

A historical approach to Russian foreign policy in the Balkans (1945- 2022)

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze, from a historical standpoint, the development of Russian policy in the Balkans from the end of the Second World War to present day.

The paper focuses on three major historical periods: the Cold War (1945-1990), the dissolution of the USSR and territorial changes in the Balkans (1990-2000), and lastly the period of 2000-2022, which in political history studies is considered as a comeback of Russia as a prominent player in the region.

The methodology employed is based on a comparative analysis of the three periods, with the primary aim being to comprehend the significant difference in Russia's policy on the region of the Balkans over the past 78 years.

The paper examines external factors that have influenced Russia's policy shifts in the Balkans, as well as internal factors, particularly Putin's role in remaking Kremlin's foreign policy as a great power, based on contemporary literature.

The paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach by alternating both economic and military diplomacy, focusing on critical moments during the three aforementioned periods.

In conclusion, this analysis aims to tackle concerns regarding the impact of Russian politics on the future of the Balkans by analyzing the interaction between Balkan states and Russia during the three above eras.

Keywords: Putin, region, diplomacy, great power, history studies

1. Introduction

The approach of Russian foreign policy to the Balkan region is one of the most discussed topics in various fields of study, such as historical, political, and international relations studies. The need to continuously write about this topic stems from today's geopolitical developments. In order to make a theoretical prognosis of Russia's ambitions as a global leader in the 21st century, the theoretical knowledge on Moscow's continuously held positions is an indispensable prerequisite for analyses of this nature. Therefore, this work considers a period of over 70 years, from the time when Stalin imposed his social system through the Red Army (Kissinger, 2019, pp. 416-17) to Putin's new model, a mixture of the splendor of the czarist era and the madness of Stalinism for hegemony.

To better understand the approaches of Russian politics as a player in international geopolitics, a noteworthy introduction into this study is Winston Churchill's statement that "the key to understanding the Russian enigma lies in its national interest" (Tsygankov, 2010, p. xxxiii). However, Tsygankov (2010) has rightly remarked that Churchill was unable to explain this enigma, and it is the responsibility of scholars to define what "national interest" means for contemporary Russia through their analyses.

In fact, since the time of Churchill's above-mentioned statement and his contemporaries, like Stalin, the leaders who have led the former Soviet Union and today's Russia have brought a variety of perceptions to what can be defined as Russia's "national interest." Historical reasons are a very good source that helps us understand why, after over 7 decades, the West is facing Putin's vision for "national interest" based on the ego of recognition as a great power at the international (Clark, D & Foxall, A, 2014, p. 6).

From this perspective, Russia's foreign policy and national interest can be best interpreted by not directly comparing it with the West but highlighting the differences between them in certain regions of the world. The Balkans have always been an ideal milieu for the previously mentioned strategy. The Balkans have never been neglected by Russian foreign policy, not even during its most challenging difficult times. Almost all historical studies analysing the region show that Russia has always been directly or indirectly present in the region. What this paper tries to examine, however, is that the Balkans have always been a territory where Russia seeks to establish its reputation as a great power (Headley, J, 2008, p. 17; Tsygankov, 2010). Due to certain historical factors, this image has not always been the same; yet, it has maintained continuity from Stalin to Putin, preserving certain strict frames of political, military, and diplomatic thought and conduct.

1.1 Aim

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical approach in the fields of historical studies and international relations in order to comprehend the foreign policy approach of Russia to such a problematic region in the center of Europe, as is the Balkans. On the basis of this

perspective, the paper tries to draw predictive conclusions referring to the period from 1945 to 2022.

1.2 Hypothesis

The main hypothesis of this paper is that Russian foreign policy has considered and continues to consider the Balkans a highly favorable region for fostering its aspirations as a global leader. Based on historical facts presented in a series of works by some of the best scholars in the field, the study argues that Russian return to the Balkans is not the case, but a continuity of a policy that has experienced its vicissitudes during the period under consideration.

1.3 Methodology

The paper relies on two primary methodologies. Firstly, to comprehend the perception of Russian politics in the Balkans during a specific time frame, the debates of renowned historians and international relations experts have been examined. A thorough investigation has enabled the identification of different viewpoints on Russian politics in the Balkans. Secondly, in order to comprehend the political shifts that occurred in Russia during the time span specified in the paper's title, the "over time comparison" method is employed, providing information on each period to find differences and commonalities.

