to its convention in June 2016: the Serbian People's Party (then in Vučić's coalition cabinet), the Democratic Party of Serbia (founded by Vojislav Koštunica), Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party (both from Montenegro), and the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia. All parties signed a declaration in favour of political neutrality, aligning themselves with Russia's stance against NATO expansion.⁶³

But the list of Russia's fellow travellers and proxies is longer. In Serbia, for instance, it includes the far-right movement Dveri, which is bitterly opposed to Vučić and has been a driving force behind civic protests against his regime. In addition to the political parties there are also multiple civic organisations and informal groups that have a pro-Kremlin agenda (described below).

They have thrived in places like Serbia and Republika Srpska, not least because of the favourable attitude of the authorities there, and to some degree in Montenegro.

Russia wields considerable influence in internally polarised countries. It plays on internal divisions to maximise its geopolitical clout and fight the West. The cases of North Macedonia and Montenegro shed light on the mechanics of Russian involvement. In both countries, Russia attempted to obstruct integration into NATO taking advantage from domestic turmoil.

In the case of North Macedonia, Moscow instrumentalised political rivalries and fissures between the majority Slav, Macedonian, and Albanian communities. In Montenegro, Russia profits from the rifts over Montenegrin national identity. Moscow's partisans are mostly those citizens who consider Montenegrins to be a branch of the greater Serbian nation. By contrast, supporters of the country's Western orientation overall subscribe to the notion of Montenegrins' being a ethnonational group in its own right, separate from Serbs.⁶⁴

In both Montenegro and North Macedonia, Russia has proven its ability to exploit domestic conflicts. In Montenegro, for instance, it sided with the anti-NATO opposition, which also attacked Prime Minister Milo Djukanović and his governing Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) on grounds of corruption.

In October 2016, on the eve of the general elections, authorities revealed they had blocked a coup attempt involving rogue security officers,





Protests against name change in North Macedonia, 2018. Photo - AFP

opposition politicians, and Russian intelligence operatives. In May 2019, criminal proceedings led to sentences for Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, two leaders of the pro-Russia Democratic Front. Their sentences, currently on appeal, continue to fuel political polarisation in a country where a non-negligible section of the population is opposed to NATO. In North Macedonia, Russia is aligned with the nationalist centre-right VMRO-DPMNE⁶⁵ party.

In 2015, the Foreign Ministry and pro-Kremlin media opposed the protests against VMRO-DPMNE-led government of Nikola Gruevski, viewing them as a colour revolution orchestrated by the West. When the Socialists replaced

VMRO-DPMNE in government, Russia and its proxies opposed the agreement with Greece signed in June 2018 that paved the way to NATO membership and accession talks with the EU. The protests depicted the country's change of name as an act of national treason. Putin himself described the Prespa Agreement as an egregious example of arm-twisting by the West, imposing its will in disregard of other countries' sovereignty. In both the Montenegrin and North Macedonian cases, Russia sought to insert itself into national decision-making in order to undermine the expansion of NATO and the EU.

Religious ties

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is one of the channels for projecting soft power. Just like the Russian state has built strong ties with governments, the church profits from links to independent churches in Balkan countries with an Orthodox majority such as Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria. The main interlocutor in the Western Balkans is the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which finds itself in a somewhat similar situation as the ROC in the post-Soviet space. Beyond Serbia, the church controls parishes in Republika Srpska, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Croatia, and has jurisdiction claims over North Macedonia. The SOC has a close relationship with the Serbian state and is often outspoken on social and political issues. In Montenegro the SOC has always stood in firm opposition to NATO membership. In a recent interview, Amfilohije, the metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral and the SOC's most senior figure besides Patriarch Irinej, compared the NATO to the Nazis.⁶⁶

The Russian-Serb ecclesiastical alliance strengthened over the dispute concerning Ukraine. Thus, in 2018, the Serbian synod aligned with its Russian counterpart in resisting the autocephaly of the Ukrainian church recognised by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople.⁶⁷ In this instance, the Serbian synod draws a parallel between the jurisdiction dispute with breakaway churches in Montenegro and North Macedonia, both unrecognised by other Orthodox patriarchates. It is no wonder that one of the most outspoken critics of Ukraine's separation is, again, Metropolitan Amfilohije.

