

# DO THE WESTERN BALKANS FACE A COMING RUSSIAN STORM?

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## SUMMARY

- The confluence of a rising series of pressures in the Balkans, as well as the attention of Russian Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev – who has taken on the region as a special responsibility – suggests 2018 will see the launch of a renewed Russian campaign in the Balkans.
- Russia looks to the Balkans as a battlefield in its “political war”, in part to compensate for its mixed success with “active measures” in Europe. Russia is seeking to create distractions and potentially bargaining chips with the EU, especially as this push coincides with the EU’s own renewed attention to the region.
- The aim is not to assert authority over the region for its own sake so much as to harness and magnify existing tensions. In Russian eyes, the EU’s approach towards the Western Balkans is neither serious or systematic and so offers Moscow opportunities to create leverage.

*“Serbia and the rest of the Balkans are a pawn in a great game of powers between Russia, the EU, and the US.”*

- Former Serbian economy minister Saša Radulović[1]

Early on 16 October 2016, the day of the Montenegrin parliamentary election, the Montenegrin police and security services arrested some 20 Serbians and Montenegrins whom they described as attempting a coup and intending to assassinate the prime minister, Milo Djukanović. Those arrested included Bratislav Dikić, former head of the Serbian Gendarmerie. In due course others, including two Russian citizens, would be charged with what the special prosecutor for organised crime and corruption would call “a powerful organisation” of some 500 plotters. Moscow backed the plot, according to the prosecutor, with the intent of forestalling the country from joining NATO.[2]

In response, there were warnings that 2017 would see further meddling by Moscow in the Western Balkans, with Donald Tusk pointing to “unhealthy external influences... destabilising several countries” and US vice-president Mike Pence telling the countries of that region that Russia was trying to destabilise them, undermine their democracies, and divide them from the rest of Europe.[3] That year, however, saw little evidence of a systematic campaign to assert its influence in the region, let alone a successful one. For several reasons, though, 2018 may be rather different. Federica Mogherini has warned that “the Balkans can easily become one of the chessboards where the big power game can be played”, but the 2016 coup attempt suggests that this game has already started.[4]

Russia has considerable historical, cultural, economic, and political stakes in the region. Serbia, in particular, remains not just an ally, but also a base for wider activities throughout the Balkans, from intelligence gathering to cultural outreach. As Dimitar Bechev has observed, “Russia is not returning to the Balkans because it never left.”[5]

Nonetheless, Russia’s role in the Balkans has demonstrated, if anything, the weakness

of weak ties. Even Serbia, while happy to welcome Russian visitors and accept hand-me-down MiG-29 jets as a Liberation Day present, is still looking towards European Union membership.<sup>[6]</sup> The EU has named Serbia, along with Montenegro, as the frontrunners to achieve membership by 2025.<sup>[7]</sup> Serbia trades far more with both Germany and Italy individually than with Russia, despite a free trade agreement between the two countries.<sup>[8]</sup> Serbia does not always approve of Russian efforts in the region. Indeed, after the abortive Montenegrin coup, which was staged from Serbia, Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful secretary of Russia's Security Council, rushed to Belgrade to smooth ruffled feathers (and allegedly quietly spirit some intelligence officers back to Moscow).<sup>[9]</sup>

This is certainly an exciting time for the region in all the worst as well as all the best ways. Bulgaria's assumption of the EU Council presidency in January means that the EU will pay closer attention to the Balkans in 2018. On 6 February, the European Commission published its new enhanced Strategy for the Western Balkans, that included refining the accession process for Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>[10]</sup> These proposals ran into controversy at a foreign ministers' meeting in February, though, with some countries saying a possible 2025 membership date was too late and with others worrying about continued problems with crime and corruption in the region.<sup>[11]</sup>

Tensions are again rising between Serbia and Kosovo, while the prospect of a long-discussed name change for Macedonia to resolve its dispute with Greece is aggravating nationalists on both sides of the issue. Montenegro is holding presidential elections in the spring, Bosnia-Herzegovina has parliamentary elections in October, and there is still the chance – even though the ruling Serbian Progressive Party appears to be backing away from the idea – of early elections in Serbia. These developments create options and opportunities for Moscow and, in the words of one Russian foreign ministry veteran, “give Patrushev the chance to make up for Montenegro.”<sup>[12]</sup>

## Enter Patrushev

*“A firm course has been taken for the further expansion of the [NATO] Alliance, in which Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are being forcibly dragged in.”*

- Nikolai Patrushev, 2017[13]

Patrushev’s role in Russian policy towards the Balkans is increasingly significant. The personalised, de-institutionalised nature of Russian politics mean that Russian governance has become an “adhocracy” in which policy is driven by the appointment of individuals with Vladimir Putin’s confidence. There had been a sense in Moscow that policy towards the Balkans had suffered from not having a single, powerful “curator”. Meanwhile Patrushev, former head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), close client-ally of Putin’s, and a man noted for his hawkish views, was looking for a wider role. As a result, some time in either late 2015 or, more likely, the first half of 2016 (different Russian interlocutors have different stories), Putin appears to have made him the Kremlin’s point man on the Balkans.

