

# The Balkan Kettle: Russia's policy towards the Balkans

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## Abstract

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*The purpose of this article is to identify the policy orientations of Russia in the Balkans. The historical aspects of Russia's political and cultural ties with the Balkan region and Russia's policy towards the Balkans during the USSR period will feature. As the Balkans are an important factor in Russia's geopolitical game to retain influence in Europe, the author analyses Russia's contemporary policy in the Balkans, its interests and the measures taken to achieve its specific goals. It can be concluded that Russian involvement in some Balkan countries is exhausting the elements of a hybrid war. Two possible models of geopolitical behaviour in relation to Russia can be distinguished. The first is to continue trying to stay as far away from Russia, the second is to build effective mechanisms for socio-economic cooperation. It can be implied that Russia will not hesitate to repeat the hybrid war scenario from Ukraine in order to maintain its political influence in the region. Only the EU returning to a consistent policy of enlargement involving the Balkan countries and the economic strengthening of the Member States from the Balkan region can weaken Russia's political influence in the region.*

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## Keywords:

Russia, Western Balkans Six, politics, history, energy, religion, European integration

### Article info

Received: 26 March 2021

Revised: 2 June 2021

Accepted: 8 June 2021

Available online: 30 September 2021

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/138674>

## Introduction

The purpose of the article is to identify the policy directions of Russia towards the Balkans, which can be identified as the Western Balkans, the Balkan Peninsula, the Western Balkans Six – WB6, and South-Eastern Europe. The content covers the past and present perspectives to reveal the broad context of Russia's political endeavours towards the Balkans. Russia's current interest in the situation in the Balkans has a long pedigree, but it is the cornerstone of the political strategy in many areas. Therefore, historical factors as the roots for Russia's current policy in South-Eastern Europe constitute a specific area for reflection. In relation to the present-day situation and future actions, they basically concern European Union integration. Such a mosaic of interests throughout a specific timeline indicates that Russian and Western Balkan relations are intrinsic and require complex analyses. This analysis will evolve around economic and energy policy, religious and cultural issues and problems with integration of Balkan countries into the European Union. Hybrid war, which is the main thread of the article, is understood as "the combination of incompatible, namely: a fragmentary and situational combination of different methods and theories of war, their integration into different spheres, especially political, religious, ideological, ethical, economic and informational" (Zhyhlei and Syvak, 2019).

The limitations concern specific, aforementioned areas of analysis as well as key actors (states): Russia, the EU and the Balkan region. The author is aware of the influence of other countries, instance e.g. China, Turkey, and some Arab countries, but the article restricts itself to Russia and the EU in particular. A key thread is the area of the energy expansion of Russian companies in the Balkans (Sushkova and Koumpoti, 2020). Equally important is the use by Russia of the so-called soft power and cultivation of the belief that Russia is a key strategic partner which cares more than the EU about the interests of the region. Russia bases these activities on the Slavic and Orthodox traditions, amongst other things. In this way, Serbia is the strongest anchor for such movements (Reid, 2020). Another area for examination is the process of integrating the Western Balkan countries into the European Union. Russia, based on historical traditions, energy, Slavic culture and the Orthodox Church, is trying to hinder the integration efforts of individual countries 20 years after the end of the wars in former Yugoslavia, and the Western Balkans remains only partially integrated into Western structures of security and economics. Today, it is a region in which NATO and the EU compete for influence alongside Russia and China. While NATO could have enlarged further with the accession of North Macedonia, Russia has effectively encouraged Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina not to pursue similar ambitions (Larsen, 2020).

The analysis used two types of sources. The first are local and threads examined from a closer perspective. These sources were supported by the international works of authors with a broader perspective. The use of resources creates also another limitation for the analyses.

### A historic Balkans Linked to Russia

The history of Europe is the fate of tens of nations and states and a history of wars which ended with one state entity and others becoming power players. Russia has had a huge impact on the fate of Europe, a country that was previously torn apart by invasions of Huns, Avars and Khazars. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the first Slavic proto-state entities existed within the borders of Russia, roughly corresponding to the Kiev, Novgorod and Ryazan districts (Kozłowski *et al.*, 2001).

The great prince of Kiev, Vladimir the Great of the Rurik dynasty, a saint of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church, contributed to the unification of the Ruthenian tribes.

In 988 in Chersonesos, he was baptised and married Anna, sister of the Byzantine emperor Basil II (Serczyk, 2009). This event permanently defined Russia's culture and religion. Subsequent periods in the history of Russia included a division into districts and wars of individual principalities with the Tatars, Lithuanians, Sweden, the Teutonic Order and Poland. The beginnings of Russia's superpower status are related to the Romanov dynasty which was enthroned in Moscow in 1613 by the Council of the Land. Their rule and the reforms of the 17th and 18th centuries allowed Russia to consider playing a greater role in the international arena (Heller, 2008).

