

Research Article

THE MIRROR REFLECTION OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: OPENING NEW CONFLICTS AS A DISTRACTION

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Submitted on 13 Jun 2023 / Revised 24 Jun 2023 / Approved **25 Jun 2023**

Published: **01 Aug 2023**

Summary: 1. Introduction. – 2. Why are the Western Balkans a Solid Ground for Russian Political Influence? – 3. Russian Influence in Serbia and its Reflected Scenarios in Kosovo. – 4. Conclusions

Keywords: Western Balkans, the war in Ukraine, Russia's influence, geopolitics, conflict, great powers

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Lead author: responsible for writing and research. **Competing interests:** Any competing interests were declared by all co-authors. **Disclaimer:** All authors declare that their opinions and views expressed in this manuscript are free of any impact of any organizations.

Translation: The article was written in English language, and additionally was edited and checked for proof reading by all authors.

Managing editor – Mag Polina Siedova. **English Editor** – Nicole Robinson.

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How to cite: J Krasniqi, L Hajdari, A Maliqi, K DeGroff Madsen 'The Mirror Reflection of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in The Western Balkans: Opening New Conflicts as a Distraction' 2023 3 (20) Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 12-26. <https://doi.org/10.33327/AJEE-18-6.3-a000317>

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Western Balkan region has long struggled under extensive pressure and influence from Russia and the West. World developments have occasionally echoed tensions among nations in the region, including a prolonged EU and NATO membership process, which has increased the possibility of Russia's influence, especially after the aggression in Ukraine. This article analyses the increase in Russia – Ukraine tensions and its direct correlation with the increase of tensions in the Western Balkans through hybrid war methods understood through Zhyhlei and Syvak's definition: "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."⁵ The higher Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the higher the pressure on Serbia to fuel tensions in the Western Balkans. This pressure comes through direct threats, media propaganda, and influence on parallel structures and financial support for CSOs, through which Russia increases its influence in the Balkans through Serbia as its closest ally. This influence strategy is particularly important for Russia to undermine the power and influence of the West and NATO in former Yugoslav states, especially those with open conflicts which serve as a global distraction from a possible power decline in Ukraine.

Methods: Through discourse and thematic analysis, this article analyses local, regional, and international media, data, and publications of international organisations, press releases of international and regional institutions, conclusions of distinguished scientists and heads of state over the current situation in the Western Balkans, and interviews with representatives of CSOs and institutions in Kosovo. The influence of Russian aggression in Ukraine, with Russia's pressure to increase tensions in the Western Balkans, has been analysed in the framework of Western unipolar influence and Russia's attempts to return to multipolarity.

Results and Conclusion: Among others, it is concluded that Russian influence is present in the Western Balkans and seeks to destabilise the region by activating passive conflicts from the past or opening new conflicts to defer international attention from the power decline in Ukraine, which did not produce the results that Russia had expected. This is possible through Serbia, Russia's closest ally. The solution to prevent Russian influence and any future conflicts among Balkan states is to accelerate NATO and EU's integration of Western Balkan countries.

1 INTRODUCTION

The U.S., EU, China, and Russia play an important role in balancing powers under the equilibrium principle in modern international relations. Throughout history, the Balkan region has been a center of attention for international actors, including empires and great powers, due to its geostrategic position and resources. As Pezarat Correia states it, the Balkan region "is pivotal between three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa (...) as a crossroad of cultures and, historically, of disputes between empires."⁶ It is not surprising, then, that the region has become an arena of rivalry between Moscow, Brussels, and Washington as they seek influence over one another.

The Balkans have been particularly important to Russia. In addition to geopolitical factors, Russia is tied to the region through economic interests as well as historical ties with Christian

5 Iryna Zhyhlei, Segiy Legenchyk and Olena Syvak, 'Hybrid War as a form of Modern International Conflicts and its Influence on Accounting Development' (2020) 11 (1) *Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski* 194, doi: 10.31648/pw.5980.

6 Pedro de Pezarat Correia, *Manual de Geopolítica e Geoestratégia, vol 2 Análise Geoestratégica do Mundo em Conflito* (Almedina 2010).

