

2025: why the EU has to mean it in the Western Balkans

"I don't see any other future for the Western Balkans than the EU. There is no other alternative, there is no plan B. The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe and they belong to our community." (D. Tusk, 2018)

These words were spoken by European Council President Donald Tusk after the European Union-Western Balkans summit on 17 May in Sofia, Bulgaria. Here EU leaders stated their unreserved support for the region's economic, political and social transformation along with, most crucially, what the concluding Sofia Declaration termed the "European perspective" of the Western Balkans. What the EU seems all but blind to, however, is the new geopolitical reality dawning in the region: the unthinkable "plan B" is lurking just beyond the horizon, with Russia leading the charge.

The new EU engagement

In a marked u-turn from Brussels' stance in 2014, when European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker affirmed that there would be no further EU enlargement in the foreseeable future on account of "enlargement fatigue", on 6 February this year the Commission published its new enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans. A symbol of renewed EU engagement in the region, the strategy for the first time set an indicative date for Serbia and Montenegro to be ready to join the Union – 2025 – and laid out a path to membership for these two states along with their neighbours Albania, Bosnia and Macedonia¹ (FYROM). The document included the announcement of a range of specific initiatives targeting particular areas of interest to both the region and the EU: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital connectivity, and "reconciliation and good neighbourly relations". As Velina Lilyanova, Policy Analyst at the European Parliament External Policies Unit, notes, the strategy was welcomed by experts by virtue of its clarity in identifying problems and highlighting the significance of bilateral disputes, but criticised over doubts that it would "do enough to change the dynamics in the region" (as stated by Florian Bieber, Professor of Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, writing in *Foreign Affairs*).

Despite periods of stability since the end of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, in recent years the Western Balkans have seen rising instability and unrest born of ethnic tensions, nationalist and populist politics, renewed violence, economic stagnation and corruption. As Vincent L. Morelli of the Library of Congress contends, this unsettled nature has afforded Moscow a "geopolitical opportunity to aggressively exploit and a chance to reassert itself as a significant influence in the region". With the EU (and the West more broadly) competing with Russia on countries' domestic politics and on issues with wider ramifications such as the

¹ This article will use the name "Macedonia" to refer to the former Yugoslav republic (as opposed to Northern Macedonia), in light of the ongoing nature of negotiations and ratification processes

status of Kosovo, the ex-Yugoslav nations, in particular, have become polarised between pro-EU and pro-Russia constituencies, which are often divided along ethnic lines.

Speaking a language of integration and assimilation understood by many as synonymous with painful economic and political change, EU leadership stands in cold contrast to the “warm” (as described by Ivor Roberts, former British ambassador to Yugoslavia) presence of Russia in the region. Moreover, where EU engagement in the region has been cautious and non-committal at best, and neglectful at worst, Russia has stepped in to bridge the gap. While the EU and NATO rely on strengthened economies and governmental institutions to provide a solid foundation for regional peace and cooperation, they ignore the impulse for strong nationhood and preoccupation with borders and territories that prevails in the Western Balkans. This fixation, on the other hand, has not escaped Moscow’s notice. Building on cultural and historical ties with the region, Russia has been able to solidify its influence in a number of spheres.

Florian Bieber writes that a string of incidents starting in January 2017 has sparked increased fears among NATO and EU leadership regarding conflict in the Western Balkans, spurring the organisations to action: the train sent by the Serbian government from Belgrade to Kosovo in January 2017 bearing signs proclaiming “Kosovo is Serbia”, eventually stopped after threats by Kosovo’s leadership; thugs known to Macedonia’s ruling VMRO-DPMNE party being let into parliament and threatening opposition MPs; Kosovo Serb politician, Oliver Ivanović, killed in broad daylight by gunmen in Mitrovica in January this year. According to Bieber, the realisation of Montenegro’s NATO membership in June 2017 and the EU’s recent reengagement in the Balkans were in part born of these events (in addition, undoubtedly, to the current Presidency of the EU being held by Bulgaria and the recent refugee crisis). This renewed sense of commitment and urgency, however, functions as little more than a sticking plaster: Russia has already penetrated the region, and its connections run deeper than economic and institutional reform.

Talking money: a one-track mindset

It is often triumphantly underlined that the EU is the biggest donor and investor in the Western Balkans. This is, indeed, the case and is largely by way of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), which constitutes the means by which the EU supports reforms in the enlargement region with financial and technical help. Under the IPA, almost €9 billion of pre-accession assistance were given during the 2007-2017 period, with the European Commission planning to gradually increase funding until 2020. Furthermore, the EU is the main trading partner for the Western Balkans, with the volume of trade between the EU and the Western Balkans in 2016 totalling €43 billion and the EU accounting for more than two-thirds of foreign direct investment in the region.