1.4 The beginnings of Russian Foreign Policy in the Balkans

The interest of Russian foreign policy in the Balkans dates back to the end of the 18th century. Especially after the Treaty of San Stefano in 1877, Russia extended its influence in the Balkans towards the Aegean (Glenny, 2019, p. 164). Russia's expansion up to the borders of the Adriatic Sea aroused strategic ambitions to dominate the Mediterranean (Jelavich, 1991). This political and military objective has never ceased to inspire Kremlin leadership, culminating in two distinct periods, after the end of the Cold War and after 2000. Ethnic, religious, cultural and even secret or non-secret alliances have been used to achieve this objective (Abrahamyan, 2015; McBride, 2022; Stronski, P& Himes, A, 2019). In rivalry with the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire, Russia attempted to take advantage of the disintegration of these two empires, in order to increase its influence in the Balkans at the beginning of the 20th century. It was classified as the third most influential power in Balkan affairs after Turkey and Austria at the end of World War I (Eberhardt, 2012). However, the transformation that occurred within Russia during this period did not create a favorable environment for the fulfillment of this ambition. Mihailov (2010, p. 80 as cited in Jagiello,

2021, p. 5) concludes that during the interwar period, the Soviet Union's foreign policy did not play any particular role in the Balkans. This is also related to the exclusion of the Soviet Union from decision-making during the negotiations conducted at Versailles and later in the League of Nations. Experiencing the internal problems of revolutionary transformations, Russia's foreign policy during this time frame remained inferior. The onset of World War II and the formation of an ostensibly impossible alliance between the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union laid the groundwork for the implementation of the Soviet strategic plan to divide the world into spheres of influence in the aftermath of the conflict. This projection was a direct consequence of the Soviet Union's emergence as the second most significant actor on the post-war international stage. This philosophy could not exclude the Balkans.

1.5 Soviet Foreign Policy in the Balkans during the Cold War (1945-1990).

The geopolitical presence of the Soviet Union in the Balkans at the end of World War II had its origins in the scheme of influences designed by Churchill during his visit to Moscow in October 1944 (Gilbert, 1992, p. 979). According to this scheme, the 2+2+2 principle would be applied in the region, meaning that Greece and Turkey would remain under British influence, Romania and Bulgaria under Soviet influence, while Yugoslavia and Albania would remain outside the blocs. In his book "Diplomacy" Kissinger analyses how the Soviet Union secured its political presence in the Balkans, arguing that the scheme "only worked in the case of Greece, which remained under British influence, while all other countries except Yugoslavia became Soviet satellites, regardless of the percentages stipulated in the agreement" (Kissinger, 2019, pp. 443-45).

In the Balkans, there were no indications of multilateral cooperation during the Stalin era. The only attempt that turned out to be unsuccessful was the formation of the Balkan Federation, which was intended to include Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania (Jagiello, 2021, p. 4; Kaba & Çeku, 2011; Smirnova, 2004, pp. 333-34). The rift between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union prompted the Soviet Union to tailor its foreign policy not to the region as a whole, but by setting priorities and objectives for each country. Stalin preferred to uphold the treaties of mutual goodwill and assistance with each Balkan nation, based on its geostrategic significance and the conditions of a new global reality (Laqueur, 1996, p. 77). The bilateral treaties acted as a security mechanism to shield communist Balkan nations from Western influences.

In summary, the nature of Soviet foreign policy in the Balkans immediately after the end of World War II was primarily ideological. The communist ideology had different applications in the new regimes in the Balkans, and there is no doubt that the Soviet Union supported the strengthening of these regimes by all means possible. In countries such as Albania, which had declared open war on the West, without waiting for the official start of the Cold War, the ideological foundations eliminated all influences that might stem from national interests.

On the other hand, there was the model of Yugoslavia, which did not tolerate Soviet foreign policy to eliminate the influence of national interests in their governing system. Indeed, Tito's communist regime openly turned into an ideological contender and clearly expressed Yugoslavia's national priorities in the communist camp. Bulgaria and Romania had no chance to choose, as the communist regimes installed were chosen by the Kremlin and not by national interests (Mihailov, 2010, p. 82).