Orthodox countries in the region.⁷ The Balkan states are also at the center of Russia's foreign policy as it seeks to return to multipolarity in world affairs to oppose the Western unipolar influence, according to Stanislav Secieru.⁸ Vadim Kononenko highlights multipolarity from the war in Bosnia & Herzegovina in 1994 and the war in Kosovo in 1999 as a

“rhetorical tool of Russian diplomacy with which, in the absence of more persuasive instruments, Russia has tried to overcome a striking and painful decline of its role and status in the international system since the end of the Cold War.”⁹

As a result, any attempts to guide Balkan countries into Western institutions receive consistent pushback from Russia, including through the use of separatist and nationalist groups that Russia supports. Of particular importance is the hindrance to NATO and EU enlargement efforts, which Russia considers a threat to its interests. The unresolved conflicts in Bosnia & Herzegovina and between Kosovo and Serbia are used as leverage to maintain Russian influence in the region.¹⁰ Meanwhile, as Samokhalov analyses,

“Russia is more concerned about being recognized recognised among great powers than it is concerned about failing states in the Balkans.”¹¹

The Kosovo period, specifically, opened the opportunity for Russia to position against the West. Putin used the Kosovo conflict to flip the West's narrative, allowing intervention in Kosovo to justify his campaign into Chechnya, propelling him from Prime Minister to President. Russia argued that NATO's use of force to resolve ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia allowed Russia to do the same in Chechnya. While the West rejected the narrative, Russia pushed the point by modelling information briefings on NATO.¹² NATO's use of force in Kosovo further shaped Russian foreign policy, as evidenced in the National Security Concept approved in December 1999, which cited NATO's use of force outside its zone of responsibility without UN sanction as a threat to Russia's national security.¹³ Kosovo re-emerged as a major issue in Russia's foreign policy toward the Balkans when Kosovo declared independence in 2008. At that point, Russia said it would support Serbia's reaction and even help its interests in Kosovo.¹⁴ Putin would later cite the “Kosovo precedent” to justify their annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.¹⁵

After the Kosovo war, Russia maintained the importance of the Balkans as a regional priority. While Russia went on to cultivate ties with the other states of the former Yugoslavia, Serbia remained its closest ally due to anti-NATO sentiments.¹⁶

7 Dimitar Bechev, 'Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans' (*Atlantic Council*, 20 December 2019) <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-strategic-interests-and-tools-of-influence-in-the-western-balkans>> accessed 10 June 2023.

8 Stanislav Secieru, 'Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks' (*European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2 July 2019) <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia-western-balkans#_make_the_balkans_multipolar_again> accessed 10 June 2023.

9 Vadim Kononenko, 'From Yugoslavia to Iraq: Russia's Foreign Policy and the Effects of Multipolarity' (UPI Working Papers 42, UPI; FIIA 2003) 36.

10 Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, 'Russia's Game in the Balkans' (*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 06 February 2019) <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>> accessed 10 June 2023.

11 Vsevolod Samokhalov, 'Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response' (2019) 21 (2) *Insight Turkey* 192, doi: 10.25253/99.2019212.12.

12 James Headley, *Russia and the Balkans: Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin* (Hurst & Co 2008).

13 *ibid.*

14 Samuel Ramani, 'Why Serbia is Strengthening its Alliance with Russia' (*HuffPost News*, 15 February 2016) <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-russia-is-tightening_b_9218306> accessed 10 June 2023.

15 V Putin, 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation' (*President of Russia*, 18 March 2014) <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>> accessed 10 June 2023.

16 Headley (n 12).

The start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022¹⁷ was a clear statement from Moscow against NATO and EU enlargement, as they are perceived a threat to Russia's national security and global political interests.¹⁸ Russian political influence in the Balkans is clearly seen by Western countries. They view Russia as having a direct path through its economic cooperation with Serbia and through financial support for different political parties and civil society organizations, mainly in Serbia and Republica Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁹ The expansion of Western influence has been opposed by Russia's destabilising actions meant to undermine the West's state-building efforts in the Western Balkans. This has happened despite the investment of the EU and the U.S. through NATO membership of some Balkan countries,²⁰ their EU integration process,²¹ as well as the economic interconnection between the Balkans and the Western world.