Russia's area of interest was in line with the areas inhabited by Slavs and Orthodox followers. This was related to two ideas supported by the Romanov dynasty: the first idea was Byzantineism, i.e. the belief in cultural origin based on Byzantine Orthodoxy (Bala, 2016, pp. 13–21). The second idea from the 19th century was Pan-Slavism, the basic assumption and goal of which, at the same time, is the creation of a great Slavic Empire under the authority of Russia. This concept was supported by the tsarist authorities, the Orthodox Church and the then Russian elite. According to the ideological assumptions of Pan-Slavism, the future Slavic Federation was to include:

- The Russian empire, including all Galicia and Hungarian Russia;
- The Czech-Moravian-Slovak Kingdom, i.e. the Czech Republic, Moravia, and the north-western part of Hungary;
- The Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom stretching from the Alps to Albania and North Macedonia;
- The Bulgarian Kingdom consisting of Bulgaria, Rumelia and Macedonia;
- The Romanian Kingdom, including Wallachia, Moldova, part of Bukovina, half of Transylvania to the western Bessarabian river. Whereas the eastern part of Bessarabia with the Delta of the Danube and Dobrudnia was directly attached to Russia;
- The Greek Kingdom, plus Epirus, Thessalia, South-West North Macedonia and the islands archipelago in the Aegean Sea, including: Crete, Cyprus and Rhodes, and the lower Asian coast on the Aegean Sea;
- The Hungarian Kingdom made up of Hungary and a part of Transylvania;
- The district of Constantinople comprising part of Rumelia and parts of Asia adjacent to the Turkish Straits;
- The capital of the Slavic Federation was planned to be Constantinople (Eberhardt, 2012).

Both concepts were driven by messianic ideas, according to which Russia was supposed to become the centre for uniting all Slavs of the Romanov dynasty, who were oppressed by Turkey as well as by the German element. Russia, as a defender of the Orthodox religion, became a champion of the Balkan nations, for some of which it has been legally the main foundation supporting independence tendencies, the sense of national identity, and the local culture (Kłaczyński, 2017, p. 70).

The accepted role of the defender of Slavs and the Orthodox religion was one of triggering wars with Turkey. One of the Russian-Turkish wars, in the years 1768–1774, ended with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire on sea and land. Finally, Turkey was forced to

sign an unfavourable peace in Küczük Kajnardza on 21 July 1774. Peace conditions guaranteed Russia's right to defend the Slavic Orthodox population living on the Balkan peninsula. From this moment, Russia has tried to intervene in Balkan affairs and take every opportunity to strengthen its political position. Next to Turkey and Austria, it became the third force affecting the situation in the Balkans (Eberhardt, 2012).

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it had little success in the Balkans, especially in the economic sphere, where the Austro-Hungarian and German capitals were dominant. In the Balkan wars (1912 and 1913), Russia tried to play the role of an arbitrator between Christian nations fighting for independence following the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Nor did it play a significant role in establishing the borders in the Balkans after the end of the First World War, when France and the United Kingdom, introduced their visions of the statehood of the Balkan nations. During the interwar period and during the second World War, the USSR played a minor role in the internal and political life and in the foreign policy of the Balkan countries (Mihailov, 2010, pp. 80–81). This state of affairs radically changed for Russia as well as for the entire Balkans after the end of the Second World War.

## Balkans behind the “Iron Curtain”

The Soviet Union's influence in Central and Eastern Europe broadly coincided with the area occupied by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War and was sanctioned by the Yalta Conference. In the socialist countries, the communist parties effectively grasped power by making systemic transformations. The entire eastern bloc was under the control of the USSR, as well as individual armies which were subordinate to Moscow in the framework of the Warsaw agreement. The Soviet Union made key decisions on the eastern bloc countries' foreign policy and on the main economic policy directions.

During the first period following the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union was geopolitical in the Balkans. The exception was Muslim Turkey and Greece in their civil war. Stalin supported the idea of creating a Balkan Federation between Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania. This idea was initially recognised by the leaders of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, and Bulgaria, Georgios Dimitrov, but after the so-called Yugoslav crisis (1948), the idea of the Balkan Federation started to move (Mihailov, 2010, p. 81).