Patrushev has no professional background on the Balkans (in both the FSB and KGB he was essentially a domestic political policeman), nor any personal ties. However, his fierce conviction that Russia and the West – essentially, the United States – are engaged in a zero-sum civilisational and political struggle, inclines him to an interest in regions such as the Western Balkans where both ‘sides’ appear closely and directly in competition. This conviction led him to pay heed to Leonid Reshetnikov, a former senior figure within the KGB and then Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and from 2009 head of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI).[14] A Balkans specialist by training, a nationalist by inclination, Reshetnikov has untiringly championed his view that the Balkans represent a key potential opportunity for Russia. When, in October 2016, he said that it was “time [for Russia] to return to the Balkans,” he did so in full confidence that Patrushev was in agreement.[15]

After all, the Montenegro adventure could not have been done without Patrushev’s approval – and his willingness to pitch the idea to Putin. In previous cases where final

authority was initially unclear – from the decision to seize Crimea to the kidnapping of an Estonian security officer – it has later emerged that the president expects the final say on anything with substantial geopolitical implications and risks.[16] The initial impulse appears to have come from another of Russia’s controversial “geopolitical entrepreneurs”, the billionaire Konstantin Malofeev. A nationalist and ardent supporter of a pan-Slavic Orthodox community, Malofeev was also involved in Crimea and Donbas (and has worked with RISI). He has considerable political and economic stakes in the Balkans, including, according to the leaked ‘Panama Papers’, interests in Serbia.[17] It was he, for example, who organised a controversial visit by over a hundred Cossacks to Banja Luka, capital of Republika Srpska, in a show of force in support of nationalist leader Milorad Dodik.[18]

Malofeev appears, according to this narrative, to have originated the notion that a small operation could destabilise Montenegro, not least by assassinating Djukanović, and prevent the country from slipping into NATO’s embrace. He realised, however, that this was not something he could do himself so looked for a backer within the government and found Patrushev. When the latter was able to persuade Putin of the plan’s merits, he suddenly also acquired the mandate to, for example, engage elements of the GRU (military intelligence) for the operation.[19]

## The stars are right

*“In a display of massive arrogance, the West has grandiosely attacked the pride that many Serbians and Macedonians feel for their countries, possibly heralding a long-awaited turning point where the people finally realize their subservient status under ‘Euro-Atlanticism’ and begin actively pressuring their governments to reject it in full.”*

- Sputnik editorial, 2016[20]

Of course, the coup attempt failed. Montenegro joined NATO, Patrushev was forced to go to Belgrade and apologise, and Reshetnikov lost his position as head of RISI. This failure has not, however, brought an end to Russia’s ambitions in the Balkans. Rather, as one former Presidential Administration staffer put it to me, “it simply proved that what was needed was a strategy, not just opportunism.”[21] Multiple sources in

Moscow suggest that Russian government thinking about a “Balkan strategy” predated the Montenegro affair, but it has certainly become more serious since then.

A series of other developments also combined to give this process new emphasis and urgency. Russia’s political active measures campaign in the US and EU have brought largely Pyrrhic victories. The election of Donald Trump created considerable dismay among America’s allies, but it also worries Moscow, accustomed as it is to a predictable, risk-averse Washington.[22] Meddling in France and Germany appears to have backfired, and overall, while there has been success in exacerbating tension and conflicts in the West, these have not yet led to any concrete advances for Russia.[23] If anything, the perceived Russian threat has galvanised NATO and anti-Russian sentiments. There is a sense in Moscow that direct attempts to subvert Europe are often unpredictable and even counter-productive. The response is to look to other theatres in which to be able to assert Russia’s geopolitical claims and also accumulate potential bargaining chips.[24]

This new strategic thrust will also involve new personnel. The 2018 presidential election in Russia, while a sure thing for Putin, is likely to lead to a reshuffle. In this system, loyalty to the boss is important, but it also helps to have some grand design to pitch. A comprehensive Balkan strategy is expected by Moscow insiders to be central to Patrushev’s efforts to maintain or even strengthen his position.

