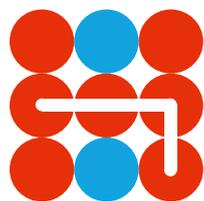

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Understanding Russia's influence in the Western Balkans

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Understanding Russia's influence in the Western Balkans

The prospect of a settlement between Athens and Skopje and further expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, as well as the prospect of the EU embarking on membership talks with yet another local country, undercuts Russian influence in the Balkans, writes Dr. Dimitar Beshev, a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center.

On 11 July 2018, the government of Greece took an unprecedented decision. Athens expelled two Russian diplomats and banned the entry of two others. Moscow's personnel were accused of interfering in local politics in northern Greece, a hotbed of opposition against the agreement signed by Prime Minister Tsipras and Zoran Zaev, his opposite number from Macedonia, to put an end to a long-standing dispute regarding the name of the former Yugoslav republic. Predictably, Russia took reciprocal action against diplomats at the Greek embassy.

The spat escalated further when Greece recalled its ambassador from Moscow in early August. A group of Russian clergy was also denied admission to Mount Athos, a semi-autonomous area under the purvey of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople and home to twenty medieval monasteries, including one affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. In the meantime, Zaev pointed the finger at Ivan Savvides, a prominent Russian-Greek businessman based in Thessaloniki and sometime member of the Russian parliament, for financing opponents of the deal with Greece within Macedonia.¹

Russia's quarrel with Greece came as a surprise to many a Balkan watcher.

When it was inaugurated in January 2015, the Tsipras government, a coalition between the radical left-wing Syriza and the right-wing nationalist True Greeks, was widely seen as beholden to the Kremlin. Several months later, in the midst of a crisis when Greece's bankruptcy and continued membership in the eurozone was at stake, Tsipras travelled to Moscow to personally entreat Vladimir Putin. Although not much came out of it, Greece continued courting Russia for a lucrative energy deal, and in early 2018 declined to join other EU members in declaring Russian diplomats *personae non gratae* in response to the Skripal affair. To cut a long story short, a country habitually described as one of Russia's 'Trojan horses' in the Western alliance suddenly turned out to be at loggerheads with the Kremlin.

The same applies to Macedonia, which has always enjoyed a constructive relationship with Russia since the disintegration of former Yugoslavia. In fact, Russia was the first permanent member of the UN Security Council to recognise Macedonia's independence in early 1992, well ahead of the United States or the big nations in Western Europe. Successive governments in Skopje have looked to Russia as a source of economic and diplomatic opportunities rather than a security threat.

¹ Saška Cvetkovska, 'Russian Businessman behind Unrest in Macedonia', Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 16 July 2018. <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia>.

What ultimately broke this pattern is Zaev's resolve to secure Macedonia's accession to NATO, put on hold since April 2008 because of a Greek veto. **The prospect of a settlement between Athens and Skopje and further expansion of the Atlantic Alliance, as well as the prospect of the EU embarking on membership talks with yet another local country, undercuts Russian influence in the Balkans.**

The Greece-Macedonia case sheds light on Russia's role in Southeast Europe in general and the Western Balkans (the Yugoslav successor states minus Slovenia and Croatia, plus Albania) in particular. There are several features connected with Moscow's overall policy that are worth highlighting:

1) **Russia pursues no grand strategy beyond obstructing the expansion of NATO and the EU.** It lacks the will and the means to establish itself as a regional hegemon, emulating the Soviet Union in the Cold War days. The Western Balkans, which are heavily dependent on the EU for trade and investment, are unlikely to seek deeper integration into Russian-led initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union. Even neutral Serbia, which is closest to Russia in foreign policy terms, has not gone any further than a free-trade agreement and observer status within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

2) **Russia's attitude to the region is a function of the state of its relations with the West.** In times of rapprochement, such as the Medvedev presidency (2008–12), Moscow sought to find a common denominator with the Western powers. It raised no objections to NATO's enlargement towards Albania and Croatia

in 2009 and cooperated with several large Western European companies in the (now defunct) South Stream gas project. Post-Crimea, however, Russia started looking at the Balkans from a zero-sum angle, where any gain for the West is its loss. It opposes, both rhetorically and in practice, NATO enlargement and even the expansion of the EU.

3) **Moscow has shifted gears from a policy based on incentives (the multibillion energy deals which were the hallmark of the 2000s) to one focussing on taking advantage of divisions and conflicts within and between states in the Western Balkans and the wider region.** Increasingly, its interlocutors are no longer governments but fringe actors taking a radical anti-Western position. Since 2014, Russia has interfered directly in the domestic affairs of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia. It remains highly influential in Serbia, even though its principal partner there is still President Aleksandar Vučić, who is cooperating with both Russia and the West.²

Russian influence operations draw strength thanks to enabling conditions at the national and regional level.

First and foremost is the positive image Russia enjoys amongst majorities in Serbia and Republika Srpska (the Serb-majority entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as large pluralities in mostly pro-Western Montenegro and Macedonia. Russia is popular because parts of society, particularly those with nationalist leanings, see it as a counterweight to the West, and the US in particular.

² Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017.

Memories of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s are still alive, and fanned on a daily basis through the media by political elites seeking to rally constituents behind the flag. More often than not, Russia features as a historic ally of Orthodox populations against other ethnic and religious groups (e.g. Muslim Bosniaks, Albanians, Catholic Croats) favoured by the West.