In contrast, according to Deputy Editor of Carnegie.ru Maxim Samorukov,

even in Serbia, Moscow's closest Balkan ally, Russia falls far behind the EU by a factor of ten in terms of trade; this amounted to just 6.7 percent with Russia in 2016, compared to 64.4 percent with the EU in the same year. The 2018 report by the Sofia-based Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) contends that, while Russian investment in the region has increased by more than 3 billion euros in absolute terms since 2005, Russia's economic footprint as share of the total economy in the Western Balkans has either shrunk or stagnated as a result of international sanctions imposed following the annexation of Crimea.

Herein lies the first pitfall: these figures do not tell the whole story, but rather obscure the true extent of Russia's economic sway. Firstly, as the CSD report sets out, the scope of Russian foreign direct investment has been underestimated by the EU partly because a proportion is "channeled through offshore zones and tax havens such as Cyprus" and thus remains for the most part hidden. Secondly, the political impact of this foreign direct investment has been miscalculated due to a lack of recognition of the differences between EU and Russian investment: whereas the EU is made up of member states, with foreign direct investment from individual countries not necessarily indicative of common economic policy, Russia is a singular entity. This crucial difference renders direct comparison of Russian foreign direct investment with the EU's total stock near futile. Thirdly, we can look back to the adage, "quality over quantity". We grow up learning this but are wont to forget it; the countries of the Western Balkans are not primarily vulnerable to Russian influence because of the extent of investment, but because it focuses on strategic sectors such as banking, energy and fuel processing.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Russian energy companies such as Gazprom and Lukoil have made significant incursions into the Bosnian, Bulgarian, Romanian and Serbian markets. While prominence in the energy sector does not necessarily ensure political leverage – we can note, for example, Montenegro's joining EU sanctions on Russia, despite one third of all registered firms in Montenegro being linked to Russia – it is in part due to such strategic investment of Russian capital that governments in the region are susceptible to pressures on a host of strategic decisions: not only those related to energy market diversification and liberalisation, but also to NATO and EU membership, along with economic sanctions (in contrast to the Montenegro example mentioned above, Bosnia, Serbia, and Macedonia have refused to join EU sanctions against Moscow).

The second pitfall lies in an undue focus on money: a nation is more than its economy, after all, and never more so than in an era of geopolitics and rising nationalist sentiment. Russia has seized upon the climate of instability in the Western Balkans and settled on what Maxim Samorukov terms a "low-cost, opportunistic approach" that employs a range of political and soft power tools, also drawing on historical, cultural and religious ties – invoking, for example, a pan-Slavic or Orthodox Christian brotherhood. As Dimitar Bechev argued in 2017, the era of big-money interventions by Russia ended following the cancellation of the South Stream pipeline project, the 2014 Crimean crisis and the imposition of European

sanctions on Russia. This new phase is characterised by “Moscow’s low-intensity campaign against EU and NATO in the region”.

Manpower

International relations expert Mark Galeotti argues that the Russian approach towards the Balkans can be termed “adhocracy”, meaning that policy is informal and relies on the actions of individuals in whom President Vladimir Putin holds confidence. Noteworthy not only for their specific roles in building linkages with the region, but also because they serve as excellent illustrations of this “adhocracy” phenomenon, are Nikolai Patrushev, Konstantin Malofeev and Alexander Dugin.

The former head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Nikolai Patrushev now heads up Russia’s Security Council and is widely understood as Russia’s chief strategist in the Balkans and as the one to have pitched the idea of the (failed) 2016 Montenegro coup to Putin. “[He] is definitely one of those people who think Russia is in an existential struggle for its survival,” Galeotti says of Patrushev. “It’s a Cold-War, Manichean vision of the world. And one in which any reversals for the West are implicitly good for Russia.” As Howard Amos notes, writing for *Foreign Affairs* in 2017, the former spy’s involvement suggests a more uncompromising Russian approach to the region.

Nationalist oligarch and champion of a pan-Slavic Orthodox brotherhood, Konstantin Malofeev has certainly also been “one to watch” in the Balkans. The businessman, who is currently under Western sanctions for his involvement in Crimea and Donbas, has political and business interests in the region and is well known for organising a visit by over a hundred Cossacks to the capital of Republika Srpska, Banja Luka, in support of nationalist, accessionist leader and pro-Russian politician Milorad Dodik. Galeotti argues that it was Malofeev who first conceived the idea of an operation to destabilise Montenegro in an attempt to stop it from joining NATO, but that it was necessary for him to find a backer within the government: enter Patrushev.