This article explores the increase of influence and pressure in the Western Balkans that parallels the intensity of the war in Ukraine. This largely takes place through Serbia, Russia's closest ally, demonstrated through economic and military cooperation between the two countries and through the social and historical connection that Russia and Serbia share. To analyse the present rhetoric, major articles from local, regional, and international media have been analysed, as well as press releases from global leaders and international representative missions to Kosovo. These are supplemented with interviews conducted with the Deputy Minister of Defence of Kosovo, Mr. Shemsi Sylja, with Xhemajl Rexha – Chairman of the Board of the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK), and Mentor Vrajolli – the Executive Director of Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) to include different perspectives on the situation.

This article shows that open conflict between Kosovo and Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other multi-ethnic states in the Western Balkans have been targets of Russia's destabilising intentions. Russia aims to reinstate new conflicts so that the world can ultimately shift its focus from the war in Ukraine since the conflict did not achieve the victory that Moscow had planned.

2 WHY ARE THE WESTERN BALKANS A SOLID GROUND FOR RUSSIAN POLITICAL INFLUENCE?

The vulnerability of the Balkans towards external influences originates in the ties and relations from the past, including inter-ethnic conflicts, cultural and religious proximities, and lack of cooperation between countries in the region in economic, political, or socio-cultural spheres.²² The struggle with significant problems, such as high-level corruption,

17 Brad Fisher, 'Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Doctrine of Malign Illegal Operations' (2022) 5 (4-2 spec) Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 25, doi: 10.33327/AJEE-18-5-4-a000456.

18 Aditi Sangal and others, 'Russia's war in Ukraine' (CNN, 24 June 2022) <<https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-06-24-22/index.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

19 'Ndikimi rus në Ballkanin Perëndimor / Raporti: Rusia financon në mënyrë të paligjshme partitë e djathta politike dhe grupet e djathta ekstreme' (Top Channel, 15 March 2023) <<https://top-channel.tv/2023/03/15/ndikimi-rus-ne-ballkanin-p1eren1ldimor-raporti-rusia-financon-ne-menyre-te-paligjshme-partite-e-djathta-politike-dhe-grupet-e-djathta-ekstreme>> accessed 10 June 2023.

20 'Enlargement and Article 10' (NATO, 12 April 2023) <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm> accessed 10 June 2023.

21 EU-Western Balkans Summit Declaration 10229/03 (Presse 163) (Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003) <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/PRES_03_163> accessed 10 June 2023.

22 Noela Mahmutaj, 'Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans' in Anja Mihr, Paolo Sorbello and Brigitte Weiffen (eds), *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia: Transformation and Development in the OSCE Region* (Springer 2023) ch 8, 125, doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8.

organised crime, high migration rates, and other phenomena, creates ground for instability and various types of crises.²³ All of these elements open the door to the possibility of increased external influence, including Russian influence with its large potential.

Russian influence in the Balkans has been present during different intervals over history. This is particularly true given its emotional and historical connection with Serbia, further enhanced with military, political, and economic cooperation over the years.²⁴ Stronski and Himes write that:

“For Russia, the Balkans have important historical, cultural, and religious ties—common ties that are actively spread, and sometimes exaggerated by, the efforts of Russian public diplomacy and media narratives.”²⁵

These narratives were spread among other countries in the Western Balkans through Russian media and news agencies, such as Sputnik and RT, but also through other means of propaganda. The ethnic composition of the Western Balkan states that emerged from the former Yugoslavia comprises another convenient element for Russian influence, especially through Serb communities, both in the states themselves and wherever they reside in the Balkans.

