

Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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The impact that the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had on Europe's political order, security architecture, and economic wellbeing – not to mention the great loss of innocent civilian lives – is colossal.



The Western Balkans, a region still prone to instability where in many cases governance structures are yet to be consolidated, has felt the full effect of the war in Ukraine.

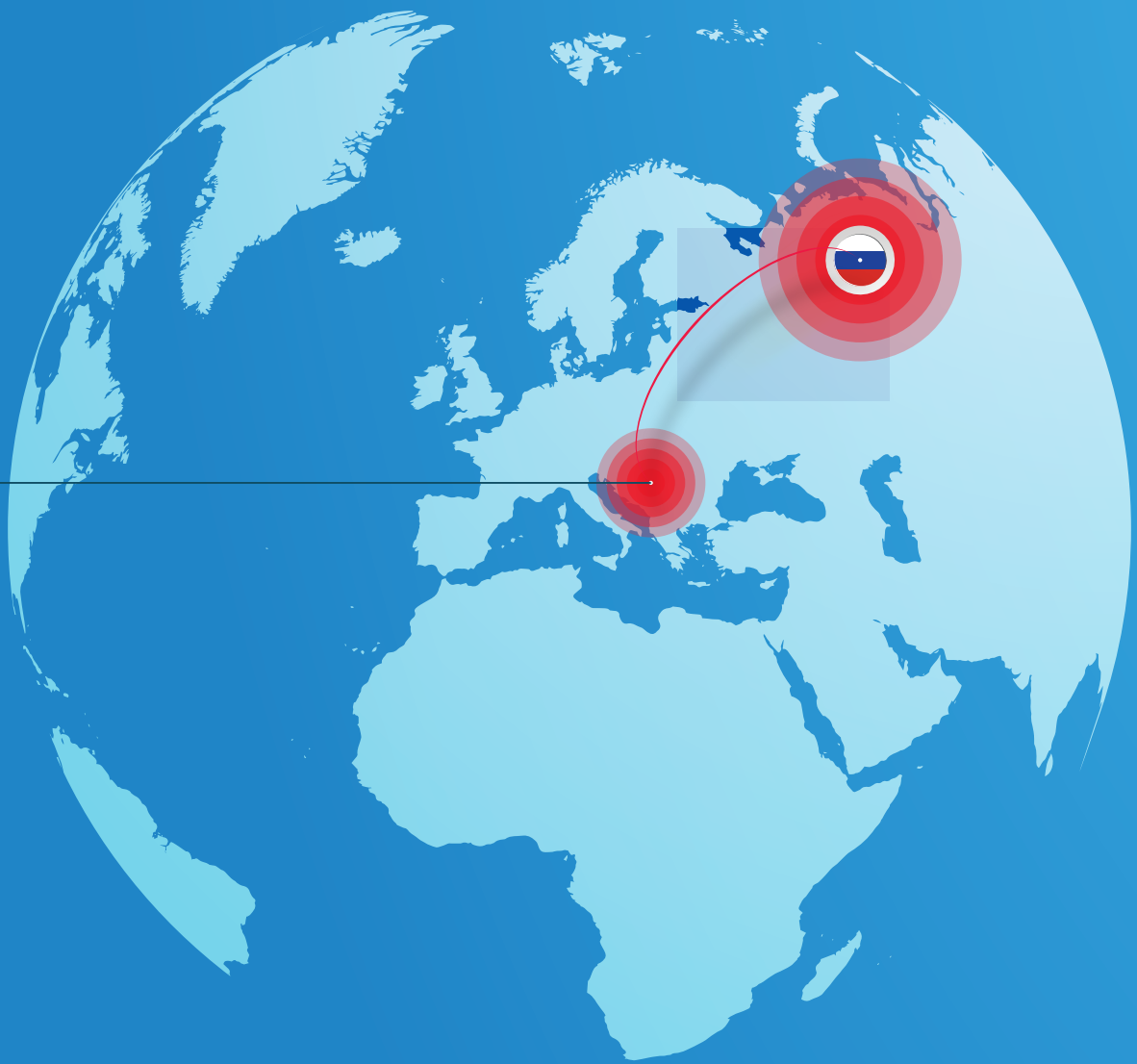


The Western Balkans' security architecture will be determined by how the EU and NATO respond. The EU, NATO, and the leaders of the WB need to collectively work harder to eliminate Russia's opportunism for influence so that the region does not deviate from its path to Euro-Atlantic integration.

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Key recommendations:

- **Prospects for NATO membership:** The entire WB states integration in NATO would be a positive development because it would bring full consolidation of the south wing into NATO, which would also send a clear message to Russia.
- **Stop appeasement policies – reward states aligning with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy:** While the EU has sent assistance and granted candidate status to Ukraine since the Russian invasion, the WB states that joined the EU in sanctioning Russia (except for Serbia) and are prone to similar threats have not received such “rewards.”
- **More work on solving bilateral disputes/unfinished business:** The EU should not allow unfinished business to fester in the WB, such as the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, or the North Macedonia-Bulgaria stagnation. These stagnating issues impede predictability, which is what offers Russia opportunities to play a malign role.
- **A clear path and merit-based approach towards EU accession:** The EU needs to set a timetable as to when the WB states can join. This would incentivize the WB governments to deliver on meeting the accession criteria faster, and in return, get membership. Additionally, the EU needs to become a stronger security provider and offer more economic incentives.
- **Fight autocratic tendencies in the region:** The EU needs to hold accountable the governments in WB that are evidencing democratic backsliding. With a more aggressive approach by the EU, where it sanctions backsliding and rewards democratic reform, we will have a different outlook for the WB by the end of 2030.

Introduction:

Almost two years have passed since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine; the challenges resulting from this unjustified and unprovoked attack persist throughout Europe. The impact that this war has had on Europe's political order, security architecture, and economic wellbeing – not to mention the great loss of innocent civilian lives – is colossal. The Western Balkans (from hereon WB) - a region still prone to instability where in many cases governance structures are yet to be consolidated - has felt the full effect of this impact. In this region, especially in the states created following the collapse of Yugoslavia, nationalism remains a powerful force fueled by territorial disagreements, economic tensions, and ethnic and religious differences. These elements make the region both inherently unstable and vulnerable to the influence and interference of external actors. Consequently, in the wake of the turmoil caused by the invasion of Ukraine, external actors, such as Russia, have sought to take advantage of this vulnerability, by fomenting problems in an already troubled region.

The issue of Russian influence in the WB is a widely debated topic. On the one hand, some argue that Moscow's presence in the region is overstated, and that its other geostrategic priorities always take precedence over those with traditional allies, e.g., the Slavic brotherhood in the WB. Others argue that Moscow's interference in the WB is not to be underestimated and that the region needs to take preemptive measures to stop Russian influence from advancing further. However,

a significant number of scholars argue that there may be some truth to both perspectives, namely, that while the Kremlin does have influence and interests in the WB, its approach is, and always has been, primarily opportunistic. That is, the Kremlin will utilize the ties it enjoys with some local actors and governments in the WB to implement its agenda – which is mainly to cause trouble for the EU and NATO – and in particular to slow down, and if possible, block, further NATO accession. But this perspective also recognizes the limits of Russia's capabilities and the fact that the region's future is in the EU. Indeed, the region is committed to joining the EU, but the slow process of EU integration has inspired much criticism. This accession impasse has aroused fears about an increase in malign influence from alternative outside powers, including China, which, some argue may be more of a threat than Russia.

With fractious political events occurring on a regular basis, the upcoming elections in the EU and the US scheduled for this year, and in a few important EU states, as well as other security challenges facing the world, neither the WB, nor the EU and NATO can underestimate the fragility of the current situation. In other words, one should not turn a blind eye to the idea that the region is immune to more trouble. Therefore, the purpose of this policy brief is to analyze Russian influence in the WB, particularly the security challenges this region has faced since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and suggest a way forward.

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Background, objective, and research methodology

To understand the Russian interest in the Balkans, one needs to look at the history of this region, as well as the interests of the Great Powers that have historically sought to exert their influence there, be it direct or proxy based. Balkan history is rather complex, as the Balkans have been a crossroads between Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, German, to a certain extent Italian, and most recently British, US, and EU interests. Russia, too, during Tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet times has also had its eye on this region. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, followed by the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, which led to four consecutive wars driven by Serbia's nationalist and expansionist aspirations, states in the region have embarked on a path to consolidate their statehoods, making efforts to solve bilateral disputes, and implement reforms in order to join the EU.

For its part, the EU has signaled that it welcomes EU expansion to include the WB states and has been working with them to ensure a smooth path towards European integration for twenty years now. More precisely, in 2003, at the EU-WB Thessaloniki Summit, the governments of the EU member states, along with representatives of WB states, promised that the future of the WB is in the EU. However, twenty years on, none of the WB states (except for Croatia which joined the EU in 2013) are members of the EU, nor do they have a clear timeframe as to when that will happen¹. Several pledges were also made after 2003; for example, in 2018, under the Juncker Commission, there was the "promise" that the WB6 could join by 2025². As this promise will clearly not materialize, there is now speculation about 2030 being the potential "finish line," though there are doubts about this timeframe as well³. While this new proposal seems to contain a package including a staged accession,

the question arises, do such timeframes really matter if there is no clarity as to what needs to be done to gain full membership?

