



The Western Balkans: How is the Region Endangered by Russian Influence?

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The Western Balkans: How is the Region Endangered by Russian Influence?

by Çlirim Toci*

[The Balkans] produce more history than they can consume.

-Winston Churchill-

Abstract

The Western Balkans is a vital European region of different nationalities, religions and cultures. It stands between the West and the East. The overall image of the region is that it has been the prize in incessant battles for competition between different powers and actors for centuries. Since the end of the Cold War, nations of this region have been looking toward integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Some have succeeded, while others are still struggling to integrate. But, the War in Ukraine has put the spotlight the Western Balkans again. The West has to give new impetus and sustain local ambitions towards the EU membership. Looking at what is happening in the Balkans, the paper at your hand aims to underline the challenges and implications caused by the Russian influence. At the same time, internal actors are using Russia for localized power games.

Keywords: The Western Balkan, the Russian influence, the West and power balance.

1. Introduction

In the early part of the 20th century, historians metaphorically coined the term “powder keg of Europe” for the Balkan region. This allusion was obvious during tensions among nations at the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of World War I (1914-19). The region has passed through several stages since then, most prominently WWII, the Cold War and the post-Cold War era. Fukuyama characterizes this last stage, the post-Cold era, as a new era that marks ‘the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government!’.

The Balkans could not benefit from this “final form of human government” as described by Fukuyama. After 1990, the region experienced disintegration and conflicts among former Yugoslavian republics while the rest of Europe enjoyed “peace dividends”. The political and economic atmosphere that immediately changed drastically evidenced the struggle of the regional states to establish themselves as democracies in the Western sense, defying attempts of Serbia to establish hegemony. Against this historical backdrop, the EU and the US policymakers, when referring to the Western Balkans, often identify the region as a geographical entity with this ‘suis generis’ political context.

The geopolitical landscape in the region is bipolar and unstable. On the one side, countries like Albania, Kosova, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are more oriented towards Euro-Atlantic integration. On the other side, Serbia and Republika Srpska, one of the three political entities comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), are closely connected to Russia because of cultural and linguistic affinity, the Orthodox Church, and the affiliation of the Slavic Brotherhood. From the two, Serbia is pursuing its ambition to join the EU while also cultivating ties with Moscow.

In this context, the West has to be versatile. It has to respond robustly to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) while not diverting self-attention from the six states of the Western Balkans (WB6)². It is in the interest of the EU to revitalize the enlargement process because, without WB6, it will never achieve strategic autonomy or manage to be a global player. The Western Balkans is the missing puzzle of European integration and geopolitical space.

It is in fact worth answering the question of “Why”? The paper at your hand will primarily examine why the region matters so much to Russia. This further raises several questions that need to be identified and analysed. More precisely, is the willingness of Russia to keep long-standing ties with the region can be attributed to the aim of reducing the Western power and to the desire to create a power balance in the backyard of the EU?

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2. Willingness to maintain long-standing ties

The Balkans, for centuries, have been known as a center of great power competition and strategic interest between the Orient (the East) and the Occident (the West). Historically, Russia has been a critical player, and its influence is not new for the region. The influence was most visible in supporting and recognising Serbian independence during the 19th century. Russia is considered an essential ally for all Serbs and Orthodox Christians in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. In the region, the Kremlin is seen 'as someone who stands up to the West', said Vuk Vuksanović.

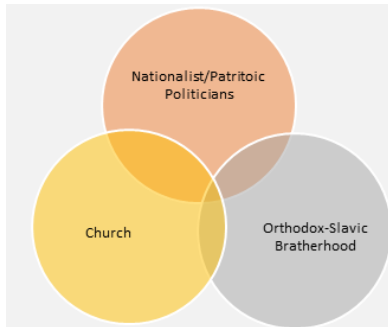


Figure 1: Russian political campaign toolkit in the Western Balkans.

Since ascendance to the president's office, Mr. Putin has sought to reclaim his role as a power broker. He directly criticized the US for "attempting to create a unipolar world" ³. To the same effect, Russia has used the case of Kosovo and NATO strikes (1999) to create grievances against the Western powers.⁴

The Western Balkans hold great geostrategic importance for Russia because it is in the backyard of the EU. With disputes and unresolved conflicts among entities within Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Kosovo and Serbia, Moscow seeks to leverage the instability and weaken the influence of NATO and the EU. Russia, for years, has used political campaign toolkits like Serbian nationalist/patriotic politicians, the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox-Slavic Brotherhood (See Figure 1) to deepen the impact.