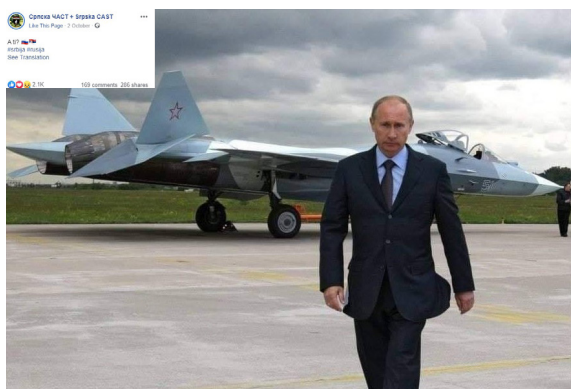
The ROC has a number of churches under its jurisdiction, for example the Holy Trinity Church in Belgrade—a relic from the White Russian diaspora in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia during the interwar period. Church diplomacy has been at work in Bosnia too. In September 2018, a new church was consecrated in Banja Luka, along with a Russian cultural center, in the presence of Milorad Dodik and Ambassador Petr Ivantsov.⁶⁸ In Skopje, Russian businessman Sergey Samsonenko contributed to the renovation of the St. Clement of Ohrid cathedral (under the jurisdiction of the non-canonical Macedonian Orthodox Church) and financed the foundation of a Russian church.⁶⁹

Konstantin Malofeev, 'the Orthodox Oligarch', has been active on the religious front too. For years, his foundations have been sponsoring the transfer of the Holy Fire from Jerusalem to Belgrade each Easter. From there, the flame travels to Serbian Orthodox churches across the region, underscoring the spiritual bond between Russia and ethnic Serbs across the Balkans.⁷⁰

Links to civic associations

Russia has been nurturing links and/or supporting various civic organisations with a nationalist, conservative, or anti-Western orientation. These include NGOs, veteran associations in Serbia and Republika Srpska, charitable foundations, business chambers, biker clubs, youth organisations, athletic clubs, and schools. In Serbia, a report by the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies from 2016 lists such bodies.⁷¹





ЈА САМ ЗА ПУТИНА! А ТИ?

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Facebook post of *Srpska Čast* [Serbian Honour] promoting themselves as Putin supporters and inviting others to follow them on social media. (Screenshot taken on 3.12.2019)

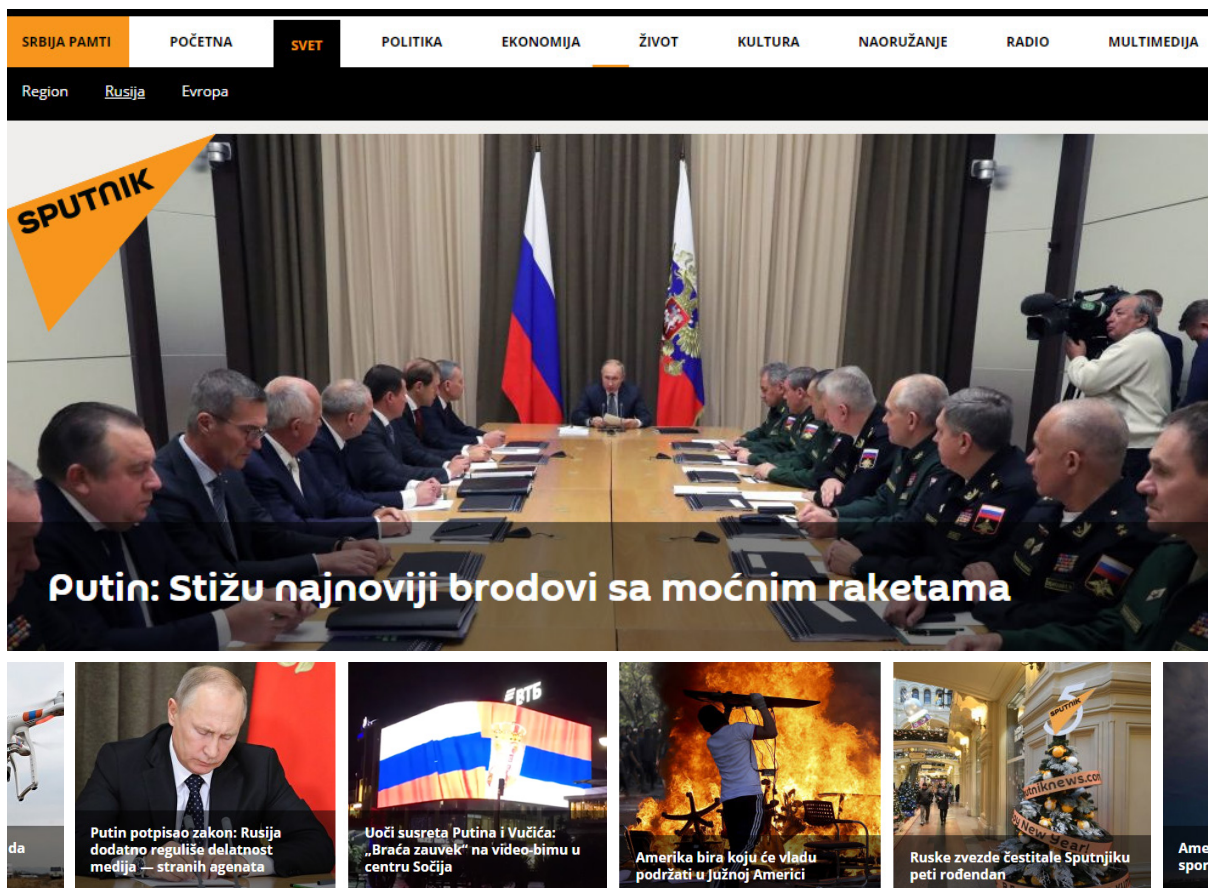
Some of them have direct ties to Moscow and go back in time. Thus, the *Nashi* ['Our People'] movement, established by Putin's then spin-doctor Vladislav Surkov, had a branch in Serbia that cooperated with local conservative nationalists, some of whom later rose to prominence. The *Srpski pokret Dveri* [Serbian Movement Dveri] headed by Boško Obradović, transformed into a political party and entered parliament in 2016. Known for its opposition against LGBT rights and advocacy for rehabilitating Serbian anti-communists and nationalist collaborating with the Nazis, Dveri has been at the forefront of anti-Vučić protests in Serbia.⁷²