Russia, on the other hand, while tacitly accepting the fact that the region's future is in the EU, has periodically tried to assert its presence in the WB. The Kremlin has often tried to exploit the popular sentiment that it enjoys among the Christian Orthodox population in the region to strengthen relations with local political and cultural actors, governments, and businesses. For example, Alexander Dugin, the Russian Slavophile philosopher and Putin's intellectual guru, has proposed the idea of creating a "Balkan Orthodox Union."⁴ Moreover, Russian influence is not only faith-based. For instance, through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), a Russia-led single market made up of former Soviet states, Russia has tried to attract states such as Serbia. In 2019, Serbia signed a Free Trade Agreement with EAEU. While it is known that this union cannot compete with the EU because of how much the latter invests in the WB, Russia uses such initiatives for its own political interests, and in return, states such as Serbia use them as a balancing act with the aim of benefitting both from the EU and Russia⁵. Indeed, while the WB states stand to benefit from aligning with the EU and NATO, the Kremlin has challenged the integration process. Additionally, Sonja Biserko, president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia argues that given the stagnating issues and bilateral disputes that persist in the region, the WB represents easy prey for Russia⁶. As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there is growing fear in the WB of more instability, including an actual conflict, or as some put it, the WB is where Russia would like to open a second front to distract Ukraine's supporters in the West.⁷

¹ EWB. "Twenty Years since the Thessaloniki Promise of the European Perspective of the Western Balkans." European Western Balkans, 21 June 2023

² Gotev, Georgi. "Juncker Tells Balkan States 2025 Entry Possible for All." Www.euractiv.com, 26 Feb. 2018

³ EWB. "Michel: We Must Be Ready, on Both Sides, to Enlarge by 2030." European Western Balkans, 28 Aug. 2023

⁴ Cero, Harun. "San Ultradesničara I Rusije: "Balkanski Pravoslavni Savez." Al Jazeera Balkans, 16 July 2017

⁵ Cero, Harun. "Euroazijska I Evropska Unija: "Šizofrenost Vanjske Politike Srbije." Al Jazeera Balkans, 1 Sept. 2019. Savez." Al Jazeera Balkans, 16 July 2017

⁶ Cero, Harun. "San Ultradesničara I Rusije: "Balkanski Pravoslavni Savez." Al Jazeera Balkans, 16 July 2017

⁷ Shedd, David, and Stradner, Ivana. "Russia's Second Front in Europe." Foreign Affairs, 7 Nov. 2023

Because of the vulnerability of the region, combined with the risk posed by leaders with autocratic tendencies, the risk of repeated terrorist attacks such as what occurred in Kosovo on September 24, the inflammatory rhetoric of leaders who openly support separatism, WB states look to the EU and NATO to step in and provide a clearer perspective about their future as well as security. Though three of the WB states (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia) are NATO members, and the region as a whole is surrounded by NATO member states, the space for Russian interference and influence remains.

Therefore, this policy brief will focus on the six WB states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The aim of this policy brief is four-fold: first, to provide a general overview of each WB state's relations with Russia. Second, to identify the impact of the war in Ukraine. Third, to describe Russia's goals and reasons for exerting its influence in the region. Fourth and finally, the policy brief will provide a list of recommendations as to what the region as a whole, with the help of the EU and NATO, must do to limit the space for Russian influence.

The research methodology includes a mixture of primary and secondary data. The primary data includes fourteen interviews with former and current politicians, former diplomats, as well as political advisers, professors, and political analysts from the six WB states. The secondary data includes discourse and thematic analyses, local and international think-tank reports and news, and books written by prominent writers on the given topic.

Before diving into the security implications of the war in Ukraine and the recommendations for the way forward, the policy brief will first present a WB country-by-country overview of their relations with Russia.

Albania



In 2022, at a summit in Brussels, Albania's Prime Minister Rama said that Albania is 100% under Russia's radar. Moreover, at this year's UN Security Council meeting in October chaired by Albania, Albanian PM Rama clashed with Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, by defying Nebenzya's effort to disrupt Ukrainian PM Zelensky's speech.⁸ These two instances suggest the following: first, Russia has only a marginal interest and/or influence in Albania, and second, the relations between the two states are strained. Indeed, the general perception when discussing Russian influence in the WB is that Albania is not as vulnerable to Russian influence as the other states in the region.

Since the collapse of communism, relations between Albania and Russia have been limited. This was the result of the subsequent changes within the EU's security architecture.⁹ As a candidate for EU membership since 2014, Albania aligned its policy with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy by sanctioning Russia both in 2014 when Russia annexed the Crimea, and in 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ The sanctions include twelve packages of sanctions, such as freezing the assets of 650 individuals and a complete ban on Russian flights, as well as declaring a few Russian diplomats persona non-grata.¹¹ Finally, in terms of public perception, Albanians have a negative image of Russia; a survey conducted by FES in 2020, revealed that approximately 42% of the population perceives Russia's influence as very negative, 38% perceive it as negative, 10% are neutral, and 5.5% perceive it as positive.¹²

Furthermore, economic relations between Albania and Russia are limited, and the diplomatic relations remain frozen. If one seeks to identify any attempts or concrete examples of Russia interfering in Albania's affairs, there are either failed attempts or examples that don't go

beyond mere rumors. A number of years ago, for example, Russia sought to gain access to an old submarine base in Albania, but its bid was rejected. In addition, Russian entrepreneurs sought to invest in Albanian tourist infrastructure on its beautiful coast but failed to do so.¹³ Moreover, in terms of rumors, in 2019, when the EU denied the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, some news portals reported that Russia allegedly extended an invitation to Albania to join the Eurasian Economic Union. Another example is when a few tourists (two Russians and a Ukrainian) entered a military base in Gramsh to photograph it. Furthermore, though unconfirmed, the BBC recently published an article claiming that Lulzim Basha, former head of the Democratic Party, may have received funding from Russia.¹⁴ In addition, Russia's foreign minister, Lavrov, claimed that Albania has been sending troops to Donbas (however, there is evidence that some Albanians volunteered to fight on Ukraine's side against the Russians but they did so as individuals, not at the direction of the government¹⁵). This is not the first time Lavrov has made such erroneous claims; in 2015, Lavrov and other Russian politicians tried to push the narrative that Albania had territorial claims against Serbia, Greece, Macedonia, and Montenegro in an effort to spark ethnic tensions in the region.¹⁶ However, political analysts from Albania interpret these instances as merely unconfirmed propaganda.¹⁷

With all the above-listed findings in mind, one may conclude that Albania may indeed be under Russia's radar, despite Russia's limited efforts and unconfirmed rumors. Ditmir Bushati, former Foreign Minister of Albania, argues that for a global actor such as Russia, and given the influence it has sought to exert across Europe and beyond, Albania represents an anomaly. It would be

⁸ European Pravda, and Ukrainska Pravda. "Russia's Representative to the UN Tries to Disrupt Zelensky's Speech." Ukrainska Pravda, 20 Sept. 2023

⁹ Interview with Ditmir Bushati, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Albania, October 9, 2023

¹⁰ Stasiukevych, Iryna, and Malovec Michal. "EU Sanctions against Russia: Alignment of the EU Enlargement Countries." Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, July 2022

¹¹ Sinoruka, Fjori. "Albania Unveils Sanctions on Russia over Attack on Ukraine." BalkanInsight, 28 Feb. 2022

¹² Dyrnishi, Arjan. "Albania's Security Barometer: National Survey 2020." Tirana.fes.de, 2021, p. 56

¹³ Interview with Shaun Byrnes, Former US State Department Official, Former Chief of the US Kosovo Diplomatic Observer Mission 1998-99, and Balkan Expert, November 2, 2023

¹⁴ Oliver, James, et al. "Criminals and Sanctions-Busters Exploiting UK Secrecy Loophole." www.bbc.com, 2 Nov. 2023

¹⁵ Interview with Shaun Byrnes

¹⁶ Stronski, Paul, and Himes, Annie. "Russia's Game in the Balkans." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019

¹⁷ Interview with a political analyst and university professor, Albania, October 5, 2023

difficult for Russia to achieve its objectives among Albanians. "Even if, hypothetically arguing, the EU were to close the doors to Albania's path to integration, it is hardly likely that Albania would see Russia as an alternative to a strategic partner," Bushati concludes.¹⁸

¹⁸Interview with Ditmir Bushati

Bosnia and Herzegovina



When it comes to Russian influence, Bosnia and Herzegovina (from hereon Bosnia) presents a very different picture from Albania. Russia enjoys political, economic, and cultural relations with Bosnia, particularly with Republika Srpska (RS) and its leader, Milorad Dodik. Russia is engaged in “electricity generation, nuclear power projects, oil refineries and gasoline sales” in RS. It has the Zarubezhneft oil refinery, which “has cost Russian investors 60 million dollars since 2016, but Russia maintains it for leverage, because it keeps people employed, builds goodwill, and allows Russia to create a partnership with the RS.”¹⁹ Furthermore, in 2015, Russia vetoed the draft UN resolution recognizing the Srebrenica genocide with the excuse that such a resolution would be divisive for the country.²⁰ Russia even extends military support to RS, by siding with Dodik’s aspirations. According to EU officials, Dodik’s efforts to withdraw troops from the Bosnian Army and create a separate Bosnian-Serb force “undermine the state’s ability to function and carry out its constitutional responsibilities.”²¹ While Bosnia has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, RS refuses to sanction Russia. What these quick facts indicate is that Bosnia is indeed prone to Russia’s influence. As the findings of this policy brief will later showcase, Bosnia is among the WB states most vulnerable to Russian meddling in several aspects: political, military, and economic.