The self-confidence of Yugoslavia in its relations with the USSR was due to the fact that the state itself, the only one in Europe, freed itself from the German occupation of the party forces led by Tito. Secondly, in Yugoslavia and Albania, communists achieved power independently without the help of the Red Army. The self-declared concept of communism, as highlighted by Yugoslavia, and conducting a self-standing policy on the international stage put it ultimately in conflict with both sides. An example of its own foreign policy was the Yugoslav military “maximum” plan, which allowed military interference in Greece and Italy to support the call for a communist revolution. Yugoslavia strongly supported the Greek partisan movement. Stalin was not interested in the revolution in Greece, because it was outside the Soviet army and the agreement with Churchill predicted that it would fall within the British sphere of influence. The Spanish guerrilla communities aiming to destroy Franco also received the support of the Yugoslav Republic. Stalin's clear suggestions for Yugoslavia to fully comply with the USSR's policy weren't acted upon, on the other hand. In June 1948, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was excluded from Cominform (the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties, commonly known as Cominform). The Eastern bloc countries gradually broke contact with Belgrade and Yugoslavia became isolated in Central and Eastern Europe. Stalin was unable to rebut the Yugoslav leader, mainly thanks to Western economic aid and Tito's internal policy (Kowalewski, 2013).

Its own vision of Communism became a reality and Yugoslavia never returned to the group of countries in the orbit of the USSR. The cut-off from Stalinism allowed Yugoslavia access to assistance from the US and the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) – the institution responsible for the Marshall Plan. However, Yugoslavia did not agree to join the Western bloc and it remained an unengaged state in the Cold War period. Following Stalin's death in 1953, relations between the two countries were standardised and Yugoslavia received assistance from the USSR and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – Comecon (Woydyłło, 1992).

Another Balkan country in which the Soviet Union lost its influence was Albania. It withdrew from the Eastern bloc, which resulted in the USSR no longer providing economic support to it. In December 1961, Albania broke diplomatic relations with the USSR and it ceased its work in the Warsaw Pact in 1962. In September 1968, Albania withdrew from the Pact. In the 1950s, the leaders of Romania began a dialogue about their right to “their own path to socialism”. The country was also not enjoying perfect relations with the Soviet Union and had a specific international policy until the collapse of the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime in 1989. So Soviet domination did not last for too long. In all, during the Cold War, only Bulgaria was fully subordinate and showed full loyalty by Moscow, and the Balkan area was geopolitically fragmented (Mihailov, 2010, p. 82).

The transformation in the political, social, economic and cultural spheres at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s shaped a new world and regional reality. The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics brought about the dissolution of the Cold War's political, military and economic alliances. This enabled many European nations to (re)create their own statehood or started a struggle for political self-determination. It was similar in the Balkans, but not as peaceful as in the case of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic countries.

## The Balkans Remains Important for Russia

After 1991, the priorities in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation had to be re-evaluated. The area of the Commonwealth of Independent States came first. The real area of directly exerted political and economic influence was reduced to the post-Soviet space. The Russian Federation turned into a more north-eastern country compared to the reach the Soviet Union had. It lost its direct land border with the Balkans that it had with Romania, and Moldova and Ukraine were on the way. Due to these changes and the serious internal socio-economic problems, the Balkans became a “second-range” area for Russia and a subject of secondary priorities for Russian strategists and diplomats. In foreign policy, Russia cultivated its position in bilateral relations with the main EU countries, the USA, and in the Russia-NATO, Russia-China and Russia-India dialogues (Mihailov, 2010, p. 82).

This does not mean that Russia had forgotten the Balkans and their geopolitical significance. The region found its place in doctrine documents, which can be referred to as Russian doctrine in the Balkans'. In the *concept of the foreign policy FR of 1993*<sup>1</sup>, it was pointed out as a fundamental step in establishing bilateral relations with Albania and bringing it closer to Bulgaria and Romania. In the next edition of this 2000 document, the Balkans is mentioned in the context of regional (European) priorities. The focus was on the western part of the peninsula. The document states that Russia will work with the international community to stabilise the situation in the countries of the region and will support the territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, the 2008 document mentions the Balkans in only one sentence of Part Four, Regional *priorities*: “Russia is open to the development of cooperation based on pragmatism and mutual respect with the countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.” Another doctrine document is the so-called *Primakov*

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1. The second text of this document dates back to 2000 and refers to the changed situation in Europe following the collapse of the Eastern bloc. The current document is the concept of foreign policy FR approved by President Dmitri Medvedev on 12 July 2008.

*Doctor*<sup>2</sup>. It defines the position of the Russian Federation as one of the powers in the multipolar world, the main interest of which is to maintain influence in the Euro-Asian region and the Balkans by actively influencing the shaping of geostrategic policy in the region (Włodkowska, 2009, pp. 101–104).

Russia's current policy in the Balkans is a continuation of the policy of the 1970s. The Balkans is a strategically important region for Moscow for two fundamental reasons: Firstly, it is an area of competition with other regional actors such as the European Union, NATO, the USA, and secondly, there are paths to supply energy raw materials to Europe. Control over this artery is important for shaping economic and political relations in the region.