The dependency on Russian gas and oil further increases the Western Balkans’ economic vulnerability and the possibility for the region to fall under Russia’s political influence. Serbia has relied on convenient low prices for Russian gas, and the main Serbian oil producer, “NIS,” is owned by Russian company, Gazprom Neft.²⁶ The dual alignment of Serbia is visible in its deep economic cooperation with Russia. In 2022, Serbia signed a three-year gas supply contract with Russia,²⁷ however, the strong foundation of this cooperation was set between former Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic and Vladimir Putin in 2013 through “The Strategic Partnership Declaration.”²⁸ Another deal that was planned to be implemented was to build the South Stream gas pipeline, which would have increased Russian influence in the region. This deal would have utilised Serbia as a route to transport Russian gas to other parts of Europe. However, it was abandoned in 2014 due to pressure from the EU.²⁹

In recent times, Serbia’s alignment alongside Russia has been most visible through Serbia’s neutrality towards Russian aggression in Ukraine, its disobedience towards the EU and U.S. requests regarding Russian sanctions, and Serbia’s obligations towards the UN Charter. Although Serbia is financially dominated by Russia through financial support of far-right political parties and groups, CSOs, and media,³⁰ while staying loyal to its political actions, Serbia also receives financial support from the EU and Western countries. Between 2000

23 Labinot Hajdari and Judita Krasniqi, ‘The Economic Dimension of Migration: Kosovo from 2015 to 2020’ (2021) 8 (1) *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 273, doi: 10.1057/s41599-021-00923-6.

24 Ernest A Reid, ‘Third Rome or Potemkin village: Analyzing the Extent of Russia’s Power in Serbia, 2012–2019’ (2021) 49 (4) *Nationalities Papers* 728, doi: 10.1017/nps.2020.62.

25 Stronski and Himes (n 10).

26 Milica Stojanovic, ‘Serbia Mulls “Taking Over” Mainly Russian-owned Oil Company’ (*BalkanInsight*, 14 July 2022) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/14/serbia-mulls-taking-over-mainly-russian-owned-oil-company>> accessed 10 June 2023.

27 ‘Serbia’s Vucic Says he Agreed a Three-Year Gas Supply Contract with Putin’ (*Reuters*, 29 May 2022) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-vucic-says-agreed-3-year-gas-supply-contract-with-putin-2022-05-29>> accessed 10 June 2023.

28 Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia (24 May 2013) <<http://kremlin.ru/supplement/1461>> accessed 10 June 2023.

29 Andrew Rettman, ‘EU Puts Pressure on Serbia to Stop South Stream Gas Pipeline’ (*EUObserver*, 7 October 2014) <<https://euobserver.com/green-economy/125924>> accessed 10 June 2023.

30 Ndikimi rus në Ballkanin Perëndimor (n 19).

and 2022, the EU supported Serbia's field of transport with over 420 million EUR in grants.³¹ Additionally, the EU is the largest donor in the energy sector, with over 830 million EUR given in financial support.³² According to data from the Delegation of the European Union, the EU invested about 2.8 billion EUR in grants, and another 6.5 billion EUR in soft finance, during the period between 2007 and 2020.³³

In 2023, while Serbia continues to support Russia's policies and actions, the EU is financing the railway, Corridor X section, through EIB Global with a value of 1.1 billion EUR. According to the European Investment Bank (EIB), the EU investment grants are the largest for a single project in Serbia thus far, with a 1.1 billion EUR EIB loan and another loan of 550 million EUR from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).³⁴ According to the National Bank of Serbia, foreign direct investments were made as follows: the EU accounted for 19.2 billion EUR, 3.2 billion EUR from China, and only 2.4 billion EUR from Russia.³⁵ Nevertheless, support from the EU has not influenced Serbia's foreign policy orientation. Serbia did not enforce sanctions against Russia for its aggression in Ukraine; this political support mirrored social support for Russia as exhibited by the broader population in the form of pro-Russia/anti-NATO marches.³⁶ In a time when the West seeks to isolate Russia over the escalating war in Ukraine, foreign ministers of both Russia and Serbia signed an agreement on September 22, 2022, for the coordination of foreign policies of both countries.³⁷

Nevertheless, Serbia as a state is not the only option for Russian influence in the Balkans. Loyal leaders oriented toward Russia, such as Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik, continue to be offered political, military, and financial support for efforts regarding the territorial division of Bosnia & Herzegovina.³⁸ The leadership of Republika Srpska, an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina with a predominantly Serbian population, has expressed support for Russia's position on Ukraine and has opposed Western sanctions against Russia.³⁹

Unfortunately, Russia takes destabilising actions against Balkan countries that have aligned towards Western policies, particularly to undermine the West's state-building efforts in the region. The Kremlin has been accused of using various means to undermine

31 'Railways Development Required Increased Awareness of Traffic Participants' (*EU in Serbia*, 30 January 2023) <<https://europa.rs/railways-development-required-increased-awareness-of-traffic-participants/?lang=en>> accessed 10 June 2023.