This strategy seeks to support a general Russian “pivot to south-eastern Europe”. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s authoritarian turn and frustration with both the EU and US has opened new opportunities for collaboration, even if Turkey is hardly a trusted ally.[25] Greece’s slow, painful economic recovery is, ironically, also making it of renewed interest for Russian money-laundering and possibly sanctions avoidance, even while Moscow continues to build its influence there across the political spectrum. The struggle for the Western Balkans thus fits into a broader geopolitical context.

Erdoğan’s commitment to a “Neo-Ottoman” assertiveness in Turkey’s neighbourhood has also alarmed EU states.[26] Turkish investments in sectors from mining in Kosovo

to its support for the Sarajevo–Belgrade highway, as well as its free trade agreement with Bosnia, may simply be economic in nature. But they contribute to a fear among some in the region that Ankara has a wider political agenda.[27] Moscow – historically a counterweight to the Ottomans in the region – can capitalise on this, not least by claiming that the European nations will be half-hearted protectors against Turkey because of its NATO membership and role in the Syria and Iraq conflicts.

Finally, Moscow is also likely to take advantage of the EU’s weaknesses in the region. While the EU’s decision to treat the Balkan states individually in terms of their claims to membership is entirely logical, it has also proven divisive. Kosovo’s prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj, for example, has claimed that the priority given to Serbia’s accession reflects fears that it would otherwise favour closer ties to Russia: “Belgrade has benefited a lot from playing the card of the alternative – and that’s Moscow, Russia.” He went on to accuse the EU of “double standards.”[28] While Haradinaj has been the most outspoken, a similar attitude is likely to become more common now that there is more movement in the accession process.

Overall, it seems that 2018 will see a much more deliberate, serious, and, above all, coordinated Russian campaign in the Western Balkans.

## **What happens in the Balkans doesn’t stay in the Balkans**

*“Serbia is currently holding talks with the EU about membership. To reiterate, we regard this as the absolutely sovereign choice of our Serbian friends and strategic partners. ... The most important thing is that in developing its ties with potential or associated members, the EU abandons the absolutely detrimental and destructive ‘either/or’ logic, forcing its colleagues, who are in talks with it, to make a choice: either with Russia or with the EU. As you know, this has already led to the profound crisis of Ukrainian statehood ... Unfortunately, these tactics show through in the EU’s approach towards a number of its other negotiating partners.”*

– Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, 2016[29]

As one Moscow insider put it to me, “the Balkans are not the Baltics.”[30] He meant that, for all the concern about Russian ambitions in the Baltics, it is a region of relatively strong, mature democracies, with working economies, effective checks and

balances and all the other governance assets that help proof systems against Russian meddling.

The Balkans are very different. The countries of the region lack mature governance and are rife with corruption and division. But the Balkans are also geographically and culturally close to Western Europe, and interpenetrated by NATO and EU members and wannabes. It is necessarily of geopolitical importance to the West. Moscow's interest in the Balkans is, after all, less about the region so much as how it can be used for leverage with both Europe and Turkey.

In a previous European Council on Foreign Relations report, *Controlling Chaos*, I developed a model to predict Russian intentions based on a nation's institutional strength and its level of affinity or vulnerability to Russia.<sup>[31]</sup> All of the countries of the Western Balkans have low institutional strength, with Serbia having a high level of affinity and most of the rest a medium level, with Albania and Kosovo both being on the edge of low.

The model therefore predicts that the overall Russian objective in Serbia will be state capture, trying to establish powerful networks of allies and clients able to dominate the country. Russia already has not only strong political links but also considerable economic penetration in Serbia: for instance, since 2008 the Russian company Gazpromneft has controlled the NIS oil and gas corporation, Serbia's biggest business. Moscow can also build on existing assumptions generated by a self-sustaining mix of propaganda and historical affinity. As Bechev has noted: "a survey in Serbia from 2015 found that 47% of respondents believed that Russia provides more financial aid than EU [sic]. In truth, it lags far, far behind. Whereas the EU contributed €3.5 billion in grants between 2000 and 2013 alone, Russia has only committed to extend a loan of \$338m to the Serbian railways. Even distant Japan has given more."<sup>[32]</sup>