The Russian geopolitician, Nartov (2004), aware of the new balance of power after the Cold War period, defined the main goals of the Russian geostrategy for the Balkan region as follows:

- preventing the diplomatic isolation of Russia in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Sofia;
- stopping the West from interfering with the internal politics of the Balkan states, especially the Slavic states;
- fighting for the fate of the Balkan nations to be decided by the United Nations, not NATO (Nartov, 2004, pp. 230–231).

As the history of conflicts in the Balkans shows, it was NATO and the United States who took the initiative in the region. It was the West that decided on the terms of the peace agreement in Dayton in 1995, and NATO mounted an armed intervention in Yugoslavia. Nobody asked the Russians for their opinion, and after the Kosovo crisis in 1999, the geostrategic initiative in the Balkan region belongs exclusively to NATO, which has significant forces in Kosovo as part of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeeping mission.

According to Reljić (2009)<sup>3</sup>, Russia's political influence in the Western Balkans is largely based on three pillars:

- A. First, Russia uses its privileged position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council Through veto law, Moscow can block all UN processes in the Western Balkans if they oppose the political objectives of Russia. Therefore, since 2007, Russia has blocked efforts by Western countries to give international legal legitimacy to Kosovo's independence.
- B. The second pillar is the historic, cultural and political ties Russia has with the peoples and countries of South-Eastern Europe, which have an Orthodox tradition. Moscow is of the opinion that such solidarity will continue with these countries in South East Europe despite their membership of NATO and the European Union, or decision to join these organisations.
- C. The third pillar on which Moscow is based in the Western Balkans is Russia's growing economic importance for the countries in the area. Russia is the leading supplier of energy raw materials for the region and is increasingly becoming an investor and a trading partner (Reljić, 2009, p. 6).

The three pillars will be discussed in detail.

- A. Russia's strong position on the UN Security Council is used to defend the interests of Serbia, the largest republic of the former Yugoslavia. It does not seek stronger allied re-

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2. It was presented in 1996 at 51. Session of the General Assembly of the UN by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of FR Yevgeny Primakov.

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3. Dušan Reljić is currently the head of the Brussels Bureau of SWP Berlin (German Institute for International Affairs and Security). Dušan Reljić is concerned with international relations and security, with particular reference to the enlargement of the EU in South-East Europe, democratisation, nationalism and ethnic conflicts, transformation in former socialist countries, political communication and media performance in situations of tension and conflict.

lations with the United States and NATO. Serbia does not recognise the independence of Kosovo, which is within its borders, and declared its independence on February 17, 2008. A day after Priština's unilateral declaration of independence, at the initiative of Russia, a meeting of the UN Security Council on Kosovo was convened. At the meeting, Russia announced that it would block any attempts to admit Kosovo to the UN and other international bodies. It also declared support for Serbia's policy to defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty. It continues to recognise Serbia within its previous borders. Russia also protects the interests of Serbs living in the Republic of Srpska. It is one of the two parts (49%) of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the other is the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The current status of the Republic of Srpska is governed by the peace agreement that ended the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995). The goal of RS is the greatest possible autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina and even gaining independence in the future. Bosnia and Herzegovina is an official candidate for NATO membership. The possible accession to NATO structures will weaken the position of the Bosnian Serbs and will destroy the chances of possible independence. It is obvious that Russia is not interested in Bosnia and Herzegovina joining NATO, which coincides with the interests of the Bosnian Serbs.

B. The second pillar concerns raw materials and economic policy in the Balkans. In the economic sphere, the expansion of Russian economic interests has been evident in the Balkans since the beginning of the century. Russia strengthens its influence in the region by deepening trade and economic relations in key sectors: banking, energy, property and trade. For example, between 1995 and 2007, the trade in goods between Russia and Greece increased from 404 million to 2.9 billion dollars. This indicator has undoubtedly been affected by Russian gas supplies to Greece since 1996. The proportion of Russian foreign trade with Romania – 82%, Bulgaria – 80%, Turkey – 77. 2% is similar ([Gks.ru, 2008](#)).

Concerns such as: Gazprom, Gazpromneft and Lukoil are the biggest players in the oil and gas markets in the Balkans. Gazpromneft controls Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), the largest company in Serbia. Lukoil has the only Bulgarian refinery near Burgas, the largest such facility in the Balkans, apart from Greece and Turkey. The supply of gas to Europe is of strategic importance to Russia. The South Stream project, which has been under way for years, was suspended, but has been reborn in a new version: *Turkish Potok* (Turkish Stream)<sup>4</sup> ([Kuczyński, 2019, p. 9](#)).