32 'EU boosts Green Agenda in Serbia' (*EU in Serbia*, 17 December 2022) <<https://europa.rs/eu-boosts-green-agenda-in-serbia/?lang=en>> accessed 10 June 2023.

33 Mateja Agatonović, 'How much money Serbia receives from the EU and how much it risks to lose?' (*European Western Balkans*, 14 December 2022). <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/12/14/how-much-money-serbia-receives-from-the-eu-an-how-much-it-risks-to-lose>> accessed 10 June 2023.

34 'Serbia: Team Europe – EU, EIB and EBRD announce financial package to improve the Belgrade-Niš railway' (*European Investment Bank*, 28 February 2023) <<https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2023-080-team-europe-eu-eib-and-ebrd-announce-financial-package-to-improve-the-belgrade-nis-railway>> accessed 10 June 2023.

35 Snezana Rakic, 'China the Biggest Foreign Investor in Serbia this Year' (*Serbian Monitor*, 24 October 2022) <<https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/china-the-biggest-foreign-investor-in-serbia-this-year>> accessed 10 June 2023.

36 'Pro-Russia Serbs protest in Belgrade to support Russia and against NATO' (*Reuters*, 16 April 2022) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pro-russia-serbs-protest-belgrade-support-russia-against-nato-2022-04-16>> accessed 10 June 2023.

37 'EU Candidate Serbia and Russia Sign Foreign Policy Agreement' (*Associated Press*, 24 September 2022) <<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-united-nations-general-assembly-foreign-policy-moscow-serbia-c63b0ca1271dd5b2ee3008bdccb7de23>> accessed 10 June 2023.

38 Hamza Karcic, 'Putin's Most Loyal Balkan Client' (*Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2022) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/07/bosnia-elections-milorad-dodik-putin-russia>> accessed 10 June 2023.

39 'Bosnian Serb Entity Parliament Rejects Sanctions Against Russia' (*N1*, 6 June 2022) <<https://n1info.ba/english/news/bosnian-serb-entity-parliament-rejects-sanctions-against-russia>> accessed 10 June 2023.

Montenegro's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including through disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and support for opposition groups. In 2016, a Russian-led network of military intelligence organised a coup attempt in Montenegro, obstructed elections, and facilitated an assassination plot against former Prime Minister, Milo Djukanovic, as a result of Montenegro's decision to start the process of integration into NATO.⁴⁰ Moscow has also sought to maintain its influence in Montenegro through economic ties. Russia is a major investor in Montenegro's tourism industry and invests in many infrastructure projects, including a highway and power plant.⁴¹

Additionally, Russia has been accused of using its influence to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴² Russia has been a strong supporter of Serbia's position in Kosovo and has opposed Kosovo since it declared independence from Serbia in 2008. In 2021, Kosovo's government expelled two Russian diplomats due to Moscow's destabilising activities in Kosovo.⁴³ Moscow has supported Belgrade's efforts to block Kosovo's membership in international organisations, such as the United Nations and Interpol,⁴⁴ which remains a concern for Kosovo and the international community, particularly as Kosovo seeks to strengthen its position on the global stage and gain recognition as an independent state.