In the rest of the Balkan countries, the Russians instead seek the more modest objective of targeting the state to influence it on specific issues and to edge it into a more favourable position vis-à-vis Russia. For example, they capitalised on the 2017 political crisis in Macedonia to describe the country as facing what a Russian foreign



ministry statement called “gross external interference” as “attempts, which are actively supported by EU and NATO leaders, are being made to make Macedonians accept the ‘Albanian platform’ designed in Tirana.”[33] The aim was modest: to present Russia as an honest broker and ally compared with the “interfering” Westerners. But anecdotal evidence suggests it has had some traction in Macedonia’s elites.[34]

Russian options for Albania and Kosovo are more limited. Kosovo is used instrumentally, whether as a lure for closer cooperation by other nations or a chance to create mischief. In particular, Belgrade’s reliance on Moscow for support on the issue of Kosovo’s status gives the Russians leverage. This was visible during Sergei Lavrov’s recent visit to Belgrade, when Serbian prime minister Ana Brnabic thanked him for Moscow’s “principled stance on [Kosovo’s] non-recognition” as a state and President Aleksandar Vucic reaffirmed that Serbia would not place sanctions on Russia.[35] Conversely, Albania is largely regarded as offering few opportunities for Moscow. This seems a realistic perspective given that Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati has explicitly pitched Albania to Washington as “a bastion against Russia’s influence in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Croatia.”[36]

All this means that Russia will never be able to match the economic and even normative draw of the EU, so it is not likely even to try. Rather, its goals and instruments in many ways reflect the relatively peripheral nature of the region and Moscow’s own limits. In broad terms, its goals are three-fold:

### **1. Acquire a role as a regional player and power.**

The Balkans are not of great economic or strategic importance in and of themselves, but their position in the EU neighbourhood and the role of Turkey in the region means they have value to Russia. Putin’s ambitions to “make Russia great again” are traditional and reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century geopolitics. A central element is the belief that a great power by definition has both a sphere of influence and the right to dispose of the interests of lesser states. Gaining greater traction in the Western Balkans plays well with nationalists at home, makes it harder for the EU and Turkey to

ignore Russian interests, and provides potential bargaining chips for the future.

## **2. Stymie further NATO expansion.**

The addition of Montenegro – a country whose entire armed forces are smaller than a Russian regiment – would hardly seem to make NATO any more formidable. But Moscow regards any expansion of the alliance as not only an offence (whatever the historical facts, the Russians believe they were offered implicit assurances NATO would not expand after the end of the cold war) but also an obstacle and a challenge. It is an obstacle, in that the Article 5 mutual defence guarantee means that any member is essentially off limits to any overt pressure. The timing of the 2016 coup attempt was presumably driven by an awareness that the window of opportunity for such obvious adventures was closing.

More generally, Moscow's zero-sum worldview sees NATO expansion, even if it poses no direct threat to Russia, as a defeat, a tilt of the strategic balance away from Moscow. As one former Russian insider put it, "the Kremlin has a very Soviet notion that any success for NATO is, de facto, a defeat for Russia."[\[37\]](#)

## **3. Exploit potential EU expansion (and its potential failures).**

By contrast, Moscow has a more nuanced take on EU expansion. This more benign view stems in part from its lack of respect for the bloc, except insofar as – witnessed in Ukraine – closer alignment with the EU is explicitly at the cost of relations with Russia. Indeed, the Russian ministry of foreign affairs strongly believes that there is a perverse advantage to EU expansion into the Balkans. The thinking is that the potential admission of new, poorer countries will inevitably create further demands on common resources and more division in the bloc.

The disputes at the February 2018 foreign ministers' summit were a case in point, and arguably prefigure many such rows. In the case of Serbia, the Kremlin is tacitly encouraging its aspirations to join the EU. Lavrov used his recent visit to Belgrade explicitly to state that Moscow has no objections (so long as this was not used also to break its existing ties with Serbia).[\[38\]](#) If it is successful, Moscow can hope to have a

“Trojan horse” inside the Union; if unsuccessful, the Russians will be ready to capitalise on any backlash. According to Fredrik Wesslau of ECFR, there are even those in Moscow who hope that any EU or NATO failures in the Balkans may send a negative message (which would be magnified by Russian diplomacy and propaganda) about the scope for joining these bodies that will discourage Ukraine and Georgia from seeking membership.

## The usual playlist

*“What’s worth stressing is that there is nothing new about what the Russians are doing in the region, but that these are circumstances in which their usual hits play well.”*

- US diplomat recently serving in the region, 2018[39]

Russian objectives may reflect the particular circumstances and opportunities of the time, but the methods employed are very familiar. Moscow seeks to take full advantage of three classic strategies: divide and rule, elite capture, and exploiting unrealistic expectations.