The expansion of the Russian economy is also evident in Croatia, where Lukoil bought the Europe-MIL fuel and distribution company. The same company took over the largest petrol distribution network in Serbia (*Lukoil-Beopetrol*), while Gazprom is also interested in building a 400 kilometres Serbian section of the planned southern blue stream II pipeline and the Banatski Dvor gas storage site ([Włodkowska, 2009, p. 112](#)).

Russia is also interested in the Bulgarian project to build a nuclear power plant in Belene, which was temporarily abandoned in 2012. These companies came forward with a share of investments: China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC), Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power, French Framatome, German-registered Bekron-Liaz Technical Engineering and Russian Rosati. The most likely partner of the Bulgarians in the nuclear power plant project will be the Russians. This is supported by the close, multiannual cooperation with Russia in the construction and modernisation of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant. Bulgaria will also want to use Rosati to implement the Belene nuclear power plant and the 1000 MW and have its second components delivered to Bulgaria. This makes Russia a potential competitor in implementing this investment with Bulgaria able to play, at most, the role of a tender card ([Dąbrowski, 2018](#)).

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4. *The Turkish Stream is a pipeline project from Russia to Turkey running at the bottom of the Black Sea. It is intended to consist of two threads. Each with a capacity of 15.75 billion m<sup>3</sup> a year. The first gas would flow for Turkey's own needs. The second could be used to bring the raw material destined for re-export to Europe.*

In addition to energy, Russia is often presented in the region as a financial rescue circle for Bosnian-Serbian entities. The senior Russian officials and former President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, have held many rounds of negotiations. As a result, Russia has promised several loans to support the state budget of the Republic of Srpska. According to Dodik, Russia promised at least USD 625 million in 2014, but there is little evidence that Moscow actually contributed Banja Luka money. Russia has also invested in other sectors in the region: banking, retail, real estate and tourism. In 2012, the Russian state-owned Sberbank bought Volksbank International, formerly an eastern European subsidiary of the Austrian banking group, now called *Sberbank Europe*. The acquisition provided the Russian bank with a relatively large presence in retail and commercial banking in south-eastern Europe with assets in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. Russian entities have an impact on the property and tourism markets in several Balkan countries, especially in Montenegro and Bulgaria. In 2012, Russian citizens owned around 40 per cent of the real estate in Montenegro, especially along the Adriatic coast. The Bulgarian Minister of Tourism stated during his journey to Russia in 2018 that over 400,000 Russian citizens have second homes in that country, and the Bulgarian national bank estimates that Russian investments in the Bulgarian real estate sector exceeded 1 billion euro (Stronski and Himes, 2019, pp. 6–7).

The foundations of the third pillar of Russian influence in the Balkans are its historical traditions with the Balkan countries and the Orthodox religious ties. In the Western Balkans region, in particular, the Serbs and Montenegrins feel particularly committed to Russia. The strengthening of Russian influence is also carried out in the cultural and social sphere using soft power tactics (Panagiotou, 2020). It can be effective because of the common history and religious aspect. Moscow is trying to emphasise its attractiveness by recalling and nurturing cultural and religious ties with the region. An important ally in this field is the Orthodox Church as along with the Russian oligarchs and some local politicians. Orthodox religion is used by Moscow to promote its image as a defender of traditional family values. The media and journalists who are in favour of Russia are spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments at the same time (Kuczyński, 2019).

Examples of actions in this area are the opening of the Russkaya Mir (Russian world) branches and the delegation of the International Foundation for the Protection of Orthodox Nations in Novi Sad and Belgrade. In 2013, a representation of the Russian Institute of Strategic studies (RISI) was established in Belgrade and a branch of the Russian *Rosstrudnichestvo* Agency (Russian House Cultural Center). Russian foundations are also active in Serbia, such as the Gorczakov public diplomacy Foundation, *the Strategic Culture Foundation*, *the Duma of the Homeland Foundation*, *the St. Peter's Fund Andrzej Necropol*, and the Russia Foundation in Belgrade, which was created specifically for Serbia. Serbian language versions of Russian portals have been developed, often with an extended section on local policy. They are most often created by Russian public institutions, such as the RT news channel (Vostok.rs, n.d.), radio *the voice of Russia* (www.glasrusije.rs), Russian foundations such as *the Foundation for Strategic Culture* (Strategic-culture.org, n.d.) and the environments associated with Russian Cerquia (Pravoslavie.ru, n.d.). The main Serbian journal Politika and the monthly Geopolitika are accompanied by the magazines Ruska Reč and Rusija and Srbija, issued by the editorial Rossijskaja Gazeta as part of the project Russia beyond the headlines. The activities of Russian organisations and media and their related Serbian counterparts focus on a number of thematic areas:

- firstly, they promote the Russian version of the world situation, e.g. the current crisis in Ukraine, or the reinterpretation of history in accordance with Moscow's interest in supporting the multi-annual Russian-Serbian alliance;



- secondly, they try to discredit the Western structures of cooperation (NATO, EU) as detrimental to Serbian interests and threatening global peace and stability;
- thirdly, they present Russia as the closest ally of Serbia, whose actions are always in line with the interests of the Balkan partner and, at the same time, as an attractive ally with a strong global position, a strong economy and an interesting culture. Whereas the fate of the Serbian and Russian communities and, above all, the tradition of joint struggle in world wars are emphasised;
- fourthly, they criticise the pro-European actions of the current government ([Szpala, 2014, pp. 3–4](#)).

Russia's hybrid actions were even directed at Serbian youth. With the consent of Serbia, Russian representatives organised a summer camp in the Serbian resort of Zlatibor, the aim of which was to instil patriotic values in Russian-Serbian youth. As it turned out, one of the organisers was a retired Soviet army officer, Colonel Valery Shambarov, known for his imperial views and associated with organisations directing fighters to the conflict region in eastern Ukraine. The camp's programme included military training of young people. As a result, the Serbian police demanded that the organisers stop operating in Serbia ([Samokhvalov, 2019](#)).

The influence of Russia in Serbia and among Serbian minorities in neighbouring countries is a shuttle for its interests in the Balkans. They are also part of a broader plan to stop the integration of the Balkan countries into Euro-Atlantic structures and to maintain an area of instability and frozen conflicts in the immediate vicinity of the EU.

The three pillars of Russia's action areas set out above ignore one more area of the agency's actions that use personal assets and local nationalist environments for destabilising and even subversive activities. The importance of the Western Balkans for Russia has been demonstrated by the ineffective EU-Montenegro envelopes in October 2016<sup>5</sup>. Since then, the Russians have introduced much more informal and agency factors into their regional policy, and Russian policy in the Western Balkans has begun to be personally supervised by Nikolai Patruszw, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. The Western Balkans are a stage in the geopolitical hybrid war between Russia and the West, but without the military factor. Moscow does not need its own "green people". It has other advantages: A comprehensive agency, both its own and its allies, and the Serbian paramilitary formations funded and trained by the Russians. This is enough to destabilise the region. With strong influence in local political, media and business elites, and in favour of Orthodox Church, Moscow is fuelling ethnic and religious tensions, blocking reforms, supporting extremely nationalist and anti-Western environments, and it is working in such a way that the most serious conflicts between the countries of the region are not resolved ([Kuczyński, 2019, p. 5](#)).

Russia has set up a humanitarian aid facility in Nis, Serbia, which is assessed as an intelligence gathering centre. This facility could provide Moscow with a potential platform for gathering information and monitoring events in Serbia and key countries of interest, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Two Serbian paramilitary organisations, the Serbian Honour and the Veterans of the Republika Srpska, receive Russian training assistance and have unclear links to organisations such as the International Advisory Committee of the Organisation of Reserve Officers. It is a Russian umbrella organisation founded in 2010, uniting reservists and retired military officers from the former Soviet Union ([Stronski and Himes, 2019, p. 5](#)).

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5. *The Montenegrin Special Prosecutor, who supervised the investigation into the attempt to conduct the coup on the date of the parliamentary elections in October 2016, accused the Russian State authorities of trying to overturn the Montenegrin authorities. According to the prosecutor, the revolution was prepared by Russian nationalist environments, and one of the organisers of the assassination was an officer of the Russian Special Services, Eduard Shishmakov, a former Deputy Russian military Attaché in Warsaw who was expelled from Poland and charged with espionage in 2014. Back in November, the black miners identified Vladimir Popov as co-organiser of the assassination of another Russian citizen, Seroka, M. (2017) Czarnogóra: Rosja oskarżana o próbę zorganizowania zamachu stanu: Ośrodek Analiz Wschodnich. Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2017-03-06/czarnogora-rosja-oskarzana-o-probe-zorganizowania-zamachu-stanu>.*

As we can see, Russia has a broad set of impact tools in the Balkans and uses them to retain its influence and strengthen its negotiating position on regional issues. It wants to be a participant in all processes, not just an event observer.