Adnan Cerimagić, a senior analyst for the WB, argues that relations between Bosnia and Russia had a turning point in 2014.²² The large protests that took place in multiple cities in Bosnia in February 2014 as a result of the citizens’ dissatisfaction with the government, served as a wake-up call to the EU to bring together parties that were close to the European People’s Party. That meant leaving Dodik out of the picture. Before the elections that were to take place in October of that year, Dodik realized he was left without allies and decided to pay Putin a visit in September of that year. Ever since, their relations have only strengthened on many levels, including personal, political, and economic. A 2016 landslide referendum, for example, which Russia openly backed, was intended to maintain the National Day of RS as a holiday by sparking

controversy with the Constitutional Court of Bosnia, led to Dodik becoming fully emboldened with Putin to salvage his political power and authority. By 2018, Dodik managed to defeat the opposition and he has openly engaged with far right-wing leaders such as Hungarian PM Viktor Orban.²³

Additionally, Cerimagić explains that Russia continues to use its veto in the UN by voting to prolong the EU’s military mission (EUFOR) to indicate that Moscow does have a say in international affairs. After the start of Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, even NATO’s Jens Stoltenberg and EU’s Joseph Borrell spoke about Putin’s plan (allegedly in coordination with Dodik) of June 2021 to launch a quick invasion of Ukraine, which they thought would ultimately destabilize Moldova and Bosnia, which would present RS with the opportunity to declare some sort of independence from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Dodik has even openly spoken about the “Srpski Svet” (Serbian World), which is a parallel to “Russky Mir” (Russian World) much as Putin is a role model for Dodik.²⁴ Such a threatening statement is a red flag for the entire WB region. Although the US Embassy in Sarajevo has condemned this statement (and even sanctioned Dodik and his partners), the EU has yet to issue a statement.

While Russia has an economic presence in Bosnia, it is far smaller than that of the EU. Data from 2020 indicates that Russia accounts for only 3% of FDI in Bosnia, compared to the EU’s 64% share. However, Russia has strong economic leverage in RS because of its control of the major refinery there and even rumored loans to Dodik’s government. Furthermore, as Majda Ruge, a senior policy fellow in Berlin writes, “Despite Russia’s limited economic leverage, Moscow’s firm intention is to continue subverting existing Western political and security initiatives in Bosnia.”²⁵ Through low-cost acts, Russia seeks to prevent Bosnia from adopting a coherent foreign policy. This was best exemplified by how Igor Kalbukhov, Russian Ambassador to Bosnia, reacted to the possibility of Bosnia joining NATO; “If Bosnia decides to be a member of any alliance, that is an internal matter. Our response is a different matter. Ukraine’s example

¹⁹ Stronski, Paul, and Himes, Annie. “Russia’s Game in the Balkans.”

²⁰ Reuters. “Russia Vetoes UN Move to Call Srebrenica ‘Genocide.’” BBC News, 8 July 2015, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33445772

²¹ RFE, and RL’s Balkan Service. “UN Security Council Extends Bosnian Peacekeeping Force after Russia, China Appeased.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 4 Nov. 2021

²² Interview with Adnan Cerimagić, Senior Analyst for the Western Balkans, October 4, 2023

²³ Interview with Adnan Cerimagić

²⁴ Interview with Adnan Cerimagić

²⁵ Ruge, Majda. “The Past and the Furious: How Russia’s Revisionism Threatens Bosnia.” ECFR, 13 Sept. 2022

shows what we expect. Should there be any threat, we will respond," Kalbukhov said in an interview in March 2022.²⁶ In terms of additional security matters, there have been rumors that Russia may open a cultural and humanitarian center in Banja Luka (a similar one exists in Nis, Serbia), which raises concerns that it will serve as another means to achieve Russia's geopolitical ambitions.²⁷ The presence of Night Wolves, Wagner²⁸, and other pro-Kremlin groups in Bosnia's RS has long been known, which is just another example of channels of influence that threaten Bosnia's stability.

However, Russophile sentiment varies throughout Bosnia. When discussing Russian influence in Bosnia, one must take into account more than one perspective: that of RS, and that of the Federation. Their positions diverge on aligning with EU Common Security and Foreign Policy; the former is not aligned, whereas the latter is. The same thing is reflected among the public. Bosnian Serbs see Russia as their ally, whereas Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Muslims see NATO and the EU as their allies.

Despite Bosnia's changing electoral politics, polls show NATO is still broadly popular. A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute last year found that 69% of Bosniaks and 77% of Croats support NATO membership, whereas only 8% of Bosnian Serbs are in favor.²⁹

What the overview of these findings shows about Russia-Bosnia relations is that multifold influence exists, but mainly due to the individual agency of leaders such as Dodik, who enable Putin to exert his influence there. However, with pro-Russian leaders such as Dodik, given the fragility of Bosnia's statehood (despite the fact that Bosnia recently received EU candidate status), the situation is far from stable. Yet, the Russian influence in Bosnia and the threat that it poses seems to be falling on deaf ears in Brussels. Later in this policy brief we call for the EU and NATO to do a better job in anchoring Bosnia within their security orbit as this is critical to facilitating a politically stable and secure environment for Bosnia.

²⁶ Belančić, Nataša. "Russia Ambassador: Bosnia Can Join NATO, but Moscow Will React to Threat." N1, 16 Mar. 2022

²⁷ E. Dz. "The Center in Banja Luka and the Highway as an Announcement of a Larger Presence of Russia in BiH." Sarajevo Times, 31 Dec. 2021

²⁸ RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "Members of Russia Motorcycle Group Night Wolves Take Part in Republika Srpska Celebration Day." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 9 Jan. 2023

²⁹ International Republican Institute. "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey I January-February 2022." International Republican Institute, 29 Jan. 2022

Kosovo



Kosovo, in comparison to the rest of the WB states, does not have formal diplomatic relations with Russia. That is because the latter does not recognize Kosovo's independence, which Putin uses to justify Russian support for separatist movements in its so-called "Near Abroad."³⁰ However, even though the two states do not have bilateral relations, they have a lot of unofficial contact. The "Kosovo case" has been "utilized" by the Kremlin quite often. First, because the Kremlin periodically accuses NATO of violating international law by its military intervention in 1999 against Serbia to stop the Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians, to justify Russia's own actual violations of international law in attacking Georgia in 2008 and seizing parts of that country. And second, because the West (US, Canada, Germany, the UK, France etc.) have recognized Kosovo's independence. Putin never accepted that and has constantly accused the West of hypocrisy.³¹ That is why, as Lulzim Peci, a political analyst from Kosovo argues, Russia's policy has always been more towards Kosovo, than in Kosovo. "The aim is not only to portray Kosovo as a failed state, but to reveal the weaknesses and "injustices" of the West," Peci concluded.³² Moreover, another reason why Kosovo plays a role in the Russia-WB relations is the unresolved Kosovo-Serbia dispute. Having historically sided with Serbia (primarily due to their Slavic Orthodox brotherhood), Russia fervently supports Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence. Therefore, while NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo remains a lingering Russian grudge against the West, it also provides an opening for Russia to maintain and even build up its influence in probably the most important state in the WB.

As previously mentioned, while Kosovo and Russia do not have diplomatic relations, Russia has sought to find its way to meddle in Kosovo's internal affairs. Both during the Rambouillet negotiations in March 1999, as well as during the Vienna negotiations on Kosovo's status in 2006, Russia sided with Serbia and tried to influence the outcome, but was outvoted. After Milosevic capitulated in June 1999, Russian peacekeepers based in Bosnia

rushed to Kosovo to try to occupy the Prishtina airport before the arrival of NATO troops. That almost led to a military confrontation between NATO and Russia. Russia eventually backed down. Kosovo has thus been the cause of numerous humiliations for Russia.

However, the Kremlin still has some cards it can play against Kosovo. First, it uses its permanent vote in the UN Security Council to veto Kosovo's bid for membership in the UN, and supports Serbia's lobbying against Kosovo's membership in international organizations, as well as supporting Serbia's lobbying for the derecognition of Kosovo.³³ Second, Putin enjoys great popularity among the Serbian population (both in Serbia and in the Serbian-majority municipalities in Kosovo) – a nationalism card that he has mastered using and seems to feel little hesitation in doing so, in particular to create problems for his NATO rivals.