### 1. Divide and rule.

Historical, political, ethnic, and economic rivalries are rife across the Balkans, from the uneasy tripartite status of Bosnia to the grudging status of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. In the words of a Russian foreign ministry staffer, “it’s full of opportunities for us to play everyone against each other – and frankly, we don’t have to do very much.”[40]

Often, Moscow develops opportunities to be all things to all audiences. To the Serbs, for example, it portrays Macedonia (like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo) as little more than an EU or American client – a line that also plays well in Greece. At the same time, to the Macedonians, the Russians have begun claiming that their country is under threat from US plans to carve it up to create a “Greater Albania”.[41] Whether or not this is at all widely believed locally, such notions are picked up and instrumentalised by local nationalists such as the populist political leader Nikola

Gruevski.[42]

Often these divide and rule gambits are conducted through the medium of wider political and economic relations. For example, Moscow is seeking to develop its role in the region as a counter-terrorism partner. Not only does this give it a pretext for interaction at the security level, it also allows it to try and play some Balkans countries' vulnerabilities off against others'.

For example, according to one staffer present at the October 2017 meeting between Russian deputy Foreign minister Oleg Syromolotov – responsible for counter-terrorism cooperation – and Serbian deputy foreign minister Branimir Filipovic, Moscow eagerly played up Europe's "refusal" to acknowledge Belgrade's "legitimate concerns" about terrorism from Kosovo and Muslims from the Middle East.[43] Indeed, with a disproportionate number of Muslims from Bosnia, Albania, and Kosovo joining jihadist insurgencies in the Middle East and then returning home, the scope for Russia to play the 'Orthodox Christian solidarity' card will only grow.[44]

## **2. Elite capture**

Small, impoverished nations in which corruption is rife and in which checks and balances are rudimentary offer all kinds of opportunities for acquiring influence, as the Russians buy allies and clients within the elite. The Russians have already demonstrated that they are happy to support self-interested cliques against international pressure and domestic critiques alike, from Macedonia's Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO)[45] to Dodik's separatists in Bosnia's troublesome Republika Srpska region.[46] Dodik is presumably standing for re-election in October and has been both supported and wooed by the Russians – not least with six meetings with Putin since 2014. He remains a close ally and a potential asset.

## **3. Exploiting unrealistic expectations**

This is a strategy that takes advantage not only of the often naïve ambitions of Balkan nations in terms of EU membership and consequent economic uplift but also, sadly,

Brussels's patchy record in following through with its promises. The coming years will, Moscow believes, provide ample opportunities for populist parties and Russian mischief-making. Indeed, with countries such as Slovenia already seeking to push accession for Montenegro and Serbia even further back, this is likely to be an ever more fruitful area for the Russians.[47] If and when hopes of early accession to the EU, and even more so of consequent rapid economic uplift, are dashed, Moscow will then be able to capitalise on this as “proof” of European perfidy or lack of interest in the region.

## **Moscow has a plan**

*“When the EU managed to kill the South Stream [gas] pipeline, it showed us that Europe can respond to big challenges. So we’ll be providing lots and lots of small challenges that it won’t notice or know what to do about.”*