Greece and Turkey proved to be a "failure" of Moscow's ideological approach, which did not attempt to alter the situation through the use of military force, in accordance with the October 1944 agreement between Churchill and Stalin. This panorama demonstrates why, until Stalin's death, there were no efforts to unify Balkan foreign policy under the banner of communism, but rather it was adapted to the ideological model that each small Balkan country was seeking to build under Soviet vassalage.

The idea of unity within a political line in the Balkans became more apparent after Stalin's death and Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power. Keeping Balkan states under one motto aimed to avoid disobedience from the communist regimes in the region to the Kremlin. This idea also served the creation of the Warsaw Pact, a political-military organization to which at least three Balkan states with Stalinist communist regimes, Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania, adhered. Despite these efforts, the defining characteristic of Soviet foreign policy remained fragmentation. The reasons for this fragmentation were several.

Firstly, the Balkans have historically been a region with intense political conflicts, and the Soviet Union never sought to eliminate them, but rather to exploit them for its own purposes by participating in them. The most typical instance was the Soviet intervention in the Albanian-Yugoslavian political conflict during the administration of Nikita Khrushchev (Griffith, 1963). The peace between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the mid-1950s was perceived as a threat by the Albanian communist regime and one of the primary reasons that pushed it seek a new and distant alliance with communist China, the new rival of the Soviet Union in the communist world (Fischer, B. & Schmitt, O, 2022, p. 221). As Albania remained a communist regime, its rebellion against the Soviet Union was not viewed as a failure of the Kremlin's ideological approach. By siding with Yugoslavia in the aforementioned conflict, the Soviet Union chose to maintain ties with a partner of greater influence in the Western world, especially considering that Yugoslavia, with its non-alignment policy, was a first-rate actor in a region where the other states were either members of NATO or the Warsaw Pact.

Secondly, geographical proximity to the region has always been a factor of fragmentation. If for Romania and Bulgaria, the land border was of particular importance, this is not the case for the other Balkan states. At the Yalta and Potsdam meetings, the Russian foreign policy clearly indicated that the Red Army, under the cloak of liberator, had no intention of withdrawing from the territories of Romania and Bulgaria. The military presence in these two Balkan states was not a manifestation of the Kremlin's domestic policy, but rather of its foreign policy to assert its superpower status. In the remainder of the Balkans, where the liberation card was inapplicable, geographic distance dictated the significance of

partnerships. In specific cases, geographical location enabled some states to gain importance for a certain period, as was the case with Albania and the establishment of the Pashaliman naval base in the Bay of Vlora (Smaçi, 2017). Access to the Adriatic Sea was the result of early political and military activity by Russia in Southeastern Europe.

A series of historical documents show that the establishment of the naval base in a Cold War hot spot, in the Mediterranean, was part of a strategy of coercion and rivalry to impose certain geopolitical decisions (Lalaj, 2008, pp. 177-179; Smaçi, 2017, pp. 82-114). Thus, as a geographical space connecting East and West, but also in terms of largely communist affiliation, the Balkans were an instrument that the Soviet Union continuously used to exert pressure on the United States and its European allies, given the region's war-torn history. The rifts with Yugoslavia in 1948 and Albania in 1961 diminished the Soviet Union's influence on the Balkans. The relations with the region were mostly focused on propaganda under the slogan of proletarian internationalism (Barghoorn, 1960).

1.6 The ignominious failure in the Balkans (1990-2000).

In 1990 the relationship with the Balkans endured a radical transformation. In contrast to the nearly five decades following the end of World War II, the approach of Russian foreign policy as a significant power in relation to the West played a decisive role in its relations with the region (Samokhvalov, 2017, p. 132). The collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with the outbreak of war in the Balkans and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, one of the pillars of Soviet foreign policy in the region during the Cold War, despite being outside the Soviet camp. In the confusion of the rapid transition from a superpower consisting of a large number of states representing the former Soviet Union to a single Russian state, the problems of the Balkans initially received little attention and became a “subject of secondary priorities for Russian strategists and diplomats” (Bowker, 1998, pp. 1245-61; Jagiello, 2021, p. 5). This scant attention and inability to act would come to be regarded as the greatest ignominy of Russian foreign policy during the final decade of the 20th century (McGlynn, 2022).