During the last decade, Moscow has extended and strengthened its activities, exploring nationalist/patriotic politicians and building a network of proxies parroting the same narratives. This aligns with the intent of the local and state actors to promote their own regional interests. The Russian political toolkit involves and works with various political actors, e.g., Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vulin. They are both known for their pro-Russian feelings and anti-Western stances. For instance, Mr. Vulin is considered the 'man of Moscow'. He has supported the creation of 'the Serbian Word' (Srpski svet), similar to the Kremlin-backed word 'Russkii mir' (Russian World), uniting all Serbs in the Western Balkans.

Russia has cultivated close ties with old/veteran and young politicians to promote Russian interests. Different pro-Russia actors and states support the Kremlin in the Balkan and beyond. For instance, Serbian ruling forces benefit from being pro-Russia to keep aligned with voters. In comparison, the war in Ukraine has not changed the attitude of Serbs toward Russia. While recently, Mr. Dodik, the Serbian leader in Bosnia and Herzegovina, aligned Republika Srpska with Russia and pushed for a separation from the federation.

Notwithstanding the pro-Russia policies of Serbia and Republika Srpska, Russia is constantly looking for new relations and influence in the political spectrum among Western Balkan countries. Several cases have shown that political forces are affiliated with the Kremlin, such as the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socialdemokrata) of Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Left (Levica) in North Macedonia, and the Democratic Front (Demokratski Front)⁵, Democratic Party of Unity (Demokratska stranka jedinstva), New Serb Democracy (Nova srpska demokratija) and Serb List (Srpska Lista) in Montenegro.

However, although the political environment in Serbia does not make any difference from previous cases, there are several pro-Russia parties, such as OBRAS, Serbian Action (Srbska Akcija), Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka), and Strength of Serbian Movement (Pokret Snaga Srbije), are allied with Russia policy and attitude.

All these political entities adopt anti-West rhetoric. These anti-West stances became more visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina when Milorad Dodik attempted to withdraw Serbs from tax bodies, medicine certification agencies, and even the armed forces. In Montenegro, these stances were prior to NATO membership (2017). The rhetoric about the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue was even intensified. While in North Macedonia, 'the Levica distanced themselves from 'the contraversion actions' of Macedonian diplomacy to introduce sanctions against Russia.' As they indicated, 'the decision was taken under pressure from the EU and NATO.'⁶

In this context, Russia, observing the dynamics of the region, appointed the secretary of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Petrushev (2015) known as 'Putin's trustable man', as his envoy. His appointment marked another step in the Kremlin's interest in strengthening regional ties. Mr. Petrushev is known for his close relations with Serbian politicians and anti-West feelings. He has met top officials in Serbia and Republika Srpska to cultivate close ties to organisations and ethnic nationalist groups who oppose the West. Meanwhile, information shared by Intelligence Online suggests that with a secret operation in Belgrade, Moscow 'has recruited nearly 500 Balkan nationals to fight in Ukraine' or to join the pro-Russian separatists⁷.

All of these Russian actions are geared towards strengthening pro-Russian voices. The Russian non-governmental organisations, like the Center of National Glory, the Russian Institute of Strategic Research, and the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, have increased their activities. During the last decade, they brought in different academics, journalists, and intellectuals who share anti-West attitudes and promote the Kremlin's voice.

Russia knows that political influence always matters and does not shy away from using religion and the Church 'as soft-power instruments'.⁸ 'The Russian Orthodox Church is more closely linked to the Putin's regime than many observers assume.'⁹ The Church and religion are known to be crucial societal and political factors. Russia and Serbia have been spiritually united for centuries, and churches are closely bonded. The Russian Orthodox church is seen as one of the vociferous opponents of any deal-making with the West. Along the same lines, Gazprom, in 2019, which Russia uses as a political and economic instrument to project power, 'has donated \$5 million to the Serbian Orthodox Church'¹⁰. It signifies Russia's growing presence and strengthening relations based on cultural-religious ties.