## The Future of the Balkans

According to observers, the current and future essential interests of Russia in this part of Europe and the policies it follows are related to:

- The enlargement of the European Union and NATO with the next Western Balkan countries, which is considered a threat by Russia. It is in the interest of Moscow to keep this region outside of western structures as long as possible;
- Russia is striving to destabilise the region by maintaining frozen conflicts and scaling tensions through economic policy, propaganda and disinformation, the use of traditional pro-Russian backgrounds and subversive activities;
- Moscow will seek to undermine the peace arrangements of the 1990s and the 20th century efforts of the West to date. It is about the course of the borders, and also the model of Bosnia and Herzegovina set out in Dayton or, above all, Kosovo's independence;
- Russia is conducting a hybrid war against the current pro-Western authorities of Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo, and supporting Bosnian Serb separatism and paralysing the functioning of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It seeks to maintain Serbia outside of Western structures;
- The only ally of Russia in the region is Serbia. Moscow uses the fact of its conflicts with its neighbours (mainly Kosovo) and fuels these conflicts;
- In the last 3 years, Russian policy in the Western Balkans has suffered a number of failures. The fiasco ended the putsch attempt in Montenegro, and the Macedonians' agreement with the Greeks could not be blocked. As a result, Montenegro is already in NATO, and North Macedonia is a step from there;
- The destructive activities of Russia in the region are expected to intensify. Moscow uses Serbian allies for this, as well as its supported and funded opposition forces in Montenegro and North Macedonia (Kuczyński, 2019, pp. 2–3).

Russia's involvement in the Balkans is increasingly perceived by the EU and the United States as a consistent policy implementation aimed at bringing the integration processes of the Balkan countries, including, above all, the Western Balkan countries, into line with the EU and NATO structures. Pointing to this dimension of Russia's activities, US Vice-President Mike Pence, on 1 August 2017 in Podgorica, at the summit of the Adriatic Charter, accused Russia of destabilising the Balkans and moving the region away from the West where its future lies. He noted that Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia are a particular area of increasing Russian involvement (Zuvela, 2017).

The international Community, recognising the problems in the Balkan area after the war, has developed the concept of regional membership in the European Union as the most effective tool for stabilising and bringing about peace. The extension of the countries of the region to the *Stabilization and Association* process (SAP)<sup>6</sup> was intended to fill the geopolitical gap in Europe and to confirm the EU's position. The initial enthusiasm of the candidate countries has weakened and sometimes completely ended in the face

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6. *Stabilisation and Association Agreements are part of the EU Stabilisation and Association process (SAP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). At present, the SAP focuses on the countries of the Western Balkans. Specific Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) have been implemented with the various Balkan countries, which clearly contain provisions on the future membership of the EU. The Stabilisation and Association Agreements are broadly similar to the European Agreements signed with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s and the Association Agreement with Turkey.*

of internal problems and crises. The pro-European rhetoric is often replaced by nationalist slogans and the fundamentalism of individual socio-religious groups is visible in the background. The situation has been aggravated by the economic crisis, which has not allowed the standard of living to be at the same level as even the poorer countries of the EU. The economies of the six Balkan countries are small; together they account for about 2/3 of the Polish economy and are among the least developed in Europe. Although GDP grew dynamically between 2000 and 2008 (by an average of 6% per year), it was mainly based on an increase in domestic consumption, financed by foreign investment, loans, and diaspora remittances. External investments were most often made in the banking and telecommunications services sector, which did not translate into productivity gains (Szpala, 2017, pp. 1–2). The social and political elites in the countries of the Western Balkans are more focused on maintaining their influence than integration processes and possible benefits that start to move away in time. The integration was supposed to be similar to that of the countries of Central Europe, where the methods used were successful. In the case of the Western Balkans, faced with existing ethnic conflicts, tensions and crime, there is a lack of strong state structures capable of introducing EU models. As a result, democratisation processes in individual countries have been weakened. The problem of corruption, unemployment and poverty affects the inhabitants of all countries in the region and makes it difficult to implement many important reforms freely (Malaj, 2020).

Croatia, well prepared for negotiations, needed 8 years to join the EU, since it was granted candidate status in 2005 for official EU membership in 2013. The other countries are less prepared to talk about membership and less developed economically. This means that the outcome of the negotiations and the deadline for their conclusion are a great unknown. The lack of consistency in the European community's policy towards the Western Balkans has made the Serbian Alliance with Russia an alternative to integration. In the other countries of the region, the Turkish scenario has begun to be realistic, where the EU aspirations have been replaced by growing authoritarianism, nationalism and xenophobia.

