Russia’s Influence in the Balkans

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The last few years have seen a growth of Russian involvement in the Balkans. From Serbia to Greece and from Bulgaria to Bosnia, Moscow’s economic and political footprint appears to be growing. Governments in Skopje and Athens, for instance, have both alleged that Russian security operatives and business people have interfered in domestic politics in order to whip up opposition against the so-called Prespa Agreement as Macedonia prepares to vote in a referendum on September 30. What hangs in the balance is the country’s membership in NATO and ultimately the EU. Another expample comes from Bosnia. As general elections draw near, Russia has ramped up its support for its ally, the president of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, a thorn on the side of the West. What follows is a brief overview of Russia’s objectives, tools as well as the factors which enable Moscow to assert its influence in the region.

(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 for trade and investment on the EU 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 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, e.g. the Medvedev presidency (2008-12), Moscow sought to find a common denominator with Western powers. It raised no objections to NATO’s enlargement to 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 was the hallmark of the 2000s) to one focussing on taking advantage of divisions and conflicts within a between states in the Western Balkans and the wider region. Its interlocutors are increasingly not the 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 remains President Aleksandar Vučić who is cooperating with both Russia and the West.[[1]](#footnote-2)

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

First and foremost, the positive image Russia enjoys amongst a majorities in Serbia and Republika Srpska (the Serb-majority entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina) as well as a 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, the US in particular. The memories of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s are still alive and are fanned on daily basis by political elites through the media to rally constituents behind the flag. Most 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 oftentimes play a key role and, even when profit is the their main motive, provide levers of influence to the Russian state.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Third, the poor state of 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 (Russia is a force for good in global affairs as well as a victim of Western arrogance, much like countries and nations of former Yugoslavia) and positions on the issues of the day (e.g. the Skripal poisonings, the conflicts in Syria and Eastern Ukraine, the so-called refugee crisis threatening the EU and so forth).

Favourable local conditions explain why and how, despite limited resources, Russia has been successful in shaping events in the region. Across former Yugoslavia, it has encountered many willing partners and fellow travellers. In Montenegro, the main opposition bloc, the Democratic Forum (DF), chose to align itself with Russia in pushing back against the country’s accession to NATO. Though its original campaign against high-level corruption resonated with many pro-Western Montenegrins, by 2016 DF fell back on old-school Serbian nationalism and anti-Americanism. Similarly, nationalist Macedonians supportive of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and the centre-right VMRO-DPMNE have increasingly came 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 2015-7. The spectre of resurgent Albanian nationalism gives a boost to Russia as well, both in Macedonia and elsewhere in the region. 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 been providing constant positive coverage of Russia, pouring praise on the 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 to do with the abuse of power and corruption.

At first glance, Russia is in retreat in the Balkans. Halting NATO and the EU appears to be a tall order. When Moscow has taken risks, such as in Montenegro where security services unveiled an coup attempt backed by the Russian military intelligence in the autumn of 2016, they have typically backfired. The Prespa Agreement signed by Macedonia and Greece is still not complete but in case it fails it would be mostly owing to internal opposition rather than Russian wrongdoing. However, Russia has reaped strategic gains. It is now recognised as a first-rate player in the Western Balkans. Politicians celebrate it as as an ally or demonise it as an existential threat. Think tanks and journalists write about its influence. The bottomline is that Russia comes across as a competitor and co-equal of the West. That in itself is a clear achievement.

1. Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 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>

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)