Indeed, Russia has sought to affect the sentiment of the Serbian minority in Kosovo through propaganda and inflammatory iconography. Immediately after the war in 1999, Russia tried to spread anti-NATO propaganda; Enver Hoxhaj, former Kosovo Minister of Foreign Affairs, explained that some local Serbian politicians who were Members of the Kosovo Parliament, tried to spread propaganda such as "the West is in decline, the EU is a failed project. Basically, anything along the lines of Russian ultranationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin's Slavic brotherhood was a narrative the local Serbian politicians embraced and disseminated," Hoxhaj added.³⁴ Even now, Putin enjoys popularity in the Serbian-majority municipalities in Kosovo. In May 2023, municipal elections in the Serbian-majority municipalities in the north of Kosovo took place, which the Serbs boycotted. As a result, ethnic Albanian mayors took office, and portraits of Putin were found in the Municipality of Zvečan.³⁵ This is one of many cases that reveal Russia's popularity among the Serbian minority in Kosovo, as was, for instance, graffiti found in Mitrovica North drawing parallels between Kosovo and the Crimea.³⁶

³⁰ Ingimundarson, Valur. STRATEGIC UPDATE the "Kosovo Precedent": Russia's Justification of Military Interventions and Territorial Revisions in Georgia and Ukraine. LSE, July 2022.

³¹ Koha. "Russia Accuses the West of "Hypocrisy and Duplicity" Regarding the Kosovo Issue." Koha.net, 9 Mar. 2023

³² Interview with Lulzim Peci, Political Analyst, Kosovo, October 4, 2023

³³ Hoxhaj, Enver, "The Big Clash: How Russia Is Fighting Kosovo and the Balkans" p. 71

³⁴ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kosovo, October 24, 2023

³⁵ Aktuale1. "Fotografia E Putinit Në Zyren E Ish-Kryetarit Të Zveçanit." Aktuale.mk, 11 Dec. 2023

³⁶ Tschinderle, Franziska. "Back in North Mitrovica. One thing didn't change. They still have this graffiti saying: „Kosovo is Serbia - Crimea is Russia", X/ Former Twitter, 2 March 2022 Gotev, Georgi. "Juncker Tells Balkan States 2025 Entry Possible for All." Www.euractiv.com, 26 Feb. 2018

Moreover, Moscow's propaganda machine is a powerful means to maintain Russia's popularity among vulnerable groups. This machine has become useful for politicians such as Serbia's President Vucic as well, replicated both in the Kosovo war in 1999 and the current war in Ukraine. For example, "Just as Serbia's Milosevic claimed Serbs in Kosovo were oppressed by local Albanians, Putin has instrumentalized the image of allegedly oppressed Russians in Ukraine as another justification for this war. Even now, Serbian President Vucic follows Milosevic's patterns, and, though he claims to support the Kosovo Serbs, he uses them as a tool to cause tension in Kosovo."³⁷ In addition, since the war in Ukraine, there have been some unfiltered media outlets in Kosovo which have sought to portray Russia as a powerful military force. However, Lulzim Peci argues that efforts to instill fear among Albanians and to portray Russia as protector of Serbs in Kosovo are illusionary.³⁸

Other than the above-mentioned channels for influence, Russia has few other avenues to interfere in Kosovo's internal affairs, particularly because of the enormous pro-Western sentiment both among the government and the population. Russia has a liaison office in Prishtina (though it is unclear whether it remains open), but its representatives have been declared persona non-grata by Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani. Russia may have some influence through its staff employed in UNMIK (the necessity of the presence of this office is still questioned by many Kosovar Albanians today) and perhaps some staff in the OSCE office,³⁹ but other than that, Russia has no official channels of influence in Kosovo. While Kosovo's statehood is still not fully recognized by all EU members, and the soon to be sixteen-year-old

independent country is neither a UN member, nor has EU candidate status, it has aligned its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with the EU and swiftly sanctioned Russia for the invasion of Ukraine. As Kosovo has a majority Albanian population, as in Albania, it is difficult for Russia to penetrate and exert its influence. The public perception of Russia in Kosovo is very negative; 73% of Kosovar Albanians have a highly unfavorable view of Russia, and 88% support full membership in NATO.⁴⁰

However, despite the absence of bilateral relations between Russia and Kosovo, the latter has been prone to instability, mainly because of its rocky relations with Serbia, which, as previously noted, enjoys strong ties with Russia. The stagnating Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue remains one of the most concerning issues in the region. Though the Dialogue process started in 2011, the two states still struggle to reach a final agreement that would lead to mutual recognition. The risk for tension remains, particularly since the fear of a spillover effect of the war in Ukraine. There are allegations that Russia may have been behind the September 24 terrorist attack from the Banjska Monastery in the Serb-majority north of Kosovo, when a group of armed Serbs killed a Kosovo Police officer; some interviewees drew a parallel between this incident and Prigozhin's mutiny in June 2023.⁴¹ While these allegations remain unconfirmed, fear of repeated conflict in the region persists. Frequent statements by Putin, Lavrov, and Russia's FM Spokeswoman Zakharova about their "concerns" regarding developments in Kosovo only add fuel to this fire. As this policy brief will later suggest, the situation in Kosovo should serve as a stimulus for the EU and NATO to step up their efforts in helping states that are prone to increased instability as a result of the destabilizing agendas of Russia and its local allies in the Western Balkans.

³⁷ Loshaj, Jeta. "Kosovo and Ukraine Are More Similar than Many Think." Prishtina Insight, 20 Feb. 2023

³⁸ Interview with Lulzim Peci

³⁹ Interview with Shaun Byrnes

⁴⁰ International Republican Institute. "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey | January-February 2022

⁴¹ Panel Discussion with Jeton Zulfaj, Political Adviser to the Prime Minister of Kosovo, November 14, 2023

Montenegro



Montenegro represents a more complicated case with regard to Russian influence. Historically, Montenegro and Russia have had close and warm relations dating back to the 19th century when Montenegro was an independent principality. In the modern era, relations between Montenegro and Russia began deteriorating in 2014, when Montenegro decided to impose sanctions on Russia because of its annexation of Crimea. On the surface, Montenegro has aligned its Common Foreign and Security Policy with the EU. However, the current political situation is more complex.⁴²

Russia has meddled in Montenegro's efforts towards Euro-Atlantic integration. For instance, Russia tried to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO several years ago, culminating in an unsuccessful assassination attempt against pro-NATO Montenegrin President Djukanovic, and a failed coup d'état. This led to the early retirement of Putin's Balkan adviser, former KGB general Leonid Reshetnikov and, of greater importance, cooled official Russian-Montenegrin relations.⁴³ Even after Montenegro joined NATO, some sources claim that Russia launched cyber-attacks on NATO military personnel.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, sympathy for Russia remains among a segment of the population and a group of pro-Serbian politicians. There are some politicians in Montenegro that sought to block sanctions against Russia. While they didn't succeed, the newly elected government in Montenegro includes the publicly pro-Russian Head of Assembly Andrija Mandic, and thus cultivating closer relations with Russia may be back on the agenda.⁴⁵

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) plays a crucial role in enabling Russian influence in Montenegro. There are two Orthodox Churches in Montenegro, one of which is subordinate to the SOC in Belgrade, the other that has split with that church but is not autocephalous and is pro-Montenegrin independence politically and religiously. The controversial deal to make one of the Orthodox Churches in Montenegro subordinate to Serbia signed in August 2022 presents a critical threat to Montenegro

because SOC is a very powerful, if not the most powerful tool, for leveraging political influence. A former senior politician in Montenegro, argues that the mantra of the SOC is not to have any liturgy whatsoever. He argues that "SOC is more loyal to Russia than to its own government, if the latter leans towards the West."⁴⁶ The point is to facilitate Russia's political ambitions and spread fear.

The former senior politician further added that Russia has geostrategic ambitions in Montenegro, particularly because of the Adriatic Coast. Russia has long had a deep interest in obtaining a naval base in the Adriatic. This was witnessed with a provocation along the Adriatic Coast in July 2022, when a US aircraft carrier was in the Adriatic, and Russia sent ships to shadow it. Russia has even offered to buy the Port of Bar for 1.2 billion euros (almost half of Montenegro's budget,) but Montenegro refused. That is why, according to former Montenegrin politicians, Montenegro can be a hotspot for future conflicts incited by Russian provocations.⁴⁷

In terms of the political picture, the recently appointed government in Montenegro has aroused concern in the region. The newly elected Parliament Speaker, Andrija Mandic is openly pro-Serb, pro-Russia, and anti-NATO – basically a proxy of Putin and Vucic. Mandic has called for revoking Montenegro's recognition of Kosovo and withdrawing sanctions against Russia.⁴⁸ Moreover, the upcoming census in Montenegro, where there are concerns that the influence of the SOC – a proxy of Russia – may encourage many Montenegrins to declare themselves as Serbians, is arousing considerable concern.⁴⁹

When it comes to the public perception, data shows that 63% of the population supports EU membership, 33% support the NATO membership, and 32% view relations with Russia as highly favorable.⁵⁰ Vesko Garcevic, a professor at Boston University, argues that the public perception represents a kind of spiritual dichotomy; while the majority of Montenegrins support Ukraine, but also

⁴² Interview with Vesko Garcevic, Professor of Practice of International Relations and Diplomacy, Boston University, October 6, 2023

⁴³ Interview with Shaun Byrnes

⁴⁴ Interview with a former senior politician, Montenegro, October 18, 2023

⁴⁵ RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "After Months of Jockeying, Montenegro Approves New Coalition Government." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 31 Oct. 2023

⁴⁶ Interview with a former senior politician, Montenegro

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "After Months of Jockeying, Montenegro Approves New Coalition Government."