In North Macedonia, interethnic tensions were fueled with false narratives and confirmed attempts to obstruct the Prespa Agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to resolve the long-standing name dispute between the two countries, while continually hindering North Macedonia's path towards EU and NATO integration. In Albania, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has propagated false narratives, implying that Albania has territorial appetites toward its neighbors, intending to exacerbate interethnic tensions.⁴⁵ Finally, Russia has thoroughly blocked any substantive progress in resolving Kosovo and Serbia disputes, supporting Serbia's position and blocking the recognition of the independence of Kosovo.⁴⁶

Russia's opposition towards Western influence in former Yugoslav states is a long-standing position, particularly against NATO and EU integration, seen over the last two decades. Integration of Western Balkan countries into NATO⁴⁷ and EU⁴⁸ is seen as an attempt by the EU and U.S to limit Russia's influence. The war in Ukraine was a clear signal for the EU and U.S. that their focus on the Western Balkans is far from finished, and their attempts to integrate the region need to be accelerated, as it may be the only opportunity to limit Russian influence in the region. This alarm was raised in an interview with the State Department Office of the Spokesperson for the Voice of America:

40 'Russian Nationalists' Behind Montenegro PM Assassination Plot' (*BBC News*, 6 November 2016) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37890683>> accessed 10 June 2023.

41 Maxim Samorukov, 'Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine' (*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 April 2023) <<https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600>> accessed 10 June 2023.

42 'Joint statement of the heads of institutions of the Republic of Kosovo following the military aggression and invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation' (*President of the Republic of Kosovo*, 24 February 2022) <<https://president-ksgov.net/en/joint-statement-of-the-heads-of-institutions-of-the-republic-of-kosovo-following-the-military-aggression-and-invasion-of-ukraine-by-the-russian-federation>> accessed 10 June 2023.

43 'Kosovo Expels two Russian Diplomats' (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 22 October 2021) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-expels-russian-diplomats/31524923.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

44 'Kosovo Fails For Third Time To Win Interpol Membership' (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 November 2018) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-fails-for-third-time-to-win-interpol-membership/29610709.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

45 'Russia warns Albania, Kosovo against creating "Greater Albania"' *Tirana Times* (Tirana, 12 October 2020) <<https://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=147396>> accessed 10 June 2023.

46 Samokhvalov (n 11).

47 Enlargement and Article 10 (n 20).

48 EU-Western Balkans Summit Declaration 10229/03 (n 21).

“Russia’s war has clarified how urgent our work is to assist all the countries of the Western Balkans to fully advance democratic reforms and achieve their aspirations of integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.”⁴⁹

Adoption of the European Union path, and reforms from the Western Balkan states, are crucial for eligibility, and according to the European Commission’s enlargement strategic document, they consider the European Integration of the Western Balkans a geostrategic investment,⁵⁰ aiming at the integration of Serbia and Montenegro by 2025 as the preferred scenario.⁵¹

While Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro have already become NATO members, Serbia, Kosovo (through the Serbian community, particularly in the north), and Bosnia & Herzegovina are still vulnerable to Russian influence, particularly since the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine. According to Larsen, although NATO could expand its enlargement after North Macedonia’s membership occurred, “Russia has effectively encouraged Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina not to pursue similar ambitions.”⁵²

Accordingly, the EU and U.S. have since intensified their pressure on Kosovo and Serbia to abandon tensions and concentrate on dialogue, which developed rapidly in the past months through frequent visits from EU and U.S. special delegates. As a result, on the 27th of February, 2023, Kosovo and Serbia reached an agreement to implement a European Union-led agreement to normalise relations, known as “the agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia,”⁵³ regarded as the fundamental action to restrain Russia’s functional impact and control in the Balkans.

Despite efforts by the EU and the U.S. to come to an agreement, tensions remain. Serbs living in northern municipalities have quite different experiences in Kosovo than those in other areas. Those residing in the north are more resistant to Kosovo authority and maintaining ties to Serbia, while those in the south have integrated into the state in a broader extent. This was seen in a recent rule change regarding license plates. The approximately 50,000 Serbs in Northern Kosovo have largely kept Serbian plates, while the nearly 50,000 Serbs in the rest of Kosovo generally use Kosovo plates.⁵⁴ Protests in the streets and the resignation of 576 Serb officers, ten prosecutors, a government minister, and ten members of parliament followed the dismissal of a Serb police officer in North Mitrovica after he refused to change to a Kosovo plate.⁵⁵ This also led to the collective resignation of Kosovo Serb mayors in the north. Talks between Serbia and Kosovo have been set back by concerns over the resulting

49 Dino Jahic, ‘Russia’s War on Ukraine Endangers Stability in Western Balkans, US Officials Say’ (*Voice of America*, 27 February 2023) <<https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-s-war-on-ukraine-endangers-stability-in-the-western-balkans/6981840.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

50 A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans COM(2018) 65 final (Strasbourg, 6 February 2018) <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0065>> accessed 10 June 2023.