The EU-Western Balkans Summit, held on 17 May 2018 in Sofia, meant there was hope for the provisions. It was a new opening in the relations between the European Union and the Western Balkans. The EU leaders agreed on the Sofia Declaration (EU, 2018), to which the Western Balkan partners joined. The EU future of WB6 countries was also stressed in the Zagreb Declaration. The EU leaders reaffirmed their unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and announced that the EU was determined to increase its support for political, economic and social change in the region. The Western Balkan partners reaffirmed that the European perspective is their decisive strategic choice. They declared their commitment to European values and principles and to the vision of a strong, stable and united Europe. The Summit also discussed common security challenges. "Working together, we are able to tackle these challenges effectively", said EU leaders. They called for further strengthening of cooperation to stop illegal migration flows. They also agreed to step up the fight against terrorism and extremism together, including financing, radicalisation and the return of foreign fighters. They agreed that the transition in the region was conditional on taking action against corruption and organised crime. Stability and safety depend on this. They also decided to cooperate more closely in the face of disinformation and hybrid threats. The EU has committed itself to increasing aid in areas such as transport, energy security, the digital economy, the business environment and youth opportunities (EU, 2018).

The sectoral integration proposed by the European Commission as a key element of the EU offer to the Western Balkan countries is intended to keep these countries the EU's orbit in key areas for the Union before they meet the conditions for membership.

This approach assumes that the gradual integration of the Balkan countries into the EU cooperation structures will force local governments to introduce democratic and free-market reforms.

The current Western Balkan 6 Initiative (WB6) project is aimed at supporting six countries in the region in the area of a common energy policy. The forthcoming reform of the Energy Community Treaty provides an excellent opportunity to address major challenges through a unified approach and a common sense of purpose in the countries covered by the Western Balkans Summit (WB6) ([Manolkidis, 2021](#)).

## Conclusions

Russia's current policy towards the Balkans has strong historical, cultural and religious foundations. In the past, Russia has often served as the defender of the Slavic and Orthodox nations in their fight against external oppressors such as the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary and Germany. Russia has recently been trying to claim that the USA and NATO are the invaders ([Samokhvalov, 2019](#)). The Balkans are becoming an arena of rivalry between Russia and the USA. The United States has returned to the Balkans with a strong emphasis and Montenegro has joined NATO. This is an expression of the American struggle for influence in the region, which is losing out to Russia. The military importance of this decision is negligible, because the military potential of Montenegro is zero, which makes it purely a public and political movement. It affects Russia and it forms part of the rivalry between these countries.

The Balkans are now a constantly important area in Russia's geostrategic policy. Its impact on the internal and foreign policies of the Balkan countries means the region remains a "crack zone". This is beneficial for Russia, as it can present its position in crisis situations and act as an arbitrator, particularly by setting its patronage over Serbia. Such interference can lead to serious political or even armed crises. The post-war emotions on an ethnic level are still alive as is the desire to change the current status quo on the borders of the Western Balkan countries. In addition, Islamic fundamentalism, which is growing in strength, and the bad economic situation of individual countries in the region attracts terrorists in this part of Europe ([Schwartz, 2000](#)).

Local conflicts, especially on the Serbia-Kosovo line, use Russia to strengthen their position. The growing tension in Serbian-Kosovar relations is in the hands of Moscow and has found a wide resonance in the Russian media. Russia treats the Western Balkans as a strategic area of competition with the Western States. Moscow's efforts are primarily aimed at preventing the countries of the region from coming closer to Western structures (NATO and the EU) by maintaining the region in an unstable state. The Kremlin policy towards the region focuses on strengthening Russian influence in Serbia, mainly by defending Serbian interests vis-à-vis Kosovo internationally. Russian propaganda in Serbia is also increasingly active, promoted by Serbian-language media financed from Russia. The Kremlin is presented in them as a traditional defender of Serbian interests and common Orthodox and Slavic values, as opposed to the USA, the EU and NATO, which threaten these values ([Seroka \*et al.\*, 2017](#)).

The political, economic and special services activity of Russia in the Balkans is increasing. This is the case despite the temporary pushing of Russia to a defensive position due to Western diplomacy and the political volley and counter-intelligence activities carried out in the various Balkan countries. It should be noted that Russian involvement in some Balkan countries is exhausting the elements of a hybrid war ([Szczepański, 2018, pp. 44–45](#)).

On the part of the Balkan governments, we can expect two possible models of geopolitical behaviour in relation to Russia. The first is to continue to stay as far away as possible from Russia; the second is to build effective mechanisms for socio-economic cooperation. Cooperation in energy, trade, tourism, science and the economy would only yield concrete results in an atmosphere of trust and active civilisational dialogue within the wider EU-Russia and NATO-Russia framework. This depends on maintaining security in the Black Sea region, which is a particularly important area for the Eastern Balkan countries (Mihailov, 2010, p. 91).

The stabilisation of the region depends on a strong EU policy aimed at enlargement, supported by economic aid and investment in the economy. Only a clear signal, in this form, can make the Balkan societies aware that membership of the EU is still viable.

**Funding**

This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement**

Not applicable.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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