The Russian Orthodox Church has always leveraged the narrative of the Orthodox-Slavic Brotherhood. Russia knows that the Slavic brotherhood and historical relations between Russia and Serbia matter. The strategic narrative must take these facts into account. Mark Twain once said that history does not repeat itself, but it sure rhymes. History is a dialogue between the past and the present, able to channel and construct decisive actions. History and strategic narrative are two rhyming influences to align Serbia and Russia, bonding them emotionally.

3. Reducing Western Influence

Following the beginning of the 21st century, Russia changed its approach towards the Western Balkans. It involved inexpensive tools, like hybrid operations including (dis)information campaigns, cyber-attacks, supporting proxy organisations, and use of political and economic influence, to undermine the West's objective to integrate region's countries into the Euro-Atlantic structures. Russia considers 'Near Abroad' as its sphere of interest. History has shown that Russia has had long-standing interests and reasonable impact but a limited capacity for transformation over the region.

Nowadays, the security environment and the war in Ukraine has further diminished the Russian economic and political presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro (MNE) and Serbia (SRB). These are three Western Balkan countries where Russia still has influence and historical connections.

To some extent, Russia is struggling to maintain its status (recognized by the West as a great power) and presence in selected countries. Moscow thinks that the West wants to drive them out of the region. The West is attempting to solve lingering unresolved political issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, bypassing Russia. The Kremlin is worried about such attempts and is moving from a close cooperation model with the West (in the mid-1990s) to a more confrontational competition, looking to undermine the Western presence. The Western Balkans is transformed into an area of confrontation, and Moscow has developed three practical objectives: 'first, it aims to assert global power; second, it is willing to hamper Euro-Atlantic integration by opposing NATO and EU involvement; and third, it is using, particularly Kosovo, as leverage for Russia's broader foreign policy.'¹¹

When we look under the bonnet of the conflict today, strategy is linked to actions on the ground. Actions are considered ways leading to the end state. In strategy, one thing that matters more is engagement with actors. If we look carefully from a strategic angle, achieving these three objectives is mainly opportunistic and not wildly realistic. 'This movement has not yet affected Moscow's ability to act as a spoiler to the Euro-Atlantic integration of three countries.'¹² In the wake of the war in Ukraine, the region is less important. The Russia's Foreign Concept Policy has mentioned the region on two occasions. The first time in 2000, when Putin ascended to power, and the second in 2008, when Kosovo declared independence.

The reality is that Moscow has attempted to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration and destabilize the region. For instance, the Montenegro government has faced strong opposition from Russia and internal Serbian-backed political forces to prevent the country from joining NATO. Even the Church and Patriarch Amfilohije of Montenegro, in 2013, had declared and disagreed with NATO membership. He considered NATO the 'fourth Reich, that is, the continuation of fascism and they wish to dominate the whole world.'¹³ The Orthodox Church in Serbia and Montenegro still remembers and considers the NATO air campaigns against the Milošević regime in 1999: feelings of being betrayed and rejected by the West.

The strategic narrative and history stay side-by-side. Russia knows that and it wants to take advantage of employing them. In 2016, Russia and Serbia orchestrated a plot to assassinate the prime minister of Montenegro. The 'coup d'état' did not achieve its objectives and Montenegro became a member of NATO. The NATO membership is supposed to be seen as an instrument that may end the turbulences in the country's political environment. Meanwhile, political polarisation exists, e.g., between the Democratic Front, a pro-Serbian and pro-Russia coalition, and the Democratic Party of Socialists of Mr. Đukanović, a pro-Western party accused of nepotism and interference.

In a strategic sense, the Kremlin delivers a narrative and hopes to involve external and internal parties. They can use the narrative and history as a force multiplier. They promote brotherhood among Orthodox Slavs. While in the region, they employ 'low-cost (asymmetric) operations in the information space, including (dis)information campaigns, cyber-attacks, and clandestine operations combined with the support of proxy organizations and the use of political and economic influence.'¹⁴ These tactics will produce results in all six Western Balkans countries. For instance, 'the government of Serbia will allocate to Serbian organisations in Montenegro this year (2023) about 4,270,000 euros more than it did in 2022.'¹⁵ Serbia and Republika Srpska (pro-Russian oases) are mainly dominated by anti-Western nationalist behavior of autocratic leaders like Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegov-

ina and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia.