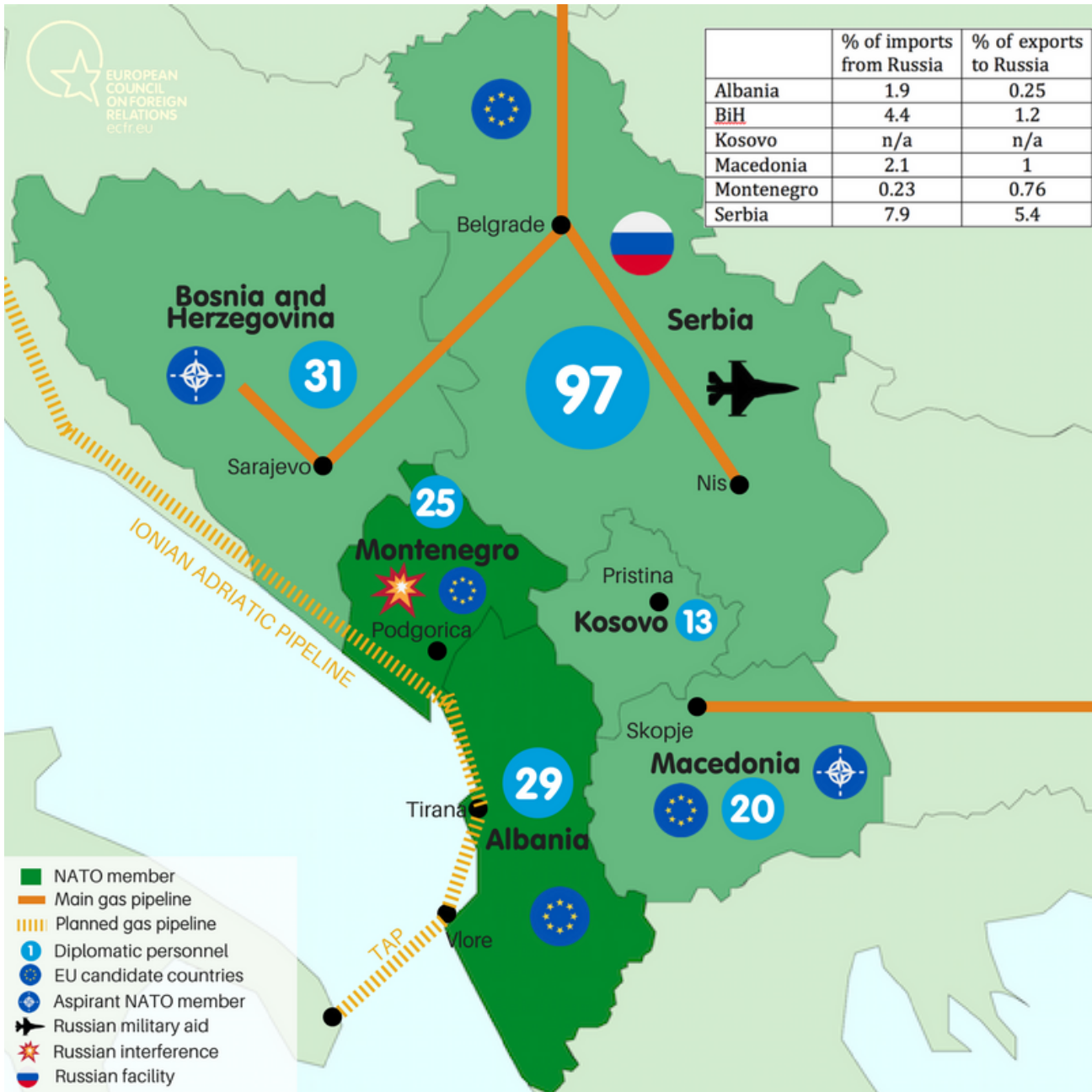
- Russian former Presidential Administration staffer, 2016[48]

Moscow can be expected to continue its propaganda campaign aimed at driving wedges between the West and the countries of the region and at exploiting fissures within the region. It will continue to undermine leaders and movements supportive of a pro-EU orientation. It may encourage Russian businesses to move directly into the local media environment but, based on its practices elsewhere, it will more often seek to support and encourage useful local initiatives. It will generate relevant news material for local recirculation and also distribute “black account” cash generated through proxies and other deniable sources. The presence of close links between Russian and local organised crime groups and the healthy revenues of drug-, people-, and weapons-trafficking in the Western Balkans may especially be exploited to acquire such funds.[49]

It will also likely extend its efforts to connect with formal institutional, social and political allies and to generate deniable “hybrid actors.” In Montenegro, for example, it hoped to use an alliance between local Orthodox Slavophiles, the paramilitary “Balkan Cossack Army,” and Russia’s Night Wolves motorcycle gang.[50] The pre-emption of

the plot prevented Moscow – and the rest of us – from knowing how effective this would have been. According to leaked documents from the Macedonian security service UBK, the Russian embassy and intelligence structures (often working out of Serbia) have not just covertly supported paramilitaries there, they have also established some 30 Macedonia-Russia “friendship associations”, as well as opening a Russian cultural centre in Skopje.[51]

This fits into a wider attempt by Moscow to strengthen the infrastructure in place for its political operations, whether involving purely “soft power” instruments or moving into the realms of subversion. For example, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre at Niš in southern Serbia (close to the borders of Macedonia, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Montenegro) was established in 2012. It claims to be a centre to coordinate assistance missions, but Western governments generally regard it as an intelligence hub. The US State Department has expressed the fear that it will become “some kind of a special centre for espionage or other nefarious activities.”[52] This fear will grow if, as Moscow wants, its staff are granted diplomatic status and thus immunity from both prosecution and inspection. The American concern is that this would, without oversight, allow it to be staffed not just with intelligence officers but also soldiers. Its permanent Russian contingent currently is less than a dozen, but the Russians could expand rapidly.[53]