Second, Russia takes advantage of endemic state capture in the region coupled with low levels of accountability on the part of elites and institutions. Sectors of the economy such as energy (dominated by public sector companies beholden to politicians), construction and finance are particularly susceptible to various forms of rent-seeking. Russian investors often play a key role and, even when profit is their main motive, provide levers of influence to the Russian state.³

Third, the poor state of the media, where quality standards are in decline and exposure to political manipulation, disinformation and fake news is the norm, helps official Russian propaganda disseminate its general narrative. The narrative promotes Russia as a force for good in global affairs as well as a victim of Western arrogance, placing Russia in the same camp as the countries and nations of former Yugoslavia. The Russian narratives also exploit news headlines such as the Skripal poisonings, the conflicts in Syria and Eastern Ukraine, the so-called refugee crisis threatening the EU and so forth, attempting to cast any Western actor in a bad light.

Favourable local conditions explain why and how, despite limited resources, Russia has been successful in shaping events in the region.

Across former Yugoslavia, Russia has encountered many willing partners and fellow travellers, such as nationalists, conservatives, or even radical leftists, who are traditionally suspicious of US foreign policy. In Montenegro, the main opposition bloc, the Democratic Front (DF), chose to align itself with Russia in pushing back against the country's accession to NATO. Although its original campaign against high-level corruption resonated with many pro-Western Montenegrins, by 2016 the DF had fallen back on old-school Serbian nationalism and anti-Americanism. It bemoaned the victimisation of Serbs spread across the region – including Montenegrins who, in their eyes, only constitute a branch of Serbdom rather than a separate nation – at the hands of the US and NATO since the 1990s.

Similarly, nationalist Macedonians supportive of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and the centre-right VMRO-DPMNE have increasingly come to view Moscow as their principal foreign patron. While the party leadership itself is formally pro-EU and NATO, the grassroots have turned anti-Western, partly as a result of the internal polarisation fanned by the media loyal to Gruevski during the crisis between 2015 and 2017. As in the case of Serbian nationalism, the US, but also the EU, are vilified over their perceived embrace of Balkan Muslims and alleged bias against Orthodox Christians.

³ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Russian Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks*, Sofia, January 2018. <http://www.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18228>.



Another theme that has particular resonance, and is heavily exploited by Russian and Russian-friendly media outlets, is that of Europe as a champion of moral decadence (over the support of LGBT rights) and pernicious multiculturalism – because of the acceptance of refugees and economic migrants from the global south. At the end of the day, however, what resonates is the fear of Albanian nationalism, seen as the darling of the West as evidenced by the 1999 intervention and Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. As in Macedonia and elsewhere in the region, it has served to fuel resentment against the West. Moscow, by contrast, wears the mantle of protector of kindred Orthodox Slavs, drawing on the memories of pre-1914 Tsarist Russia.

In Republika Srpska, President Milorad Dodik enlists diplomatic and political support from Russia to defy the West in threatening secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Serbia, pro-Vučić media have consistently provided positive coverage of Russia, heaping praise on Serbia’s president’s policy to cultivate security and economic ties with Putin. Amongst other things, **the focus on Russia, Serbia and the standoff between the East and the West diverts attention away from pressing domestic issues concerning the abuse of power and corruption.**

Russia’s principal achievement is that it appears as a co-equal competitor of the West. At first glance, Moscow is in retreat. Slowing down EU and NATO expansion is achievable, but halting the process altogether appears to be a tall order. Russia was unable to block Montenegro’s entry into the Atlantic Alliance. An attempted coup, backed by the Russian military intelligence in autumn 2016, was intercepted by the Montenegrin authorities. The gamble

backfired. The Prespa Agreement signed by Macedonia and Greece opens up the possibility of further NATO enlargement. It is not a done deal by any means, but Russia cannot undermine it single-handedly and essentially weighs in on the side of internal opponents.

Given all these limitations, Russia has done rather well. It has won recognition as a first-rate player in the Balkans. Western dignitaries, from German Chancellor Angela Merkel to US Defence Secretary James Mattis, hurried to Skopje ahead of the 30 September referendum to encourage the Yes vote – as a strategic win for the EU and NATO against the Kremlin. Balkan politicians celebrate Russia as an ally, or demonise it as an existential threat. Think tanks and journalists are fretting about its influence. Moscow appears resurgent and threatening, which is no mean achievement given the circumstances.

What can the EU and NATO do to counter the Russian challenge? First, both should honour their commitment to enlargement towards the Western Balkans. **Despite internal opposition and whatever other strategic priorities they have, expansion is the surest way to call Moscow’s bluff in the region.**

However, enlargement should come with strings attached, such as pressure on governments to implement judicial reform, improve accountability, and uphold media freedom. In other words, the **Balkan elites should not be given a free hand domestically and allowed to cash in on Western concerns or fears about Russian influence.**

Secondly, Western governments should invest in critical media, which is in a position to hold governments accountable,

combat disinformation, expose corruption, and promote higher journalistic standards.

There are good examples in this respect, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Deutsche Welle. At the end of the day, one should treat the causes first – that is, the factors enabling Russia to assert its influence – rather than the symptoms,

namely Moscow’s ability to win hearts and minds.

Making the Western Balkans and South-east Europe a less permissive environment for the Kremlin’s political war against the West should be the overarching objective.

Author

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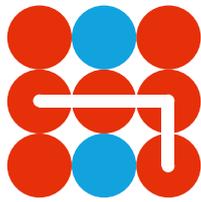
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