

OPINIONS

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Reflections of the conflict Russia-Ukraine on the position of NATO in the Balkans

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Abstract.

Russian influence in the Western Balkans could rekindle conflicts that were never completely extinguished and restore instability in the Mediterranean. From Belgrade's support to Moscow to the question of Republika Srpska in Bosnia, a framework for the region.

Still, Russia remains a dangerous actor in the Western Balkans and NATO should take it into consideration. It has a proven capacity and willingness to play the spoiler in regional reconciliation and integration processes. With Russia's economic toolkit likely weakening over time, the war in Ukraine could incentivize Moscow to use its more destabilizing tools in the region with the goal of overtaking the limited bandwidth of EU and U.S. decisionmakers.

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Demonstrations in support of Moscow, Russian tricolors waved in the square. Belgrade was the only European capital where citizens showed open support for

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Putin's war in Ukraine. For this reason, by analysts, Serbia is considered a sort of Trojan horse. A door through which to transfer the germ of instability even closer to the heart of Europe, to the center of the Mediterranean. But the dust is burning all over the Balkans².

Belgrade has long been a candidate to join the EU, a position that has recently become precarious. Especially since, last February 25, at the United Nations assembly, she refrained from condemning the invasion. In the meantime, the militarization decided by President Aleksandar Vucic continues in the country. The weapons are mainly purchased from Russia, but also from China, as evidenced by the Y-20 aircraft and sophisticated HQ-22 missiles recently delivered by Beijing. They serve to strengthen the army or are sold abroad, among others in Myanmar.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there are over one million Serbs - they make up a third of the total population and the majority in Republika Srpska - their representative Milorad Dodik vetoed any sanctions in Moscow, forcing the country to declare itself officially neutral. For many it would be the opening step of a larger project, aimed one day at gaining independence from Sarajevo and benefiting from Russian protection. The model would be Ukrainian separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. To prevent this, the EU has closed the ranks of the EUFOR mission, sending another 500 soldiers.

But in the peninsula, a historical hodgepodge of ethnic groups and religions, obviously there are also those who look to the West, photographing a highly fragmented and therefore equally explosive picture. Montenegro is a member of NATO, a candidate to join the EU, but supporting the Atlanticist cause costs money. The main voice of the economy is tourism, which has long been fueled by the oligarchs of the Kremlin.

The condemnation of Kosovo and Albania is clearer, whose adherence to the sanctions has never been questioned. Such as support for maintaining Ukrainian territorial integrity. Here the protests were of a different nature, organized by citizens in front of the Russian embassies. Yet Moscow will continue to blow on the wind of the rifts, exploiting the numerous Russian-speaking and Slavic Orthodox communities. It will thus try to remove countries from the western galaxy and awaken the anti-system sentiment of minorities. To prevent this, the joint effort of the EU and NATO will be needed, to which the then Kosovo Defense Minister, Rrustem Berisha, has asked to install a permanent military

² Serbia, Bosnia e Montenegro: perché la Russia punta i Balcani occidentali, 14 Aprile 2022, Giovanni Sofia

base on the territory, the first step for eventual accession to the Atlantic alliance. A possible path despite the fact that the small state is not currently part of the UN, as long as it contributes to the security of neighboring countries and adheres to the principles of the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949. Should this materialize, NATO could strengthen its presence in a delicate area and on the other hand, to guarantee the integrity of Kosovo, by virtue of the mutual defense clause enshrined in article 5. In support of Pristina, Turkey, Croatia and the United States have lined up among others. Furthermore, the country, after the suspension of Russia from the Council of Europe, has submitted a formal request for membership of the institution, and hopes to become a member of the European Union in the medium term. In short, in the viewfinder there is a place in the West.