Another example is the so-called *Zavetnici* [Oathkeepers] movement, which sprang up in the spring of 2016 during a wave of anti-NATO

and EU demonstrations, in which Dveri took part as well. Local media linked the organisers to the Gorchakov Fund, to the *Ruski Ekspres* [Russian Express] media center (which has close ties to Konstantin Malofeev), and to the Belgrade office of the Russian Federation's Chamber of Commerce.⁷³

Russian influence runs strong in Republika Srpska too. There the boundary between civil society and the entity's increasingly militarised law enforcement services is fuzzy. The *Veterani Republike Srpske* [Veterans of Republika Srpska] participate in Dodik's 'Statehood Day' parade and are reportedly cooperating with the International Advisory Committee of Organizations of Reserve Officers, an umbrella structure based in Russia. The Union of War Veterans in Serbia also collaborates with Russian associations.⁷⁴ In January 2018, reports emerged of a Russian-trained paramilitary force named *Srpska Čast* [Serbian Honour], again linked to Dodik, taking part in the parade.⁷⁵

Sports are also a powerful channel for Russian influence. Businessmen and corporations from the Russian Federation have been providing sponsorship to popular local outfits, thereby bolstering Russian soft power. Sergey Samsonenko, a native of Rostov-on-Don, is the owner of *Vardar Skopje*, the oldest football club in North Macedonia, as well as the highly successful men's and women's handball teams of the same name.⁷⁶ In 2010, Gazprom became the sponsor of *FC Crvena Zvezda* [Red Star], Belgrade.



Screenshots from Sputnik News Srpska (02.12.2019)

Russia in the Western Balkan information space

Russia's presence in the Western Balkan information space is central to its influence. Particularly in Serbia, as well as in the wider 'Serbosphere', which includes Republika Srpska, Montenegro, the Serbian population in Kosovo, and, in a sense, North Macedonia, the coverage of Russian foreign policy, its engagement with the Balkans, and the personality of Vladimir Putin is overwhelmingly positive or even celebratory. Russia portrays itself as an historical ally and protector of

the South Slavs, many of whom share the same religion as the Russians, against hostile powers. The theme of brotherhood is embedded in the official rhetoric of the region and among its Russia-friendly politicians.⁷⁷