A commentator and chief editor for Malofeev’s ultra-conservative TV channel Tsargrad, Alexander Dugin is a philosopher and political scientist known as “Putin’s Rasputin” or “Putin’s Brain”. Dugin strongly opposes Western liberal values and ardently supports an alternative Pan-Slavic brotherhood, which includes strengthening the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. In 2014, Dugin and Malofeev together hosted representatives of far-right parties – e.g. the Austrian Freedom Party, the Bulgarian Ataka, the French National Front – at a conference in Vienna in an attempt to promote Russian foreign policy. Similar tactics – courting right-wing political parties – can be observed in the Balkans. For example, during Jean-Claude Juncker’s Balkan tour in February/March this year, Dugin, together with another prominent Russian analyst, Leonid Savin, were guests in Skopje on a panel organised by a small pro-Russian party, United Macedonia. Allegedly in Macedonia in an unofficial capacity

as Russia's "people's diplomat", Dugin deplored the liberal ideology into which he believes the country is being enticed. "The liberal ideology is totalitarian. It wants to destroy traditions. Many nations discard it in order to protect their culture, language and religion. We are glad that Russia became a symbol of this process," he stated.

In this new era of "low-intensity" campaigning, it is crucial not to underestimate what the Foreign Policy Research Institute calls the "freelance purveyors of Russian soft power". Here Russian involvement in the Western Balkans is enacted by individuals, who court pro-Russia parties, civic groups, and media outlets, often acting with the consent of Russian intelligence officials. In this new phase, it becomes difficult to distinguish between governmental and private actors; a complex (and at times murky) network of relationships renders Russian foreign policy in the region incomprehensible and, consequently, unpredictable.

Focus on Serbia

As Galeotti notes, Kosovo's prime minister, Ramush Haradinaj, has claimed that the priority given to Serbia's accession to the EU is indicative of fears that it would otherwise move closer to Russia. The EU has been right to focus on Serbia: Russia has also done so, and boasts not only extensive economic penetration but powerful political influence in the country often described as "Russia's foothold" in the Western Balkans. It has been a two-way street, with Russia prepared not only to influence but to support Serbia in the international arena. We can recall, for example, Russia using its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to veto two UN Security Council resolutions (1994 and 2015) condemning violence by Bosnian Serbs, and objecting to a proposed resolution on Kosovo's independence.

Beginning its EU accession negotiations in 2014, Serbia has strong economic and trade ties with EU countries and, as with the region more generally, the EU is the biggest financial donor in Serbia, giving over 3.5 billion euros in grants between 2001 and 2013 (D.Bechev, 2017). This said, Russia has not only potent political links but also substantial economic penetration in the country. Particularly noteworthy, in 2008 51 percent of Serbia's oil and gas company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), Serbia's biggest business, was transferred to Russia's Gazprom Neft (a subsidiary of Gazprom) in exchange for 400 million euros and 550 million euros of investments, with Gazprom later increasing its stake in NIS to 56.5 percent.

Recent years have also seen a significant intensification in political contacts between Russia and Serbia; we note, for example, the then President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev addressing Serbia's parliament in 2009 – emphasising Russia's stance on Kosovo as part of Serbia and invoking their common past – and last year's visit to Russia by Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić. In April this year, as the Warsaw Institute (WI) reports, the director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergey Naryshkin, met with Vučić in Belgrade to discuss cooperation between SVR and the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency (BIA). During his

visit, Naryshkin also had meetings with the head of parliament, Maja Gojković, and the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej. WI's report asserts that Naryshkin's visit signifies an intensification in "special relations" between Serbia and Russia.

In part thanks to its military neutrality, Serbia has to some extent been able to "have its cake and eat it too" in security terms, participating in 13 military drills with NATO (or NATO members) and seven with the USA over the course of 2017, along with two drills with Russia. While security cooperation between Serbia and Russia has increased, with Serbia gaining observer status in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation in 2013 and being currently in the process of acquiring four Mi-17 transport helicopters and four Mi-35 attack helicopters from Russia, perhaps the most significant element of Russia's multi-pronged penetration of Serbia is something rather softer: culture.

A number of organisations promote Russia's image in Serbia, among them the Russian Centre at Belgrade university, Russian House (a branch of the Rossotrudnichestvo Russian federal aid agency), and the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, along with myriad Russian-Serbian "friendship centres", which often offer cultural events and language lessons. According to Snežana Ilić of the Zrenjanin-based Center for Civil Society, there are now several dozen such Russian-Serbian centres in Serbia, which have been fundamental in bolstering the influence of Russian soft power in the country.