The events that occurred in the Balkans between 1992 and 1999, culminating in the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, placed Russian foreign policy in a precarious position. Several questions arise when analyzing the numerous studies on Russian engagement in the Balkans during this period. Was Moscow able to exert its influence over the former Yugoslavia and determine its fate? How did Moscow use these events to shape its tenuous ties with the West? Were Moscow's relations to the region governed by opportunism or international consensus?

During this time frame, Russia's foreign policy in the Balkans lacked any overtly anti-Western tendencies. In actuality, in the case of the Bosnian War, the opportunity was seized to return to the negotiating table with the status of a great power, with the primary objective of regaining nationalist credibility in domestic politics, where Moscow's prestige had tarnished. Nonetheless, there are significant differences between the commencement of the

conflict in Bosnia and the situation in Kosovo. In the years 1992-1993, the Western and Russian approaches to the Balkans were nearly identical (Bowker, 1998).

The trend towards rejection date back to 1995 and onwards. Russia appeared more independent and with a more nationalist agenda, particularly emphasizing the defense of Serbian national interests by openly opposing NATO threats against Serbia. This position culminated in March 1999 during NATO's bombing of Serbia. Russia's condemnation of this intervention which, according to the analysis of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, rather than being an affirmation of sympathy for its Slavic brethren, was an expression of Russia's internal interests threatened by Chechen separatism (Albright, 2003).

Referring to this argument, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott cites a phone conversation between Albright and Foreign Minister Ivanov. "Madeleine, you don't understand, we have many Kosovos in Russia" (Thorun, 2008, p. 101). Thorun, in his analysis of Russian foreign policy in Serbia-Kosovo conflict, argues that "Russian foreign policy was itself the cause of the difficult circumstances that arose." Even if Russia's approach had been more constructive, either bilaterally or multilaterally, military intervention was unlikely to have been avoided.

However, the result reflected in all political analyses, which assumed the form of a geopolitical message, was its diplomatic failure and Russia's vulnerable weakness as a claimed world power. Russia's ambitions during this period were still far from this claim in terms of economic, political, and above all military capabilities. Another personal account, that of Yeltsin in "Midnight Diaries," is the closest testimony to the truth that participation in the international stabilisation force in Kosovo was symbolic (Yeltsin, B & Fitzpatrick, C, 2000).

To explain this symbolism, we must examine the words of one of the Russian generals who compared the entry of Russian forces into Pristina to that of the Red Army into Berlin. He stated, "Just as in Berlin, Russian troops were the first to enter Pristina" (Safronov I.& Sysoev.G, 1999). However, the historical context was entirely different and unfavorable to Russia. First, Yeltsin was not a weak copy of Stalin. He was a true communist with 30-years of career, who became the first Russian president after the fall of the Soviet Union. One of the accusations made against him was that he diminished Russia's reputation as a global power because of his liberal beliefs. Consequently, the use of military force as a component of a political dealing did not constitute a tangible approach to the formulation of Russia's foreign policy in this time span. According to Samokhvalov, during NATO's military intervention in Kosovo, Russia did not consider a serious military intervention in support of Serbia, remnant of the former Yugoslavia (Samokhvalov, 2019). This could be due to the fact that Yeltsin was a proponent of cooperation agreements with the West. Second, the number of Red Army soldiers was thousands of times greater than the military forces deployed to Pristina. Moreover, they arrived as part of an international military mission, despite the fact that tactical actions were part of the Russian command structure.

In contrast to 1945, when the Soviet Union imposed the creation of a Russian sector in Berlin, Russian military forces in Pristina were dispersed among American, German, and French forces, thus lacking a sector of their own (Norris, 2005, p. 310). In fact, the failed attempt to establish a Russian sector in Pristina is acknowledged in Kremlin studies, albeit with the explication that Russia's foreign policy in the Balkans during this time was based on gentlemanly agreements with the West (Entina, E & Pivovarenko, A, 2019, pp. 187-188).

However, the most plausible theory is that Russian foreign policy was at a crossroads during this time frame. Therefore-Thorun has rightly stated that during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, Russian leadership chose cooperation over opposition to the West during the Balkan crises. The rationale was that this was the only way to keep the "global power" card at play and facilitate a return to the negotiating table, where Russia's role as a mediator was crucial (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 192).