Russia's information presence is two sided. On the one hand, there are outlets funded and controlled by the Russian state, which deliver its point of view on international affairs and prominent regional issues such as the Kosovo dispute to Balkan audiences. In 2015, the Sputnik agency opened a news service in the Serbian language, which operates through both a website and a radio station. Radio Sputnik's news-



cast is available across the country through a network of more than thirty regional stations. Its content also filters through the local print and online media. This includes popular portals, many linked with high-circulation tabloids, such as *Blic*, *Kurir*, *Informer*, *Večernje Novosti*, and *B92*. The Sputnik agency's impact travels beyond Serbia's borders. For instance, during the 2018 Bosnian elections Sputnik positioned itself as a mouthpiece for Milorad Dodik and the SNSD. Critics, including the *EU vs Disinformation* platform maintained by the European External Action Service (EEAS), accuse the agency of spreading fake news, conspiracy theories, and propaganda.⁷⁸

Apart from Sputnik, the Russian government's talking points reach local audiences through platforms such as the newspaper and website *Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBtH)* operated by Rossiya Segodnya, the state agency that succeeded RIA Novosti. Headed by Dmitry Kiselev, known by many as the Kremlin's propagandist-in-chief, *RBtH* provides content to *Politika*, an established Belgrade-based daily, which has been in print since 1904.⁷⁹

Even so, Russian media are far less influential in shaping narratives than local outlets. At the end of the day, Russia owes its popularity to the fact that certain Balkan politicians and business elites, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, have chosen to inflate Russia's image and, whenever suitable, smear the West. As a recent report by the German Marshall Fund contends, '[r]egime-controlled public and private media seem to be the most active promoters of pro-Russia sentiments in Serbia'.⁸⁰

These include pro-government tabloids such as *Kurir*, *Informer*, *Alo*, and *Srpski Telegraf*, which pour praise on Russia while castigating the EU and NATO for their anti-Serbian policies, as well as all the major Serbian TV channels. A common narrative, forged by the tabloids over the past year or more, has been that war over Kosovo is imminent and that Serbia is bound to win with help from Russia and thanks to Russian arms. This narrative is spread and amplified online by a network of more than forty portals (notably by staunchly pro-Kremlin portals such as *Srbin*, *Kremlin.rs*, and others), as well as on Facebook and Twitter.⁸¹ The media ecosystem beholden to Dodik in Republika Srpska works in a similar fashion. It encompasses the official TV channel RTRS, Alternativna Televizija (private but under Dodik's indirect control), the SRNA news agency, the newspaper/portal *Glas Srpske*, and websites such as *InfoSrpska*.

At its root, Russian 'soft power' banks primarily on anti-Western attitudes dating back to the Yugoslav wars, rather than on the genuine attractiveness of Russian culture, society, or domestic institutions. Both the EU and NATO are targets. NATO is blamed for the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo. As for the EU, Russian officials, the Russian media, and their proxies fault it for the economic dislocation the region has experienced since the global financial crisis, for the imposition of liberal values (especially regarding sensitive matters such as the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities), as well as for the influx of refugees from the Middle East.

Russia, on the other hand, casts itself as a champion of traditionalism and the sacrosanct

norms of national sovereignty. This line has some resonance: surveys indicate that societies in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are far from enthusiastic when it comes to European integration. Those who consider EU membership 'a good thing' are at best a small plurality, with an equal or larger share of citizens viewing it as 'neither good nor bad'.⁸² Russia, by contrast, enjoys great popularity in certain quarters. A poll conducted in Serbia by the Gallup International Association (a different entity from the more famous Gallup, Inc. registered in the US) and released in late 2018, showed that Putin is far ahead of any international leader in popularity, with 83% of Serbs holding a positive view of him and only 12% having a negative view.⁸³

However, there is a caveat. Polling data from Serbia indicate that young people are supportive of an alliance with Moscow but are still oriented towards the West. Thus, they are much more likely to travel, work, or study in Western Europe than in Russia.⁸⁴ Russian language and popular culture have limited traction, despite various public diplomacy and cultural cooperation initiatives undertaken over the years. Also, Russia's alignment with Serbian, and to a lesser extent Macedonian, nationalism makes it unpopular amongst Muslim-majority communities, including the Bosniaks and the Kosovar Albanians.⁸⁵