⁴⁹ Interview with a former senior politician, Montenegro

⁵⁰ International Republican Institute. "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey I January-February 2022

see Russia as an ally, they will always choose the EU as a preferable destination to live in. Here Serbian and Russian media influence is an important factor. Garcevic explains that all media in Montenegro are controlled by Serbia (some even by Russia as a consequence), only the public service is independent.⁵¹

Therefore, the above-listed findings indicate that Russia has long sought and enjoyed influence in Montenegro. Its influence is primarily imperial and strategic – using the similar playbook of establishing the Srpski Svet/Ruskyi Mir and gaining a naval base on the Adriatic. More importantly, while Montenegro has been a NATO member for seven years, its process toward EU accession negotiation has been slow; hence, given this impasse, coupled with the newly elected government's favorable stance towards Russia, it remains to be seen how Russian influence in Montenegro will unfold.

⁵¹ Interview with Vesko Garcevic, Professor of Practice of International Relations and Diplomacy, Boston University, October 6, 2023

North Macedonia



While it may have previously been one of the key footholds of Russia influence due to some pro-Russian politicians, North Macedonia (NM) seems to be moving away from Russia and is no longer on its radar. Like Albania and Montenegro, Russia has added North Macedonia to its list of unfriendly states, thanks to its decision to impose sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, following the EU's example. According to the Prespa Institute's International Impact Index, Russia is not considered as a top influencer in NM's affairs.⁵² "There is no significant Russian presence in the real or financial sector of the economy, except the dependence on Russian gas, but it will be decreased with the construction of the new gas pipeline with Greece, which should be finished in 2024," explains Dragan Tevdovski, former NM Finance Minister.⁵³ Other than this aspect, diplomatic relations between the two states seem strained. Nevertheless, there are issues in NM that deserve a closer look regarding Russian influence because neither in this country, nor in the region or the EU, can the situation be taken for granted. NM will have elections next year, and the popular support for political parties that have pro-Russian tendencies seems to be increasing.⁵⁴

In March 2020, NM became a NATO member. Like Montenegro and Serbia, it is a candidate country for EU membership. After reaching an agreement on name change with Greece – the Prespa Agreement in 2018 – NM moved quickly to open EU accession talks. However, this was a deal that Russia tried to disrupt, but it was an effort that proved counterproductive and humiliating to Russia for two reasons. First, such meddling inspired the West to work faster to step up both NATO membership for NM and the Prespa Agreement. Second, both Greece (a historical ally of Russia) and NM expelled Russian

diplomats who tried to interfere in the name dispute.⁵⁵ However, while NATO membership is resolved, when it comes to EU membership, NM faces another stumbling block; Bulgaria uses its veto to prevent NM's EU membership because of disagreement over the constitutional status of the Bulgarian minority. Such an unsolved issue, some analysts argue, can serve as another opportunity for Russia to interfere.⁵⁶ Apart from trying to stop the Prespa Agreement, Russia tried to promote nationalists led by former PM Nikola Gruevski and his political party, leading to a two-year political crisis between 2015-2017 and the collapse of the Gruevski government – something which the Kremlin argued was a "color revolution" imposed by the West.⁵⁷ Beyond these instances, when it comes to public perception, a pro-Western sentiment seems to dominate. Public opinion surveys show that 22% of the NM population see Russia as a highly favorable ally, compared to the 59% who support full NATO membership, and 74% in favor of EU membership.⁵⁸

Therefore, the findings indicate that NM does not seem to be as vulnerable to instability and to Russian influence as some other states in the region (partly due to the lack of historical affinity). However, there are some opposition parties in Skopje that are pro-Russian and seem to be leading in the polls, which is why one cannot take the situation for granted.⁵⁹ There is also fear that if the rightist government returns, there could be a move towards Russia, which would produce a similar situation to that in Montenegro.⁶⁰ Therefore, while NM may not momentarily be a hotspot for conflict, the lack of success so far of its bid for EU membership may leave NM isolated and become fertile ground for disruptive influence by malign external actors such as Russia.

⁵² Stojkovski, Andreja, et al. "PRESPA Institute's International Impact Index." Prespa Institute, 2019

⁵³ Interview with Dragan Tevdovski, Former Minister of Finance, North Macedonia, October 26, 2023

⁵⁴ Interview with a political analyst from North Macedonia, November 13, 2023

⁵⁵ Samorukov, Maxim. "Double or Quits: A Russian Approach to North Macedonia and NATO." Carnegieendowment.org, 14 May 2019

⁵⁶ Interview with a political analyst from North Macedonia

⁵⁷ Interview with Dr. Aleksandar Spasov, Associate Professor of theoretical

legal sciences at the "Iustinianus Primus" Faculty of Law at the "Ss. Cyril and Methodius," North Macedonia, November 2, 2023

⁵⁸ International Republican Institute. "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey I January-February 2022

⁵⁹ Nikolovski, Ivan. "Russia Still Has Cards to Play in North Macedonia." Balkan Crossroads, 27 June 2019

⁶⁰ Act, Samantha. "IDU Member VMRO-DPMNE Leading the Polls in the Republic of North Macedonia, Expected to Win the next Elections I International Democracy Union." Idu.org, 25 Oct. 2023

Serbia



Russia and Serbia enjoy active diplomatic, military, economic, cultural, and religious relations. Vladimir Putin is the most popular foreign leader in Serbia, according to polling, and almost overshadows President Vucic's popularity. The connection between the two states is especially strong because of several factors. To begin with, historically, Russia came to Serbia's (and Bulgaria's) assistance in the Russo-Turkish war in 1878-79 and again in 1914 when Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia. Second, the two states share Eastern Orthodox faith. And third, Russia strongly condemned NATO's bombing of Belgrade in 1999 and refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence. In addition, there are strong economic links between the two states, especially in the energy sector. In 2008, after Kosovo declared independence, Russia's Gazprom Neft bought Serbia's oil and gas company, Nis, for 450 million dollars, committing to invest 600 million more. The price was too low, according to experts, but was a sign of Serbian "gratitude" for Russia's strong opposition to Kosovo's independence. Finally, there is also military and intelligence cooperation: Russia has established a "Humanitarian Center" close to Kosovo in southern Serbia, which aims at "preventing emergency humanitarian responses," but according to some sources, the center is a Russian military intelligence base. Finally, bilateral military relations are also strong. In 2019, the Serbian Ministry of Defense received 10 modernized reconnaissance BRDM-2MS vehicles as a donation from Russia. These vehicles are used for surveillance at night and have thermal vision cameras that can spot targets 3.5 km away. They are armed with 14.5 mm KPVT machine guns with a fire rate of 600 bullets per minute.⁶¹

While Serbia has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the UNGA, it has resisted calls from the EU to impose sanctions on Russia. According to Florian Bieber, a historian at the University of Graz, Serbia has been playing a "staged balancing act."⁶² That is, it tries to maintain good relations both with the West (EU, NATO, US) and with Russia. However, Filip Ejodus, a professor at the University of Belgrade argues that Serbia's game of sitting in two chairs may have an expiration date. "Such a

way of hedging bets and trying to be pragmatic doesn't work if you're a landlocked country surrounded by NATO members," Ejodus argues. Ejodus further adds that the Russian influence in Serbia can be characterized as an "influence by invitation."⁶³ The mutual interest that exists stems from the fact that Russia uses Serbia as a foothold to maintain its presence in the WB, while in return Serbia gets Russia's veto in the UNSC which blocks the recognition of Kosovo's statehood. Finally, when it comes to the public perception, the support for Russia in Serbia is rather high. Polls show that 51% of Serbs view relations with Russia as highly favorable, 48% want no relationship at all with NATO, and 50% support EU membership.⁶⁴ Such responses can be interpreted as almost intuitive, Ejodus argues. That is because of the narrative that Russia sells and has been selling for decades among the Serbian population. Indeed, similar to Montenegro, Russia's disinformation campaign in Serbia runs at full speed.⁶⁵

These findings indicate that the Russian influence in Serbia has both an ideological and a geopolitical basis. The Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandar Harchenko, is quite active in spreading propaganda that the EU is trying to make Serbia yield to pressure to "give up" Kosovo, and that the EU is "meddling" in Serbia's affairs, whereas Russia, according to Harchenko, doesn't do that. It's a direct mechanism through which they put sticks in the wheels of EU integration.⁶⁶ Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, apart from refusing to sanction Russia, several pro-Russia rallies, organized by the Vucic government, in support of the invasion and blaming NATO have taken place in Belgrade and other cities. Moreover, while Serbia has hosted Russian and Ukrainian refugees, it has been denying entry to Serbia to Russian anti-war activists.⁶⁷ Most recently, three months after being sanctioned by the US, Serbia's ultranationalist pro-Russian intelligence chief, Alexandar Vulin, finally resigned; some analysts argue that Vucic acted to remove him in response to growing Western complaints about him.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ International Republican Institute. "2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey I January-February 2022"

⁶⁵ Maliqi, Agon. "Russian Information Warfare in the Balkans: How Identity and Religion Are Instrumentalized in the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute." Berkleycenter.georgetown.edu, 13 July 2023

⁶⁶ Interview with Filip Ejodus

⁶⁷ RFE/RL's Balkan Service. "Russian Anti-War Activist Detained at Belgrade Airport, Denied Entry to Serbia."