In conclusion, Russian foreign policy in the Balkans during the final decade of the 20th century, from 1990 to 2000, was primarily influenced by external factors rather than internal reform pressure. The impact of this trend, compared to Cold War stances, was unquestionably greater than a mere disturbance. If the Russian foreign policy over the three historical periods under analysis were to be graphed, the years 1990-2000 would unquestionably represent the lowest point of political intensity as a global power. However, the end of this period also signaled a turning point in relations between Russia and the West, with the military intervention in Kosovo serving as the catalyst for this change. In fact, many scholars have concluded that the turning point occurred as a result of the West's refusal to recognize Russia as a great power. This non-recognition returned the Russia's early foreign policy on Balkans as a destabilizing factor. Putin became the leader to advocate for this position through by all possible diplomatic, economic, and military means.

1.7 Putin's Doctrine and the approach to the Balkans (2000-2022).

Vladimir Putin's rise to power coincided with a revival of Russia's national strength. Foreign policy initially approached the Balkans through the lens of early historical ties, with a particular emphasis on two allies: Serbia and Bulgaria (Clark, D & Foxall, A, 2014; Mihailov, 2010). However, Russia's advanced interest in foreign policy has not restricted its focus on only the allies and the past. If the USSR ruling elite offered the world and the Balkans the communist ideology and attempted to legitimize this governing model, Putin, as a worthy siloviki, did not hesitate to offer the model of "an illegitimate order", where everything is justified, to the hybrid regimes of the region (Shevtsova, 2014).

To comprehend the role of the Balkans in Kremlin's plans, some scholars suggest referring to the 2016 doctrinal document on Russian foreign policy. According to the Russian authors Ekaterina Entina and Pivovarnko, the Kremlin's doctrinal concept does not mention the Balkans as a global player but contains definitions, such as: "Europe" and "Euro-Atlantic space".

They argue that while the region has not completely lost its importance on the part of Russian foreign policy, what has changed is the perception of borders, while the Russian presence has begun to assume a new form (Entina, E & Pivovarenko, A, 2019). This new doctrinal form is, in fact, related to the actions of the West. As long as the West is not involved, the implication of Russian foreign policy is limited (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 193). This conclusion is correct. The first decade of the 21st century was marked by a low Western attention to the Balkans. Russian attention was similar. NATO enlargement into the Balkans with Montenegro membership marked the beginning of Moscow's divisive activities in the region.

The Putin doctrine has already clarified that the Balkans represent a zone of competition in the conflict between Russia and the hostile West (Bechev, 2017; Clark, D & Foxall, A, 2014). This so-called "clash of civilisations" has been translated into a rivalry in the arena of foreign policy, with the Balkans used as a pawn in the geopolitical battle between Russia and the West. In this context, it appears that Russian foreign policy has revitalized the Cold War stance of using the Balkans as a destabilizing region at the expense of European and Euro-Atlantic actors. Undermining the Western democratic model has become the single-minded objective of leaving the Balkans in limbo by taking advantage of the slow progress the region is making towards European integration. The same cannot be said for the inclusion of these countries in NATO, a lost battle for Russian foreign policy. Until 2014, Russian threats and operations did not constitute NATO's focus on the Balkans (Stronski, P & Himes, A, 2019). The enlargement of NATO with member countries of the region, but also former members of the Warsaw Pact such as Bulgaria, Romania (2004), and later Albania in 2009, was not well received by Russia. However, no subversive actions were taken to prevent this membership. The opposite happened after the alliance's decision to enlarge with Montenegro and later with North Macedonia. And in this case Russia has effectively encouraged Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina not to pursue similar ambitions (Larsen, 2020). The enlargement in the case of Montenegro was closely linked to the negative influence that Russian foreign policy was exerting on the region immediately after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The worsening of relations between Russia and the West after the annexation of Crimea projected the geopolitics of the region into a "zero-sum game," and this was also reflected in the difficulties that some Balkan leaders encountered in finding balance in their foreign policies regarding Russian-Western attitudes (Stronski, P & Himes, A, 2019, p. 9). Russia is currently using the Balkans as a "laboratory" to experiment with hybrid warfare. Daily, pro-Russian media networks, which receive direct funding from Moscow, fabricate stories centered on local discontent with Brussels, Washington, or Balkan politicians who distance their countries from the West. These narratives typically portray the West as the origin of the region's democratic deficits, economic difficulties, and ongoing ethnic divisions. Moscow views the Balkans as a fertile ground for the propagation of conspiracy theories that sow discord, animosity, and even nationalist contradictions (Svetoka, S & Doncheva, T, 2021).