” Moscow has benefitted from internal problems in the region not of its making: disputes from the war of the 1990s, a love-hate relationship with the West, weak institutions and media, compromised rule of law, underperforming economies, and lack of transparency and accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia's overarching objective in the Western Balkans is not to revise the status quo but to freeze it. It would like to prevent NATO from expanding and to slow down the enlargement of the EU. The present situation is in line with Russia's strategic interests. The Western Balkans are informally integrated into the West, yet this has not translated into democratic consolidation at the domestic level or in the full resolution of conflicts between states. Moscow has benefitted from internal problems in the region not of its making: outstanding disputes dating back to the war of the 1990s, a love-hate relationship with the West, weak institutions, compromised rule of law, captured media beholden to the powers of the day, underperforming economies, and the general lack of transparency and accountability. The EU and NATO agenda of promoting stability, prosperity, and better governance has therefore only been partly successful.

The present political climate empowers Russia to project its influence, bolstering its position in European politics and, to a lesser extent, at the global level. For Moscow the Western Balkans are low-hanging fruit. The second takeaway is that Russia prefers to exercise its influence on the cheap. It has carved a niche in the Western Balkans largely with help from local collaborators and fellow travellers pursuing their own agendas. That is why **Russian policy in the region is focused largely on co-optation and subversion rather than on military or non-military forms of coercion.** Instead of deploying troops in former Yugoslavia to tip the local balance of power one way or the other, Russia relies on political intervention through diplomatic initiatives, interference in domestic politics, and the information campaigns that have helped it win hearts and minds in a number of places.



The hype around Russian energy ventures notwithstanding, the inflow of money to the Western Balkans has been limited. As the case of Montenegro suggests, economic interdependence is not easy to weaponise. This marks another difference between the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet countries where Russia's soft-coercion tactics are, on the whole, more consequential.

How should the West respond to the Russian challenge in the Western Balkans? There are three points worth bearing in mind:

1. Do not give up on NATO and EU enlargement. The countries of the region should be brought into Western institutions sooner rather than later. Any delays caused by the lack of willingness or commitment to expand on the part of the current member states reinforces the Balkan people's sense of abandonment. This fuels anti-Western attitudes and empowers the Kremlin and its proxies. NATO in particular should deepen strategic cooperation with Serbia and encourage the new government in Bosnia and Herzegovina to activate the country's membership action plan (MAP). The EU should launch accession talks with Northern Macedonia and Albania.

2. Focus on democracy and the rule of law. Integration into the EU and NATO is not a goal in itself but a means to an end. Democratic consolidation and gains in the rule of law are critical to countering malign influence from the outside. Western policy should therefore focus on the underlying

flaws that enable Russian interference. The West should encourage greater transparency in party financing, judicial reform, and good governance in the energy sector. This is best the path to building resilience in national political systems and responding to co-optation and subversion.

3. Foster pluralism in media. Russian influence is at its most potent in the information space. To respond, Western states and institutions should increase their support to alternative media that are not beholden to governments and/or oligarchic interests in the region. The pro-Kremlin viewpoint should be balanced by independent journalism. The goal should not be to fight propaganda with counterpropaganda. In fact, free media only gain credibility by freely offering a critical perspective on the EU, NATO, or Western policy more broadly. But they also hold Russia accountable for its foreign policy actions and provide a balanced and fair perspective on Russian politics and society. Most importantly, by scrutinising power holders and business elites, the free media limit the ability of foreign malign actors to penetrate national politics by striking deals with local players.



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73. N. Latković and M. Jasnić, [‘Tačno je da nam Rusi pomažu. DSS, Dveri, Zavetnici i Treća Srbija rade protiv Srbije u EU’](#) [It is true that Russians are helping us. DSS, Dveri, Oathkeepers and Third Serbia are working against Serbia’s entry into the EU], *Blic*, 24 March 2016.
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78. [‘How Serbian Sputnik Infiltrated a Disinformation Hub in Bosnia and Herzegovina’](#), *EU vs. Disinformation*, 14 June 2019.
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82. The Balkan Barometer survey registered the following percentages in 2017: In Serbia 26 % considered the ‘EU a good thing’ vs. 37 % who saw it as ‘neither good or bad’; in Bosnia and



Herzegovina the numbers were 31% vs. 46%, and in Montenegro 44% vs. 29%. By contrast, the results in North Macedonia were 54% vs. 33%, in Albania 81% vs. 14%, and in Kosovo 90% vs. 6%. [*Balkan Barometer, Public Opinion Survey*](#), Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo, 2017.

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