The Kremlin's track record includes its longtime refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, a brazen coup attempt in Montenegro, support for separatist-minded leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and covert efforts to target arms supplies destined for Ukraine and to sow domestic or interstate political tensions. Despite intense international criticism over its war against Ukraine, the Russian government shows no sign of giving up on such heavy-handed behavior or tried-and-true tactics like the cooptation of corrupt local elites. But as the Ukraine war drags on, Balkan leaders may find it more difficult to sit on the fence or to play Moscow and Brussels off of each other³.

Moscow has long capitalized on lingering ethnic Serb resentment at the 1999 NATO campaign that led to the establishment of Kosovo as an independent state. Amid frequent flare-ups between Serbia and Kosovo, the large NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo continues to play an essential role in regional stabilization efforts, as this summer's spike in tensions between ethnic Serbs and Kosovar Albanians over license plates demonstrates. While Moscow was on the sidelines during the recent crisis, inflammatory rhetoric by Russian officials needlessly aggravated the overall level of tension. At the same time, the Kremlin's self-serving narratives and the support of average Serbs for Vladimir Putin as a counterweight to the West make life complicated for U.S. and EU policymakers. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's relationship with Putin has long been complicated, even though he often panders to pro-Russian domestic sentiment for his own political purposes.

³ Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor, [Paul Stronski](#) 20.09.2022

Moscow's meddling in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an ever-present threat. The Kremlin has long cultivated ties to Milorad Dodik, the leader of one of the country's two federal entities, Republika Srpska, as well as to the prominent Bosnian Croat politician Dragan Covic, whose behavior undermines the viability of Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex power-sharing arrangements. Russian support and training have bolstered the transformation of Dodik-led security units in Republika Srpska into a quasi-military force in contravention of the Dayton peace agreement. With less than two weeks before Bosnia and Herzegovina's October 2, 2022, general election, Putin hosted Dodik in Russia, a signal of support for the Bosnian Serb politician that suggests Moscow still aspires to influence the country's politics.

Another near-term question in Bosnia and Herzegovina is whether Moscow will support the renewal of the UN mandate for the European Union Peacekeeping Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or EUFOR, which expired on November 2, 2022. Russian officials are coy about their plans, but blocking its renewal could ultimately backfire if the Europeans simply decide to go around Russia and extend the mission unilaterally at Sarajevo's request. Despite the war in Ukraine, the West has not been distracted from the risks of destabilization inside Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU increased EUFOR's size from 600 to 1,100 peacekeepers earlier this year, and NATO forces based in Italy also remain prepared to deploy to Bosnia in a supporting role if needed.

Moscow's war in Ukraine, however, has introduced tension into the Russian-Serbian bilateral relationship. Belgrade voted in favor of the March 2022 United Nations General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine. Serb nationalists were dismayed that Moscow cited Kosovo as a precedent for its recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk separatist entities as independent states. Serbia reportedly has also allowed the UK and France to use its territory as a transshipment point for noncombat military equipment headed to Ukraine.

Russian soft power has enjoyed sporadic success. Russian politicians profess a special affinity for "brotherly" South Slavs and extol ties between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches. Far-right nationalist and religious groups are receptive to Moscow's efforts to promote "traditional values," as seen most vividly in an August 28 protest in Belgrade against an upcoming pride parade in which some demonstrators hoisted Russian flags and the pro-war "Z" symbol. Vucic responded by canceling the planned parade and warning that Serbia had

become the site of an East-West proxy conflict, all of which highlights the challenges he faces in balancing between Russia and the EU.

It is in the economic realm that the puniness of Russia's footprint is most apparent. All Balkan states depend heavily on Europe for trade and investment, thanks to geographic proximity and overall trade orientation. The EU accounts for 60 percent of Serbia's external trade, for example. Serbia exported roughly 14 billion euros' worth of goods to Europe in 2021; by contrast, its 2020 exports to Russia were worth only 911 million euros: 4.7 percent of the country's total exports. With the exception of Kosovo, Western Balkan countries benefit from EU visa-free regimes, which facilitate travel, as well as labor migration to and remittances from Europe. These connections enhance the EU's leverage and soft power. Serbia and Montenegro also have become a refuge for thousands of Russian exiles opposed to the war and the internal crackdown on dissent.