The Bosnian news service *Žurnal* has also alleged – although this is still unproven – that a Serbian paramilitary group called *Srbski Ponos* (“Serbian Honour”) has been trained by Russians based at the Niš centre.[54] At the very least, this does fit a wider pattern of close, supportive links with paramilitary extremists, from the aforementioned Balkan Cossack Army to the now-dissolved Hungarian National Front.[55]

Russian media operations in the Balkans are also expanding. Its *Sputnik* news service has operated in Belgrade since 2014, and it has a disproportionate influence in Bosnia’s Republika Srpska.[56] Less overtly, Moscow has sought to provide assistance and funding to news outlets with convenient political positions, such as Albanian-oriented ones in Macedonia. The Russians try to push these outlets towards a more outspoken stance, which in turn would inflame ethnic tensions.[57]

Finally, Moscow will likely seek specific, limited opportunities where small economic investments in strategic sectors will reap disproportionate rewards. Here the Russians do have some modesty. They now understand that Russia’s economic leverage is not especially effective – cutting economic ties with Montenegro over NATO membership and advising Russian tourists to stay away had very limited impact. Nonetheless, the history of Russian investment into the region in sectors such as real estate in Macedonia and pharmaceuticals in Bosnia has shown that quite small sums can buy not just economic footholds, but also associated political influence.[58]

The overall Russian aim is not to extend informal empire over the Western Balkans, much less to spark some major, overt struggle with the EU. Rather, Russian leaders see the Balkans as critical piece in a new, broader ‘Great Game’. In this game, Moscow, Brussels, Washington, and other national actors will seek to gain advantage and apply leverage in the region in the pursuit of wider goals that have little to do with Balkan politics. In the words of German MEP David McAllister, chair of the European parliament’s foreign affairs committee, “Geopolitics has returned to the Balkans.”[59]



## How to change gears in the Balkans

*“Time is running out. To put it simply, Brussels must change gear if there is to be any chance of realizing its Balkan ambitions.”*

- Carl Bildt, 2018[60]

The roll-out of the EU’s new Strategy for the Western Balkans has been heralded as the start of a new “pivot to the south-east”. But that pivot will have little meaning if Brussels and the EU member states fail to address the challenge of Russian meddling and penetration in the region. A few recommendations toward that end:

- **Appreciate that it only takes one side to start a new ‘Great Game’.** Time and again, EU interlocutors stress that they do not see the Western Balkans as an arena for geopolitical competition with Moscow. Tough luck. The Kremlin clearly does see the region in those terms and is actively seeking to exploit whatever opportunities it can find. The EU may opt to turn its back and simply hope that everything works out well, but if so it must do so in the full knowledge that this is an active choice, whether driven by priorities or principles. The EU’s frequent and ringing declarations that the Western Balkans are important to European interests imply that it does not want to abandon the region.[61] If so then, like it or not, the EU is going to have to engage in this ‘Great Game.’ Besides which, Russia may not be the only other player. As Austrian foreign minister Karin Kneissl asked, “who will be first in Belgrade – China or the EU? It is that (which) we have to counteract, as it is our immediate neighbourhood.”[62]
- **Governance is the new warfighting domain, and ‘stabilitocracies’ are not allies but mercenaries.** Elevated European rhetoric about transparency, legitimacy and meaningful participation often takes second place, in practice, to the preservation of stability and accomplishment of immediate goals. This strategy of “stabilitocracy”, as Srđa Pavlović refers to it, means that, even if Europeans consider semi-authoritarian regimes sub-optimal, they are acceptable so long as they also protect and promote Western interests.[63] Although the EU now

claims to prioritise values over interests again, it is unclear whether this is true – at the very least, Balkan actors are not persuaded of it. This is dangerous and short-sighted, as real, lasting stability means working systems and societies. Regimes which decide that they are pro-Western on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis could easily make different choices if that balance shifts in the future. Instead, encouraging – and pushing – the governments of the region to make good on promises about fighting corruption, widening political participation, democratising the media, and increasing political and economic transparency are more than just good practice, they are security necessities.