While, as Bechev notes, the EU contributed €3.5 billion in grants between 2000 and 2013 alone, while "even distant Japan" has given more than Russia, soft-power initiatives go a long way towards maintaining a strong, positive Russian presence in Serbian public opinion and obscuring this financial reality. Among the most effective instruments of Russian soft power in the country are media outlets; according to a study by the Belgrade-based Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) (2016), more than 100 Serbian organisations promote friendly ties with Russia, with eight web portals, six Russian outlets and 16 local pro-Kremlin news sources listed among them.

While famed Kremlin-backed news channel RT does not operate in Serbian, news outlets *Sputnik* and *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (RBTH) offer news in Serbian, with RBTH also providing web pages in regional languages Slovene, Croatian and Macedonian. According to the CEAS report, a striking number of media outlets in Serbia, including numerous organisations that are financially linked to the state, largely follow the discourse set out by *Sputnik*. These include: *Večernje Novosti*, *Politika*, *Pink*, *Studio B*, *Informer*, *Pečat*, *NSPM*, *Standard*, *Novi Standard*, and *Pravda*. Such media discourses coincide with increasing pressure on independent pro-European outlets, and are enhanced by systemic problems within the Serbian media landscape, which a 2015 report by the Anti-Corruption Council details as including: "lack of transparency of media ownership; lack of transparency of financing; economic influence through the budget, tax incentives, and other indirect forms of financing with public funds; problems of media privatisation and the uncertain status of media public

services; censorship, self-censorship, and tabloidisation”. Some Serbia-based media outlets announced in 2016 that Malofeev was seeking to buy a Serbian TV network, perhaps with the aim of creating a Serbian version of Tsargrad, but this has not been confirmed.

A prevalent discourse in such pro-Russian outlets focuses on traditional ties between Serbia and Russia, evoking a Slavic brotherhood and Russia as “protector” of the Serbs in a way that historian Milivoje Bešlin, writing for CEAS, claims represents “distorted interpretations of historical events”. This discourse is doubtless strengthened by close relations between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches, and a less than clear-cut demarcation between religious and political life. As in Russia, nation and religion are often conflated in Serbia, with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) often considered a fundamental aspect of Serbian identity. Partly by virtue of this phenomenon, there are strong links between the Serbian government and the SPC; when the SPC throws its support behind local Russian organisations and champions the strengthening of ties with Russia, religious activities often carry over into government policies. Never was this political-religious synthesis better illustrated than in February this year, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov unveiled a mosaic by Russian artist Nikolai Mukhin at St. Sava's Church in Belgrade, in a ceremony also attended by President Vučić. Costing four million euros, the mosaic was funded by Russian energy giant Gazprom.

In part due to media activity that publicises such events and perpetuates discourses of kinship, Russia maintains a strong presence in Serbian public consciousness and is able to build on what Galeotti terms assumptions “generated by a self-sustaining mix of propaganda and historical affinity”. A positive media image can hide a multitude of sins, including tight-fistedness, it seems; as Bechev has noted, a 2015 survey found that 47 percent of respondents believed that Russia contributes more financial aid than the EU.

Reality check

Writing for *Politico* following the Sofia summit in May 2018, Andrew Gray compared EU-Western Balkan relations to a lengthy engagement: “It wasn’t a renewal of the wedding vows because the big ceremony never happened. It was two partners declaring they still want to be engaged.” 15 years after the Thessaloniki summit which saw the EU first declare its “unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries”, only Croatia has become a member.

If the EU truly aspires to integrate the Western Balkans, there are certain things its leadership must be clear and confident about: Russia’s own aspirations in the region; proactive measures to counter Russia’s penetrative strategies; policies that acknowledge the geopolitical reality and boost ties not only with, but also within, the region; and the importance of presenting a united front.

The first thing to grasp is that while Moscow would certainly rather not see EU expansion in the Western Balkans, it has a more nuanced take on EU enlargement than we might assume. As Mark Galeotti argues, Russia's aim is not to draw the countries of the Western Balkans to Russia as an alternative to the EU, but rather its goals are threefold, and somewhat more subtle: strengthen its role as a regional player and power, hinder further NATO expansion and exploit potential EU expansion to its advantage.