EU sanctions on Russian energy exports are likely to shrink Russia's economic presence in the Balkans significantly, disrupting some of the flows of Russian oil and gas that have long been a mainstay of trade relations with the region. Serbia has ostentatiously resisted EU pressure to join the sanctions regime, which has had a negative impact on NIS, the country's major oil company. Gazprom Neft until recently held the majority stake, which served as a key symbol of Russian political and economic influence in Serbia. However, Croatia plans to implement EU sanctions that will cut off NIS's ability to import Russian oil starting in December. Due to fears of other secondary sanctions, Vucic has indicated that he may need to nationalize NIS this fall and sell Gazprom Neft's remaining stake in the company to another buyer to keep it operational.

Russia's gas war with the EU has rippled into the Balkans, even though the region's overall energy dependence on Moscow has long been exaggerated. Serbia secured a three-year contract for deeply discounted Russian gas in May 2022. The deal angered EU members, although implementation is uncertain. Yet the volume of Serbia's gas imports from Russia is relatively small, accounting for only 3 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year. The overall share of gas in Serbia's energy mix is less than 15 percent. Bulgaria imported about 3 bcm per year from Russia until Moscow turned off the taps in April 2022. Likewise, the share of gas in its energy consumption is relatively small and on par with Serbia. Greece gets 6 bcm a year of Russian gas, or 30 percent of its gas consumption. Gas accounts

for slightly more than a quarter of its overall energy consumption, but Athens plans to open a series of regasification terminals from which Balkan states stand to benefit.

Going forward, Western Balkan countries will likely have to weigh the threat of alienating the EU or the United States against the benefits of marginal gains from purchasing gas supplies from Russia or otherwise doing business as usual with Moscow. The ongoing European energy crisis is being felt across the region's energy markets. Possible shifts include accelerated efforts to develop cross-border energy swaps, new pipeline interconnectors, cleaner energy projects, and, over the longer-term, increased investment in new LNG terminals, which may allow the region to draw upon supplies from the Caspian and Eastern Mediterranean. The first of these LNG terminals, a floating facility in Greece, is scheduled to become operational in September 2022. If the EU throws its weight behind these diversification efforts, Russia's energy toolkit in southeastern Europe may not be all it is cracked up to be. Of course, any such changes will require time and massive investment, neither of which is assured.

Why the Balkans could be Russia's next target?!

The Balkans could represent "the natural and next extension of the conflict, through the instrument of hybrid or proxy warfare". An alarm launched last year, when it warned of the danger of the Russian presence in the area. Concerns re-launched on March 4 by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, for whom Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina would be in the sights of Putin after Ukraine. A list of countries to keep an eye on, to which the High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell has added Moldova. Fear, explains Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti, is the trigger of incidents under the pretext of protecting the Serbian minority of the regions. "The Western Balkans are even more in danger than the Baltic states and Moldova, because Russia has allocated part of its military strength there," he said. With specific reference to Kosovo, the objective could be the introduction of a model similar to the Srpska republic, through the instrument of Zajednica, an association of Serbian municipalities defined as unconstitutional by Pristina. Tensions to which Brussels will have to look quickly, even at the cost of failing to comply with what was sanctioned at the Versailles summit on 11 and 12 March, in which no enlargement was planned. But not even an acceleration on the accession procedures in question.

Conclusions..

Still, Russia remains a dangerous actor in the Western Balkans and NATO should take it into consideration. It has a proven capacity and willingness to play the spoiler in regional reconciliation and integration processes. With Russia's economic toolkit likely weakening over time, the war in Ukraine could incentivize Moscow to use its more destabilizing tools in the region with the goal of overtaxing the limited bandwidth of EU and U.S. decisionmakers. Russia has proven that it knows how to be a master of distraction and how to take advantage of ethnic cleavages, bolster hardline nationalist politicians, and complicate the region's lagging reform agendas....

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