- **Countries need reasons to turn away Russian money.** Russia is not a key economic partner of any of the countries of the region. Even Serbia, for example, only sends 5.4 percent of its exports to Russia, versus 15 percent to Italy and 13 percent to Germany. Russian money and market access are important to specific sectors and often comes with relatively few – apparent – strings attached. While often simply a commercial transaction, though, Russian finance can form part of long-term influence operations. It is not enough to complain about such Russian financial penetration and to advise local governments to be wary. If this is a genuine strategic concern, then Europe needs to put effort into providing positive alternatives, from providing greater guarantees to potential investors to rewarding those governments which introduce greater transparency into their financial systems.
- **Decide who is wooing whom.** Providing financial alternatives to Russia may not seem an appealing option for an EU already facing many demands on its resources. However, treating the Western Balkan states as impoverished suitors rather than prized potential allies has its own political costs. The EU's attitude is gladly exploited by Moscow as a gratis political opportunity. Montenegro was willing to join NATO even though Russian tourism was worth around 5 percent of its GDP in 2016, knowing that it would lose some or much of this, because it could see the practical advantages of the move in security terms – and because NATO did an effective job of selling them.<sup>[64]</sup> Russian efforts in the region mean the EU is not the only game in town. If the EU is genuinely interested in

expansion, it needs to recognise the competition and make explicit what it can offer that Moscow cannot.

- **Intelligence is a virtue; counter-intelligence a necessity.** Many EU countries still spend too little on intelligence and counter-intelligence, and efforts tend to go to more immediate areas of concern, such as Russia or the Middle East.<sup>[65]</sup> As a result, most EU countries lack real assets in, and coverage of, the Western Balkans. As a senior intelligence officer in a nearby EU nation put it, “we can hardly contest Russian efforts [there] when we know little more about them than what our embassies find in the local press.”<sup>[66]</sup> This needs to be more of a priority, and is one area in which the EU’s INTCEN intelligence analysis hub should acquire a more active role.

Ultimately, though, a Western orientation is a choice for the countries of the region. Are they willing to be pawns in Moscow’s “political war” with the West? Or do they genuinely see their best chance for security and prosperity in the Russian model? If not – and all the evidence suggests that the majority of the population in every country absolutely reject Russia’s ‘Great Game’ – then they themselves ought to address this challenge more directly and vigorously. They should:

- **Beware of strangers offering sweeties.** It is hardly novel for ambitious global players to seek to buy influence and leverage with aid and investment, but in an age of fluid global capital, this is especially evident. Nor is it only Russia that has reached for this tool in the Western Balkans. China is an increasingly active player, and Turkey as well, to a lesser degree. Nations need to think for the long term and be certain that the implications of accepting foreign money are benign or at least bearable. In the near term it is clear that Moscow actively leverages investment and aid for political ends – and seeks to exclude alternative sources of finance and support – and in the longer term that may well be true of Beijing, too.
- **Seek EU partnership not just support.** Many in the region feel let down by the West. The EU has indeed neglected it for too long. But this is changing and, more to the point, the EU is, whatever its strengths, hardly adept at conspiracy.

Its failings, not least its acceptance of often-corrupt “stabilocrats,” represent not malign intent but a lack of attention and will. Fundamentally, though, the people of the region can trust the values of the EU and its intent. They should engage the EU so that it cannot again get distracted. This means proactively seeking not simply support but partnerships, and also serious attention to such issues as institution-building and anti-corruption measures.

- **Learn that real security is domestic.** The primary challenges to the region – despite the dangers in the Serbia-Kosovo relationship in particular – come not from external but domestic threats. Even the external threats that do exist will generally manifest themselves through domestic weaknesses, from corrupt politicians and weak institutions to disgruntled minorities and opaque media holdings. To this end, the countries of the region need to enhance their domestic security not just by spending more on control structures but also by building state legitimacy. The two go hand in hand: more effective policing, transparent procurement and party funding, serious anti-corruption campaigns, and effective counter-intelligence are not only effective in their own right, they will attack many of the very weaknesses which undermine confidence in the state. They will also, of course, help countries appear as more attractive and plausible EU members.

Overall, then, the challenge is one of both expectations and practicalities. Although there is a perennial problem keeping the Western Balkans high enough on lists of priorities in both the European Commission and member state capitals, there is a general acceptance that the region matters. Likewise, the countries in the region appreciate the political, economic, and sometimes security advantages to membership of the EU or at least closer relations. Nonetheless, a lack of attention on the part of the former and an unwillingness to take tough decisions on the part of the latter has created political spaces into which Moscow has insinuated itself. Europe needs to recognise this challenge to its flank and get serious in the Balkans, which means both greater attention and greater rigour. Likewise, the countries of the region must appreciate that Russian attentions are largely opportunistic and malign, seeking

to exploit them to put pressure on the West, and represent a challenge demanding more serious reforms.

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