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 5 Nov. 2023

⁶⁸ Interview with Shaun Byrnes

⁶¹ Ministry of Defense Republic of Serbia. "BRDM-2MS Vehicles Are Significant Enhancement for Reconnaissance Units of Serbian Armed Forces." Mod.gov.rs, 31 Aug. 2020

⁶² Bieber, Florian. "Serbia's Staged Balancing Act." Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 7 Aug. 2023

⁶³ Interview with Filip Ejodus, Professor of Security Studies, University of Belgrade, Serbia, October 10, 2023

Furthermore, the Russo-Serbian partnership does not stop there. In September 2022, Belgrade and Moscow signed an agreement to coordinate foreign policy.⁶⁹ Moreover, as stated in the beginning of the policy brief, Serbia joined the EAEU in 2019 – another indication of the two-chair game. Finally, human rights activists such as Sonja Biserko have long warned about the Russian paramilitary group Wagner and the Night Wolves, together with Serbian extremist groups working on provoking conflict in the north of Kosovo.⁷⁰ It turned out to be accurate that Serbian extremists were involved in the September 24 Banjska attack, though the involvement of the Russian groups is unconfirmed. However, this attack shows that Serbia, like Russia, looks towards the past, instead of moving forward.⁷¹ There are additional examples as to how intertwined Belgrade and Moscow are. Yet, the EU and NATO have not held Serbia

accountable for refusing to sanction Russia and align its CFSP with the EU, despite the official candidate status it enjoys. It remains to be seen how long Serbia's maintenance of this position will be tolerated, but some observers fear that Serbia may end up without allies. "Any country supported by Russia is not better off – as was the case with the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict," Ejodus observes. Ejodus also argues that Serbia may be damaging its reputation due to the reluctance to sanction Russia - it has become known as the pariah of the region. And while Belgrade seems to continue playing the staged balancing act between East and West, in the long run, it will not pay off in terms of the path to EU accession.⁷² With all this in mind, such impunity seems only to encourage leaders with autocratic tendencies such as Vucic and Putin to achieve their goals in destabilizing not only their neighbors, but also their own states.

⁶⁹ Euractiv. "Serbia Doubles down on Plan to Coordinate Foreign Policy with Russia." www.euractiv.com, 26 Sept. 2022

⁷⁰ The Geopost. "Biserko: Russian Paramilitary Unit "Wagner", "Night Wolves" and Serbian Extremist Groups Are Provoking Conflict in the North of Kosovo." The Geopost, 23 Dec. 2022

⁷¹ Discussion with Jeton Zulfaj

⁷² Interview with Filip Ejodus

Analysis of the Russian Influence in the Western Balkans

The findings above raise several important questions: How can one assess the question of Russia's influence in the WB? If one accepts the argument that this influence exists, what is its nature and has it changed since the invasion of Ukraine, and if so, how? What are the motives behind Russia's attempts to gain and increase its influence in the WB? More importantly, what will be the consequences for the region if Russian influence persists, especially if it is nefarious? Finally, what is the EU's and NATO's role in responding to Russian efforts to influence the WB and what steps can be taken to close pathways to that in the region?

Finding a definite answer that has not already been discussed by other organizations, summits, and meetings is difficult. Namely, the call – that has been made for quite some time – for the EU, NATO, and the leaders of the WB to collectively work harder to eliminate Russia's opportunism for influence so that the region does not deviate from its path to EU membership. However, this cannot remain just a narrative. There are emerging threats and security challenges facing Europe, such as the outburst of conflict in the Middle East, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the upcoming 2024 elections in the EU and the US, as well as those in some individual EU and WB states. Would it be realistic for the WB to expect to receive the necessary attention and support from the EU and NATO in the midst of such developments? The answer is difficult to predict. Hence, all these factors call for firm, quick, and unified action to help the region stay on the trajectory of EU integration.

Before discussing the impact and consequences of the war in Ukraine for the WB, we should point out that the overall picture, derived partly from interviews as well as the analysis of other sources, leads us to conclude that the WB states are indeed vulnerable to Russian influence, be that deliberate, or opportunistic. Furthermore, depending on developments on the ground, Russian influence may be characterized by continuity and change. The three main states in which Russian influence appears to be stronger are Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (through the RS entity). North Macedonia surely remains a target, but its pro-Russian opposition parties remain weak. Finally, while Kosovo may be

vulnerable due to the tension with Serbia, Albania seems to fall at the bottom of the list of WB states with space for Russian influence.

Moreover, it is important to note that the Kremlin may not be laser-focused or have a tailored approach towards exerting its influence in the WB. However, due to the ties it enjoys with certain governments, such as Belgrade, Republika Srpska, and most likely the new government of Montenegro, Russian efforts to increase its influence may increase, especially as Russia's war in Ukraine has led to its greater diplomatic and economic isolation. As Russia is focused on Ukraine and other areas it claims to be within its own sphere of influence, it will serve as a role-model for its traditional allies in the WB to use a similar playbook (read: *Russkyi Mir = Srpski Svet*), as is the case with Serbia towards some of its neighbors.

Impact of the War in Ukraine

How has the war in Ukraine redefined security challenges in the Western Balkans? To begin with, this war has revived classic geopolitics, and it has severely damaged the post-WWII international order. "Now, foreign policy is a test of power and strength," argues Kosovo's former Foreign Minister Hoxhaj while pointing out that cooperation has been replaced by confrontation.⁷³ Moreover, most of the interviewees for this policy brief agreed that the EU has done little to comprehend the vulnerability of the region. There's plenty of so-called unfinished business in the region, starting from the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, North Macedonia's entry to the EU being blocked by Bulgaria, Dodik's autocratic rule of Republika Srpska and Vucic's in Serbia, and most recently, the emergence of a new Montenegrin Government with pro-Russian politicians in key positions. While it is up to the governments of the respective states to step up their work on reforms and strengthen democratic rule, the EU has not done enough either in providing a clear membership perspective for the region, nor in holding accountable those who provide the space for Russian influence in the WB. As a result, gambling on further EU reluctance to adopt a more assertive role, Russia, through its partners in the WB, has taken advantage of the fragile situation in the region – an advantage which, as Ukrainian President Zelensky recently stated – is not far from leading to a conflict.⁷⁴

⁷³ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

⁷⁴ Koha. "Zelensky: Rusia Po Përgatit Luftë Në Ballkan." Koha.net, 16 Nov. 2023

Moreover, the war in Ukraine has also shown that Russia's main goal is to change the unipolar world into a multipolar world. In doing so, in doing Russia seeks to restore its great power status as well as its claims to have a sphere of influence in its own neighborhood. To do that, Putin seeks to internationalize the war in Ukraine, i.e., that Moscow wants to create as many zones of conflict as possible (or to maintain the ones that already exist) in order to stir up more trouble for the EU and NATO that in Putin's probable calculations, will give him a freer hand in Ukraine and in his "Near Abroad."⁷⁵ For the WB in particular, Russia would want to have a "second front" in the already troubled region to divert NATO attention and resources away from Ukraine.⁷⁶ Indeed, Russia exploits trouble in the Western Balkans to employ its traditional foreign policy principle: divide and rule as a divisive tool against NATO and the EU.⁷⁷

Aware of the popular nationalist sentiment he enjoys among most of the Orthodox Slavs in the region, as well as his partnerships with Vucic, Dodik, and now perhaps Mandic, Putin believes that the EU and NATO perspective may be challenged in the region. This is best demonstrated by the reluctance of the EU to hold Serbia accountable for refusing to sanction Russia. Ultimately, Putin seeks to destroy the international order that was built with the establishment of the United Nations and secured by NATO's creation after WWII and US power. Russia wants a new world in which spheres of influence are recreated, thus permitting Russia to regain its former dominant influence in east central Europe, the Transcaucasus and Central Asia and regaining its status as a major power on par with the US.⁷⁸ Therefore, Russia will stick to its goal of slowing down the integration of WB in EU for as long as it can because any quick integration of the latter in Euro-Atlantic structures would reduce or even end Russia's influence there.