51 Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis, *The Western Balkans as a Geopolitical Chessboard? Myths, Realities and Policy Options* (Policy Brief, BiEPAG June 2019) <<https://ssrn.com/abstract=3406295>> accessed 10 June 2023.

52 Henrik Larsen, ‘The Western Balkans between the EU, NATO, Russia and China’ (2020) 263 *CSS Analyses in Security Policy* 1, doi: 10.3929/ethz-b-000412853.

53 ‘Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: EU Proposal – Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia’ (*European Union External Action*, 27 February 2023) <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en> accessed 10 June 2023.

54 ‘Serb Policemen Quit Jobs in Anti-Kosovo Protest’ (*Reuters*, 6 November 2022) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serb-policemen-quit-jobs-anti-kosovo-protest-2022-11-06>> accessed 10 June 2023.

55 Samuel Petrequin, ‘EU Fails to Defuse Tense Situation between Serbia and Kosovo’ (*Associated Press*, 21 November 2022) <<https://apnews.com/article/europe-serbia-kosovo-brussels-european-union-4830a2e1bdbaf5b32b0254b2de619fb9>> accessed 10 June 2023.

mayoral elections in the north, which were disputed and boycotted by ethnic Serbs. Prishtina directed the new ethnic Albanian-elected mayors to take their posts, which were met with protest. When Serbs attempted to block the mayors from entering municipal buildings, Kosovo Police fired tear gas to disperse the crowd.⁵⁶ The U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo, Jeff Hovenier,⁵⁷ and the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, condemned the actions taken by the Kosovo government on Twitter, accusing them of escalating tensions, calling on Prime Minister Kurti to “immediately halt these violent measures and refocus on the EU-facilitated dialogue.”⁵⁸

Ambassador Hovenier also condemned the violent protestors when ethnic Serbs attacked the NATO Mission in Kosovo Force (KFOR),⁵⁹ leading to dozens of international peacekeepers from KFOR becoming injured. According to the Kosovo Prime Minister, these protests were fueled by Serbia and Russia altogether, “who paid ‘ultra-nationalist’ and ‘right-wing’ protestors who admire the despotic President Putin,” since Kosovo is a NATO intervention success story, continuing to bother Serbia and Russia.⁶⁰ In response to the violence and injury of international soldiers, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, condemned the violence and warned that “NATO troops would take all necessary actions to maintain a safe and secure environment for all citizens in Kosovo.”⁶¹ As a result, NATO will send 700 more troops to northern Kosovo to help quell violent protests after clashes.⁶²

3 RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN SERBIA AND ITS REFLECTED SCENARIOS IN KOSOVO

For many decades, Serbian politics have straddled the fence between Brussels and Moscow. On the one hand, strengthening the partnership with the EU through the accession process, while on the other hand, maintaining the strong relationship with the Kremlin. However, this was only possible until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which forced democratic countries to choose a side; this situation once again revealed the deep connection between Belgrade and Moscow. Serbia’s refusal to pose sanctions against Russia, and its lack of condemnation of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, represented yet another show of the strong connections between the two states and the level of Belgrade’s loyalty towards Moscow. Serbia continues to justify its neutral political position, further refusing to impose sanctions on the Kremlin.⁶³ At the societal level, polls show that 51% of Serbia’s citizens believe that Russia is their closest

56 ‘Kryetarët hynë në komunat në veri, Serbia ngre gatishmërinë luftarake’ (*Radio Evropa e Lirë*, 26 May 2023) <<https://www.evropaelire.org/a/sirena-ne-veri-/32429113.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

57 Xhorxhina Bami and Sasa Dragojlo, ‘US Blames Kosovo for Violence in North as Disputed Mayors Enter Offices’ (*BalkanInsight*, 26 May 2023) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/26/us-blames-kosovo-for-violence-in-north-as-disputed-mayors-enter-offices>> accessed 10 June 2023.