Winning greater influence in the Western Balkans is both a plus for Putin in the domestic popularity stakes (particularly when dealing with nationalists at home) and makes it more difficult for the EU (and other players such as Turkey) to disregard Russian interests, providing strategic leverage for the future. Far more important than bringing EU expansion to a halt is obstructing the growth of NATO in the region, a particularly salient point for Russia in light of Montenegro's recent membership of the bloc. In addition to a sense of the strategic balance shifting in the West's favour and to Russia's disadvantage, membership of NATO means that overt pressure by Russia is, in essence, off the table. In order for Moscow to continue to bolster its influence, therefore, it is crucial that the other nations of the Western Balkans remain neutral. If, as many in Moscow have tacitly accepted, EU membership will eventually become a reality for the nations of the Western Balkans, the key is to sow seeds of discord now that will ultimately result in backlash within the region (discouraging other nations from joining) and a level of influence within the EU itself – Galeotti contends that in Serbia, for example, Russia can hope to have a “Trojan horse” inside the Union.

The second recommendation, that the EU take proactive measures to deal with Russia in the region, relates to the Union's lack of acknowledgement of Russia's presence and ambition. The Sofia Declaration refers to "disinformation and other hybrid activities" to be “fought together through greater collaboration”, but makes no mention of Russia specifically. This lack of acknowledgement speaks to a more general gap between Russian and EU strategies in the Western Balkans and in information warfare more broadly. Where the Western conception of information warfare is limited to tactical operations carried out during periods of active hostility, the Russian conception is “all-encompassing, and not limited to wartime” (Keir Giles, for NATO Stratcom), consequently creating a security gap. With this in mind, the EU must move from defensive to proactive practices, in particular working to neutralise Kremlin narratives via strategic communications. The EU's Eastern Stratcom Task Force and the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats must be better resourced and increase their capacities, while more support should be given to local independent media outlets in the Western Balkans or more efforts made to provide alternative sources of information. Perhaps surprisingly, the UK is currently leading the charge in this respect, with the BBC relaunching its Serbian language service in March this year and presenting partnerships with a number of local media outlets.

Thirdly, where Russia has more fully grasped (and, indeed, seized upon for political advantage) the geopolitical reality of the Western Balkans – a preoccupation with borders,

peoples and land and a growing obsession with national pride – the EU has tiptoed around the region’s issues: the Macedonia naming issue, Kosovo’s status, and ethnic tensions within the constituent parts of Bosnia & Herzegovina. Resolving these issues, and increasing cooperation in the region more generally, is essential for the stability of the region and progress of EU expansion. This is particularly crucial when we consider that Greece – an EU and NATO member state – has in the past blocked Macedonia’s membership into NATO as well as the start of EU accession talks. In sum, the EU needs to sell the necessity of multilateral, as opposed to bilateral, relations and cooperation as a key to regional stability and prosperity.

The salient geopolitical issues mentioned above, the status of Kosovo and accession of Macedonia, also speak to a key weakness on the part of the EU: a lack of unity among its member states. While the Sofia Declaration proclaims “unequivocal support” for the “European perspective” of the Western Balkans, a closer look reveals this support to be anything but. At first glance, the then Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s boycott of the summit over the presence of Kosovo – which Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece do not recognise – serves as a stark reminder of divisions within the bloc over the region; leaders present at the summit, notably French President Emmanuel Macron, also spoke at odds with the declaration, arguing that reform within the Union itself must happen before it can consider further enlargement. This disunity and lack of political resolve has been seized upon by pro-Kremlin media – consider *Sputnik*’s assertion that the EU-Western Balkans summit in Bulgaria “may turn out to be a failure as there is no unity among European states” – and rob the Union’s words of both gravity and sincerity.

Accession to the EU is one of few incentives for democratic and political reform in the Western Balkans, and one that the Union cannot afford to let slide, not least for its own sake; the refugee crisis, which has seen hundreds of thousands enter the EU via the western Balkan route, has provided a striking indication of the region’s importance to the EU’s own stability. While EU leadership seems keen to brush aside the idea that the Western Balkans might constitute an arena for geopolitical competition with Russia, that ship has already sailed. In the words of Mark Galeotti: “Tough luck. The Kremlin clearly does see the region in those terms and is actively seeking to exploit whatever opportunities it can find.” If the EU is serious about the region, it must accept that it is taking part in a multiplayer game.

Cut to the chase

Consider this popular Balkan joke:

“When it comes to EU membership, the difference between pessimists and optimists is that optimists believe Turkey will join during the Albanian EU presidency, while pessimists believe Albania will join during the Turkish EU presidency.”

This slice of slightly black comedy evokes a region that has been waiting too long. As long as the EU shies away from taking tough decisions in the Western Balkans, Moscow will continue to step into the gap, further destabilising this unstable region and, consequently, Europe itself. To ensure the stability and security of the continent as a whole, a vague, flowery promise of distant membership will not suffice: it is time for a new, more confident and committed approach.

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