The study of Stronski & Himes (2019) highlights two cases in which Russia's top foreign policy representative, Sergei Lavrov, as well as other high-ranking Russian officials, are direct contrivers of the narrative that fuels regional ethnic conflicts.

The first case involved the conspiracy surrounding the relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, accusing Bulgaria, as a NATO member state, of seeking to divide North Macedonia. The second case involved another NATO member state, Albania, which, according to the assumptions of Russia's top foreign policy leaders, with the help of NATO and the newest state in the Balkans, Kosovo, allegedly had territorial claims against its neighbors, Montenegro, Greece, and Serbia (Stronski, P& Himes, A, 2019, p. 13).

The exploitation of volatile ethnic situations that occasionally take center stage in the domestic politics of Balkan states is an effective instrument of Russian foreign policy that internationalizes them, in order to shape the geopolitics of the region, especially when dealing with NATO and the exercise of US military influence on the Balkans.

Finally, Moscow has favored the use of non-state actors its negative influence in the Balkans, in accordance with the aforementioned objectives but without taking direct responsibility. In the name of nationalism, certain extremist organizations are the driving force behind pro-Russian agendas in the Balkans. The propagation of pan-Slavism entails targeting "foreign values," which implies Euro-Atlantic values. All of this has not aided Russian foreign policy to win the war, but to impose equal partnership on the West at the diplomatic negotiating tables.

1.8 Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis of the three periods of Russian politics in the Balkans, it can be concluded that, generally speaking, Russia's relations with the Balkan region have politically and historically always served the primary objective of its foreign policy: imperial expansion and the role of a great power (Samokhvalov, 2019, p. 191), regardless of the regime type.

The first period, 1945 to 1990 was dominated by use of military force to achieve military ends. The Russian strategy relied heavily on the Warsaw Treaty mechanism to impose itself not only on the spheres of influence, but also geopolitical solutions. Under the cloak of a superpower, the former Soviet Union remained on the bipolar stage until its dissolution, using force and coercion to maintain its control over a number of Balkan nations.

From 1990 to 2000, Russia, having emerged from the former Soviet Union, was compelled, first by the new political circumstances and then by the economic ones, to refrain from interfering in Balkan affairs and to adopt Western policies. Obviously, this was a forced adaptation that led to the political frustration of the new Russian leader in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The third period, beginning with Putin's rise to power, marked a significant turning point and the revival of the notion of Russia as a global power. From this, there arise the claims that the history of Russia and the Balkans precedes that of the Balkans and the West. Economic diplomacy, followed by the cultural one supplanted the Cold War's

military power to influence the way in which the region is governed and perceived internationally.

After analyzing all three time periods and concentrating on the present, it can be concluded that the Balkans are no longer a strategic priority for Russia, unlike Ukraine and the Baltic states. Moscow has therefore refrained from employing force in the region. Each Balkan state, however, is viewed as a valuable "pawn" or "bargain" for projecting Russian influence in the region and blackmailing the West. Thus, to summarise, Russia is constantly seeking opportunities to expand its influence in the Balkans, in order to undermine Euro-Atlantic policies in the region and leave its future at the Greek calends.

Where Moscow fails, as it did with Montenegro and North Macedonia in not preventing their NATO membership, its interventions have become relief valves for continuous presence. For this purpose, it has taken advantage of corrupt political elites and the disillusionment of the local populace over unkept promises, particularly of the EU, to bring the Balkans into the union. And under these conditions, the entire Russian state apparatus is focused on what it does best: "disrespecting and undermining institutions and rules established by the West", aided also by certain elite circles that exploit engagement with Russia to advance their domestic agendas (Bechev, 2017).

In conclusion, the question whether Russia is using the Balkans to regain its status as a global power or as some "spoils" in its dealings, emphasises that Putin's strategy is not aiming for a vassal model of Balkan countries under Moscow, but rather the creation of an unfriendly environment for its historical rival, the West. As a consequence, Russia remains a dangerous actor in the region because it has demonstrated not only the will and economic capacity, but also the military capability through hybrid warfare, with the intention of undermining Euro-Atlantic policies that seek to transform the Balkans from a region with hybrid regimes into a region with Western style democracies.

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