At the same time, Russia is constructing a strategic narrative and taking advantage of Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented political environment. They promote disputes and disagreements among three communities and oppose NATO membership. Even the ambassador of Russia in Sarajevo, Igor Kalubukhov, declared that 'if Bosnia and Herzegovina will join NATO, they will react to the threat in line with their interest.'¹⁶

The Kremlin openly supports the Serbian nationalist leader, Mr. Dodik, to counterbalance its interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the West. He is always attempting to undermine the unity and functionality of the central government. He has threatened to withdraw Serbs from all national-level institutions and repatriate the power away from Sarajevo. For years, the West, especially the US, viewed him as a destabilizing leader and threatened to sanction him. In response, he declared that 'if anyone attempted to stop this separatist movement, this would lead to inter-ethnic violence and we (Serbs) have to rely on the help of our friends (referring to Russia).'¹⁷ It is viewed more as an internal political game (playing the Russian friendship card) and a message to the Western community that no decision can be achieved without him.

This environment favors Mr. Dodik and Serb nationalists (Russophiles), who are at the center stage of a long-running game between Russia and the West. At the same time, 'the Republika Srpska is becoming much more independent,' stated Paul Stronski, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Kremlin is treating Dodik as an independent head of state. Russia has welcomed him twice, in October 2022 and in May 2023. The first visit was more about getting political credit among Serbs and support for the independence of Republika Srpska. The international community considers Mr. Dodik as a threat to the Dayton agreement. However, for now, he enjoys the support of Belgrade and Moscow. He aims to create a 'de facto' independent Republika Srpska.

4. Creating a Balance of Power

Russia aims to keep the West on alert for renewing conflicts in the Western Balkans and prevent Western influence. There are two cases when Russia could exercise power influence. First, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains structurally intact but institutionally and politically dysfunctional. Second, there is open conflict and disagreements between Kosovo and Serbia. In both cases, Russia is engaging in what is considered, by analysis, the backyard of Europe.

In Republika Srpska and Serbia, being pro-Russia is a prerequisite for nationalist politics. For instance, Mr. Dodik proudly shows his loyalty that 'there is no request when he goes to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin that he will not accept.'¹⁸ He openly and constantly engages 'Russophobia' to undermine the Western effort to stabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mr. Dodik has refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the High Representative and declared that it is a privilege to be a strategic partner of Russia.



Figure 2: The Poll by Belgrade-based Demostat, 2022

While the overall environment in Serbia seems not to be very promising, thousands of pro-Russian supporters marched in Belgrade before the elections on April 2023 to support the War in Ukraine, wearing T-shirts bearing Putin's face. Meanwhile, far-right groups' People's Patrol' and 'Our People' were waving banners with 'Z' supporting the Kremlin, chanting slogans such as 'Serbs and Russian – brothers forever'.¹⁹ 'Serbia considers itself 'privileged' to be Russia's strategic partner.'²⁰

The President of Serbia, Mr. Vučić, is trying to put a tricky balance between EU integration and deep cultural and religious ties with Russia and refuses to join the US and the EU sanctions against Russian entities. For instance, a 2022 poll by Belgrade-based Demostat shows 'that 33% of the respondents said Russia should harmonize foreign policy with the EU. While 56% responded negatively and 11% did not answer.'²¹ If the majority of Serbs vote tomorrow, 'only 34 % will vote to join the EU, 51% will vote against and 11% are undecided.'²² Still, Russia is considered the most crucial ally, supported by 40% of public opinion, 30% supported the EU and 24% supported China.'²³ The public opinion shows that Russia and China are more desired partners than the EU (See Figure 2)

The government in Belgrade is working to balance the EU membership and strategic partnership with Russia. Mr. Vučić stated in the UN General Assembly (Oct 2023) that 'he represents a country willing to join the EU but also unwilling to step on traditional friendship it has built over the centuries with Russia.'²⁴ Serbia was not aligned with the EU foreign policy requirements to raise sanctions against Russia. Mr. Vuksanović said he (Mr. Vučić) is 'balancing and playing Russia and the West against each other'.²⁵ if they are that far apart Maybe now is the right moment to explain to Mr. Vučić (the president of Serbia) that Serbia 'cannot sit on two chairs at the same time, especially if they are that far apart.'²⁶