Consequences and Risks

"It was expected that the war in Ukraine would accelerate things for the WB in terms of EU enlargement, but it seems to have done the opposite. The EU has been missing its chances in the region," Adnan Cerimagic argues. Cerimagic further adds that some of the predictions that a few political analysts made in the beginning of 2022, that Russia would be weakened because of its focus on Ukraine, turned out to be misleading.⁷⁹ Indeed, the war in Ukraine soon marks two years, and the WB's EU accession prospects lack a clear vision and deadline. This may indicate that as long as such a situation remains, the WB can remain a hotspot for Russian influence, which the latter will achieve in a cost-effective way. In other words, "a divided Balkan outside of Europe with uncertainty for the future with

nationalist movements is an ideal environment for Russia to operate in," Former Kosovo FM Hoxhaj added.⁸⁰ Moreover, the rise of far-right parties in Slovakia, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and a few other Europe states, coupled with the EU's lack of unity and complacency, as well as the WB's vulnerability, are all elements that serve Russia's purposes well.

According to Dr. Aleksandar Spasov, a university professor from North Macedonia, the consequences and risks of the war in Ukraine can be measured in two levels: the macro and the micro. Macro-level consequences for the entire region of WB are the following: the region fails to advance towards EU membership; there is rise of Euro-Skepticism among WB population and a loss of EU credibility due to the so-called "enlargement fatigue"⁸¹; there is decrease in democratic rule and a turn to authoritarianism in the WB; the WB states begin looking for alternative partnerships (such as China) for economic cooperation. Whereas the micro-level consequences (in particular states) include: tendencies in countries that in the present are democratic to develop governments with autocratic characteristics; a decrease in pro-EU civil society organizations; penetration in local political parties, and economic, media and cultural institutions by external and extraregional actors through economic and other incentives.⁸²

Additional risks may include the following:

Limbo zones may melt: This refers to the situation in Kosovo, where complaints of ethnic Serbs towards the Kurti government have caused some riots, coupled with Serbia's deployment of over 8,000 troops near the Kosovo border. There was/is increased fear that the Banjska terrorist attack by the Serbian armed group in Kosovo was going to create a Donbas scenario.⁸³ Moreover, some interviewees argued that there had been warnings of an attack by Serbia three years ago. The infamous "when the army returns to Kosovo" parole by Serbian nationalists that has been appearing in Serbian-majority municipalities recently, was apparently shouted by the priests and some military members also in 2020 at the Montenegro protests in Cetinje that were organized by Montenegrins opposing the appointment of the new Serbian Orthodox Church Metropolitan in Montenegro. "The parole in Banjska was not an accident –it's been a plan of Serbian nationalists and Orthodox Church representatives way before." argues a former senior Montenegrin politician who was a witness to Cetinje protests.⁸⁴ Therefore, there is growing concern that a conflict in the WB can arise.

Bloodshed cannot be ruled out: Right after the war in Ukraine started, the Serbian Metropolitan of Montenegro said that the destiny of Montenegro is to be a small

⁷⁵ Interview with Ditmir Bushati

⁷⁶ Interview with Dr. Aleksandar Spasov

⁷⁷ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

⁷⁸ Interview with Ditmir Bushati

⁷⁹ Interview with Adnan Cerimagic

⁸⁰ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

⁸¹ Interview with Vesko Garcevic

⁸² Interview with Dr. Aleksandar Spasov

⁸³ Interview with Adnan Cerimagic

⁸⁴ Interview with a former senior politician, Montenegro

Ukraine.⁸⁵ Indeed, when comparing the rapport between Russia-Ukraine and Serbia-Montenegro, the parallels seem to have a remarkably strong resemblance. Just as Russia tries to deny the identity of Ukrainians, Serbia seems to be doing the same to Montenegrins. As mentioned in the Montenegro-Russia summary, it remains to be seen how the changes will unfold in the upcoming census in Montenegro. A former Montenegrin politician during the interview warned of an "Euromaidan" happening in Montenegro should the Serbianization of Montenegro continue.

The likelihood that the idea of monoethnic states may resurface: "Russia knows how to play the nationalistic card," Lulzim Peci argues. Indeed, the war has brought economic fragmentation, which then makes room for nationalism. For example, while it is unknown whether Russia was behind the proposed 2018 exchange of territories between then Kosovo Prime Minister Thaci and Serbian President Vucic, that deal would not only have had a spillover effect (perhaps inevitably accompanied by bloodshed) in the WB, but it would have also served Russia well as another "justification" for its war in Ukraine.

The rise of leaders with authoritarian tendencies: With a weak EU/US policy in the WB, politicians who pursue individual interests over that of the society will prevail.⁸⁶ "Putinism" as a model of governance seems to be more of a threat than Russia itself, argues Lulzim Peci.⁸⁷ Indeed, according to watchdog Freedom House, some states in Southeast and Central Europe, except for Kosovo, saw a backslide in democracy.⁸⁸ For example, Serbia went 26 places backwards in democratic decline, which, according to Jeton Zulfaj, Advisor to Kosovo's Prime Minister, poses a threat to the region. "The more Serbia backslides into autocracy, the more aggressive it becomes towards its neighbors, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia," Zulfaj concludes, implying that there is correlation between democratic advancement and resilience towards Russian influence.⁸⁹

What is Russia's interest for playing the pariah:

Before explaining Putin's motives for interfering in the WB, one must emphasize his overall goals by providing some additional background. He is apoplectic about the collapse of the USSR and blames the US for that "tragedy." His aim is to destroy the post-WWII international order, which the Kremlin implicitly accepted, especially when it signed the Helsinki Agreement in 1975 recognizing the existing borders and calling for non-interference as well as respect for human rights. By destroying the international order, Putin hopes to restore Russia's "imperial" great power status and

again become equal to its American enemy. To ensure Russia's power and security requires the creation of a Russian sphere of influence that will have as its first "member," Ukraine, but will also be joined by former Soviet republics, e.g., Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc. More disturbing for the West, in Putin's eyes, the ideal sphere of influence would include the "border lands of Eastern Europe," e.g., the Baltics, Finland, Poland, Hungary and Romania. "The recreation of Russia's cordon sanitaire, an object of Russian foreign policy since at least Alexander I's time, has a deep hold on Russian minds and on Russian history. By controlling these borderlands, Russia's ruler always felt secure," argues Shaun Byrnes, a former US State Department official. Consequently, the WB, a region small in territory but large in significance, thus plays in into Putin's agenda as well.

The findings so far indicate that the motives behind Russia's meddling in the WB are specifically directed towards creating problems for the EU and NATO. They can be categorized as **geostrategic**, imperial/ideological, and geopolitical. First, the **geostrategic** ambition is demonstrated by Russia's effort to prevent or harm the NATO and EU presence in the region, as was the case in Montenegro with the effort of getting access to the Port of Bar. As the former politician from Montenegro explained, "Russia would like to use Montenegro as a sword inside the stomach of NATO."⁹⁰

Second, the **imperial** appetite of Russia was something many interviewees emphasized. As the war in Ukraine is showing, Russia never gave up on its imperial ambitions. Similar to the war in Ukraine, Russia sees itself as a powerful geopolitical actor – as in previous centuries – not only in the WB, but also at the global level.⁹¹

The third motive is **geopolitical**. As mentioned throughout the brief, Putin holds a few grudges towards the West. Therefore, a lot of the things he does are as a result of his victim mentality, and thus, his quest for revenge against the West. Putin's fear of color revolutions is known, which was seen also in the WB when he sought to portray both the 2015 protests in NM and this year's protests in Serbia in a similar light. Moreover, as long as NATO membership for some of the WB states and EU membership for all the WB states remains a distant project, Russia will try to exploit its relations with actors in the WB to push that project even further away.

As previously mentioned, Russia has not overcome the grievances of the past. Ultimately, it wants to bring back the multipolar world, and to have a say in some of the affairs of the region. As Adnan Cerimagic pointed out "Russia's goal is not because it wants to have a long-term strategic partnership with any of the WB states, but it

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ Interview with Adnan Cerimagic

⁸⁷ Interview with Lulzim Peci

⁸⁸ Buyuk, Hamdi Firat. "Freedom House: Southeast, Central Europe –

except Kosovo – Sees Freedoms Decline." Balkan Insight, 2 Mar. 2023

⁸⁹ Discussion with Jeton Zulfaj

⁹⁰ Interview with a former senior politician, Montenegro

⁹¹ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

wants to utilize its ties in the region as a coin in a wider game."⁹² These motives remain historically repetitive. Nevertheless, while the goals and plans may not be tailored, they are opportunistic. That is, the Kremlin seeks to achieve its objectives through cost-effective ways, e.g., by encouraging old romantic ideas of pan-Slavic unity founded on shared eastern Orthodoxy and playing on old nationalist tropes that enflame inter-ethnic clashes, or through indirectly spreading propaganda in order to weaken the belief in democracy among some WB states.

⁹²Interview with Adnan Cerimagic

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above-listed findings indicate that the consequences of the war in Ukraine are indeed concerning. And while most people expected that this conflict would bring a political rebirth of the EU, not only has this rebirth not happened, but the latter has been reluctant to step up its enlargement policy to provide a clearer perspective for the WB. In so doing, it has served Russia's purposes well. Thus, as the war in Ukraine soon marks two years, it is of paramount importance for both the EU and NATO to shield the WB within their security umbrella before it is too late. Therefore, the region's security architecture will be determined by how the EU and NATO respond. This policy brief provides a set of recommendations that can be taken into consideration in order to mitigate Russian influence both in the short and long term.

Some of the recommendations that came out of the interviews and a panel discussion in November are the following:

Prospects for NATO membership: All interviewees argued that NATO needs to provide more security in the region. The example of Finland's accession was a positive step in responding to Russia's aggression on Ukraine. While three of the WB states (Albania, Montenegro, and NM) are NATO members, and Bosnia and Serbia have signed Partnership for Peace (PfP), Kosovo, which is the country that expresses the highest support for NATO (and perhaps needs membership the most) is not even a member of PfP. It would be a positive development if something was done in this direction.⁹³ Furthermore, the integration of Bosnia and Kosovo into NATO would relax bilateral tensions with neighboring states and would make finding a solution, when it comes to bilateral issues, easier. Because of historic sentiments, Bosnia and Kosovo would feel more secure under the NATO umbrella and would therefore be more open to maneuver in bilateral negotiation processes with neighboring states. Lulzim Peci argued that the entire WB states integration in NATO would be a positive development because it would bring full consolidation of the south wing into NATO, which would also send a clear message to Russia.⁹⁴

Increased NATO presence: While NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recently visited the WB, analysts

argue that more needs to be done beyond mere statements and visits to the region. There are concrete steps that NATO can take in Bosnia, for example, such as the calls to establish a military base, similar to Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, in Brcko. If the security crisis escalates, then NATO should be redeployed to Bosnia. NATO could establish its presence in Sarajevo and use the airport in the northern city of Tuzla. The strategic town of Brcko in Bosnia's northeast should be secured, and a NATO presence established there. With minimal resources, NATO could avert Bosnia's slide into uncertainty and instability as well as ensure that the Western political and military investment in peace in southeastern Europe is safeguarded.⁹⁵

More work on solving bilateral disputes/unfinished business: The EU should not allow unfinished business to fester in the WB, such as the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, or the North Macedonia-Bulgaria stagnation. These stagnating issues impede predictability (an important concept in international relations), which would offer Russia opportunities to play a malign role, Enver Hoxhaj argues. Hoxhaj further adds that completing the statehood of Kosovo is important because it also has implications for regional peace. That said, assistance in helping Kosovo gain recognition by the five EU nonrecognizers, as well as by Ukraine, would send a strong signal to Russia. The Dialogue with Serbia is also important because it would make the region more secure, and in that way, actors such as Russia will not have the opportunity to make the region less predictable, as it was witnessed in the September 24 Banjska attack. Therefore, the EU and NATO must invest in fixing bilateral disputes within the region.⁹⁶

Stop appeasement policies – reward states aligning with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP): This recommendation pertains to Serbia's hegemonic aspirations towards its neighbors Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia, particularly due to Belgrade's relations with Moscow. The EU and NATO must understand that defending BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro is the same as defending Ukraine, as both parties are threatened by states with hegemonic tendencies.⁹⁷ While the EU has

⁹³ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

⁹⁴ Interview with Lulzim Peci

⁹⁵ Popovic, Sofija. "[EWB Interview] Cero: It's Crucial That Ordinary People Really Feel Results of Reforms." *European Western Balkans*, 14 Oct. 2023

⁹⁶ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

⁹⁷ Interview with a former senior politician, Montenegro

sent assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion, and even granted it candidate status, the WB states that swiftly joined the EU in sanctioning Russia (except for Serbia) and are prone to similar threats have not received such "rewards." Thus, given the fact that we live in a new geopolitical reality, the EU must reward those who have aligned its CFSP with the EU and discipline those who haven't.⁹⁸ For example, for those states that have aligned with EU CFSP, they need a seat at the table of high-level discussions, and they need to be given credit for their positive alignment with EU CFSP, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine.⁹⁹

A clear path and merit-based approach towards EU accession: The EU needs to set a timetable as to when the WB states can become members. This would incentivize the respective governments to deliver on meeting the accession criteria faster, and in return, get membership. Indeed, the WB states need to know that EU membership is a mutual commitment. Dragan Tevdovski, former Finance Minister of North Macedonia, argues that they should step up their efforts on reform and closer cooperation.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the EU accession must be done in a merit-based approach. "You cannot agree to align with EU CFSP the day you enter the EU. EU membership is a process of transformation," Jeton Zulfaj suggests. Indeed, the EU's reaction when Serbia signed the Free Trade Agreement with EAEU (not to mention Vucic's meetings with leaders from Beijing), was that Serbia would have to withdraw from this union the day it enters the EU.¹⁰¹ Filip Ejodus suggests an alternative approach to accelerated EU integration. He calls it "a more for more, less for less" approach. "If, for example, Montenegro joins the EU, it would probably send a positive signal to Serbia that accession is possible. Such an approach is important because it would catalyze changes and hope elsewhere," Ejodus concludes.¹⁰² It is important to conclude that EU enlargement is not only about benefitting the WB. It has to do with the very basic idea regarding why the West is involved in the Balkans; to

promote liberal peace. And if this peace is threatened by outsiders, and where war rules over peace, then this calls for a new approach.¹⁰³

The EU needs to become a stronger security provider: Europe has to work on its defense capabilities, something which has been discussed and advocated for in the last two decades.¹⁰⁴ As Majda Ruge writes, "If the EU wants to fulfil its ambition of becoming a geopolitical actor that can contain Russia in its immediate neighborhood, it will not be able to do so through the enlargement framework alone (which, in any case, is malfunctioning). The EU needs to create a credible foreign and security policy that is backed by powerful military capabilities."¹⁰⁵ As stated above, this is something the EU does not need to do only for the WB states' sake, but also for its own.

More economic incentives are needed: Some interviewees suggested that the EU needs to provide access to cohesion funds and open the single market by moving beyond mere narratives that the future of the region is in the EU. If the EU would integrate the region at least into the four freedoms, then the nationalism and pan-Slavic brotherhood narratives would become less relevant.¹⁰⁶ Another way which EU-led economic incentives would help is that they would replace the corrosive effects of Russian-related businesses and investments with strong and accountable institutions.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, this would close any space for Russia to interfere, because what Russia offers is not economic progress, but mainly a recipe to the past. That is why it does not enjoy major support in the WB except amongst some individual politicians

Fight autocratic tendencies in the region: The EU needs to hold accountable the governments in WB that are evidencing democratic backsliding, an approach that Vesko Garcevic named a "No carrots, just sticks approach" - Carrots don't work for nationalists and autocrats.¹⁰⁸ With a much more aggressive approach by the EU, where it sanctions backsliding and rewards democratic reform, we will have a different outlook for the WB by the end of 2030.¹⁰⁹

⁹⁸ Interview with Ditmir Bushati

⁹⁹ Interview with Vesko Garcevic

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Dragan Tevdovski

¹⁰¹ Stojanovic, Milica. "Serbia Signs Trade Deal with Russia's Eurasian Union." *Balkan Insight*, 25 Oct. 2019

¹⁰² Interview with Filip Ejodus

¹⁰³ Interview with Enver Hoxhaj

¹⁰⁴ Witney, Nick. "Spirit of Ambition: The Ukraine War and European Defence Integration." *ECFR*, 26 July 2023

¹⁰⁵ Ruge, Majda. "The Past and the Furious: How Russia's Revisionism Threatens Bosnia."

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Adnan Cerimagic

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Vesko Garcevic

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Vesko Garcevic

¹⁰⁹ Discussion with Jeton Zulfaj

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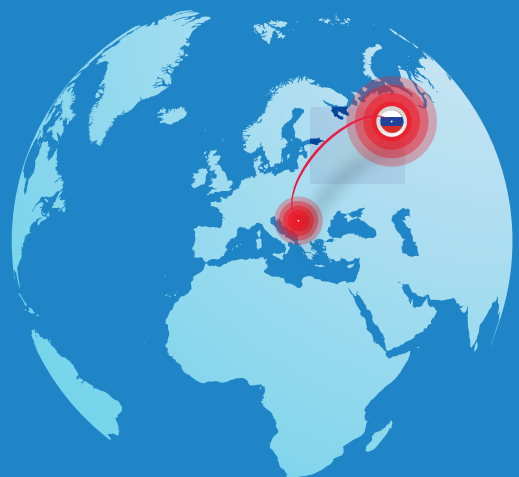
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Between Continuity and Change:

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and Security Challenges
in the Western Balkans
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Invasion of Ukraine



Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine



Russia has periodically tried to assert its presence in the WB. The Kremlin has often tried to exploit the popular sentiment that it enjoys among the Christian Orthodox population in the region to strengthen relations with local political and cultural actors, governments, and businesses.



The findings of this policy brief indicate that the motives behind Russia's meddling in the Western Balkans are specifically directed towards creating problems for the EU and NATO. They can be categorized as geostrategic, imperial/ideological, and geopolitical.



With emerging threats and security challenges facing Europe, such as the outburst of conflict in the Middle East, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the upcoming 2024 elections in the EU and the US, as well as those in some individual EU and WB states, neither the WB, nor the EU and NATO should underestimate the fragility of the current situation.