At first sight, Belgrade seems willing to increase regional influence. This ambition is not only a matter of political rhetoric. Serbia is upgrading and equipping its armed forces, mainly buying or getting donations from Russia, Belarus and China. In reality, Serbia is deeply dependent on the EU economically. Without the economic support of the EU, the Serbian economy may stagnate. Most Serbian companies do business in the West, particularly in Germany, Italy, Hungary and other Western countries.

In a particular way, Serbia has a free trade agreement with Russia. The agreement has been in effect since 2006. They are also part of the Euroasian Economic Union (EAEU), led by Russia since 2009. The Serbian membership in these two organisations was praised as a new opportunity. The agreement was considered a 'triumph of foreign policy over economics,' said Vuk Vuksanović.²⁷

Nevertheless, the process is not guided by commercial and economic conditions. The foreign policy of Belgrade aims to come even closer to Russia and balance the West. A comparison lays the fact bare. 'Serbian trading with EAEU countries is estimated to be USD 3.4 billion'. The amount is less than 10 percent of Serbia's total trade, whereas trade with the EU constitutes 63 percent.²⁸ From a foreign investment perspective, the EU investments in the country are ten times higher than Russian investments. 'According to data from the delegation of the EU, the Union invested about 2.8 billion euros in grants and another 6.6 billion in soft financing of about 300 projects, all between 2007 and 2022.'²⁹ This EU assistance does not include EU support to the transport sector, IPARD³⁰ funds, or other EU Programs.

In the current environment, the political ambition of Serbia is to explore the EU political and economic opportunities and use Russia as a 'political lifeboat' to balance the West. Serbia depends on Russian political leverage, e.g., in the UN, OSCE and UNESCO. In contrast to these dependencies, in 2022, Serbia voted for the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. In this case, Belgrade demonstrated a pragmatic foreign policy standing on the sideline of the EU-Russian conflict. The Serbian foreign policy is sometimes guided by self-interests instead of shared values with Russia.

However, the Western Balkans is vulnerable to what is happening in Ukraine, and Russia remains an existential threat. Autocrats always want to create new conflicts, destabilise regions, and shift the focus. There is little interest among these actors in following the rules of international order. Populism and autocracy challenge international cooperation and regional and global security.

5. Conclusions

Russia has targeted the Western Balkans for years to project power and influence. The Kremlin is using every opportunity or disappointment with the West to take advantage of and increase its regional footprint. The EU integration has not produced expected results. The Western Balkan nations and pro-European parties may lose credibility and fail to join the bloc. At the same time, extremist groups will get advantages and will see Russia as an alternative.

The war in Ukraine and the Hamas-Israeli conflict that is now raging (2023) should not shift the focus from the WB6. It is a significant and strategic area in Europe. Russia will try to influence and gain importance among Slavic and Orthodox Christians in Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska, Kosovo and North Macedonia. They will use nationalist leaders and the Church to gain support and stir them away from the West.

Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić will keep close ties with Russia and China while simultaneously showing willingness to join the EU. Russia will not use weapons and tanks to destabilize the region. They will use hybrid actions such as autocratic leaders, pro-Russian media outlets, the Church, criminals and political parties. A conflict at the gates of Europe is not in its interest. It will involve the EU and NATO; millions may flee to Western Europe.

However, the power projection of Russia has not changed the strategic direction of the WB6 so far. Russia is gaining small victories in a political ground in fragile, corrupt and unsettled disputes in the Western Balkans. The internal actors are using Russia for localised power games.

Looking at the curve of Russian influence throughout the region, the West has to build up a solid strategy to push back Russian influence and establish an ambitious accession agenda. They have to set up a road map for the accession process. These actions will support the pro-European movements and diminish the pro-Russian rhetoric. Nations in the WB6 would know what to do and how long to wait until they join the West. Otherwise, nations will lose hope and Russia will gain terrain, threatening and destroying all political, economic and security achievements.

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