58 ‘Secretary Antony Blinken’ (*Twitter*, 26 May 2023) <<https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1662140360821227520>> accessed 10 June 2023.

59 Jessie Gretener and others, ‘Dozens of NATO peacekeepers injured during clashes in northern Kosovo’ (*CNN*, 30 May 2023) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/29/europe/northern-kosovo-nato-serbian-clashes-intl/index.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

60 Isa Soares and Christian Edwards, ‘Kosovo prime minister says he will not surrender country to Serbian “fascist militia” after clashes in north’ (*CNN*, 31 May 2023) <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/31/europe/albin-kurti-kosovo-serbia-interview-intl/index.html?fbclid=IwAR0-WxWoya_sKteJqwP0pKd zsxM01kxsdRojNLAksp4YRFLf3Veilkm-1M> accessed 10 June 2023.

61 Zenel Zhinipotoku and Llazar Semini, ‘NATO to send 700 more troops to Kosovo to help quell violent protests’ (*Associated Press*, 30 May 2023) <<https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-ethnic-serbs-kfor-clashes-western-powers-0cb33f5396d3f16eb4a6325c61802f04>> accessed 10 June 2023.

62 *ibid.*

63 Serbian President Rejects Calls for Sanctions Against Russia’ (*Associated Press*, 4 January 2023) <<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-europe-serbia-european-union-6dea57230993b02e7a67f57693bf7f2>> accessed 10 June 2023.

ally. Results of the 2022 WBSB survey in Serbia show that the EU is considered to be the third ally (18%) after China with 19%.⁶⁴ Another survey conducted by the Institute for European Affairs and "NinaMedia" in March 2022 showed that 76% of the respondents considered Russia as a friend of Serbia, while only 13% supported the EU's decision to impose sanctions against Russia.⁶⁵

The invasion of Ukraine has also increased concern among EU policymakers that Moscow will use these ties with Serbia to extend their influence in the Western Balkans, which can produce instability in the region, particularly in the northern part of Kosovo as the weakest point of relations between Serbia and Kosovo.⁶⁶ Seeing the rise of tension between the two states, Kosovo leadership has accused the Serbian government that it is serving as a tool for Russia's influence in the region. Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, declared that "it is in the interest of the Russian Federation to have new battlegrounds because they do not want to go back to peace,"⁶⁷ while Kosovo's president raised the concern that Moscow is using Belgrade to endanger democratic values and "by destabilising the Western Balkans, will seek to destabilise the whole of Europe."⁶⁸

In the roundtable organised by the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) in April 2023, the President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, said that:

"Serbia, as a Russian satellite in the Western Balkans, continues to be a serious and main threat towards national security in Kosovo. The Republic of Serbia uses all its hybrid methods against the Republic of Kosovo in a synchronised manner. In the international relations field, it operates against statehood and the integration of the Republic of Kosovo's international institutions. Meanwhile, inside the territory of Kosovo, it exploits the criminal structures in the north of Kosovo, also becoming the main obstacle for the integration of the Kosovo Serbs in north Kosovo through pressure, fear, blackmailing, and violence."⁶⁹

According to First Deputy Minister of Defense of Kosovo, Shemsi Sylá:

"Russia influences all the parallel structures that are under Belgrade's orders, which by default are under Russia's influence as well."⁷⁰

According to President Osmani, NATO is the key factor to preserve regional peace and stability.⁷¹ As Michael Handel argues, small states must depend on their allies and the

64 Vuk Vuksanovic, Luka Steric and Maja Bjelos, Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the War in Ukraine: *WBSB Survey in Serbia, Country Report 2022* (QKSS 2022) 3.

65 Michael Minev Dimitrov, 'Analysis of Strategic stakeholders in the Western Balkans' (2022) 40 (4) *Security and Defence Quarterly* 29, doi: 10.35467/sdq/154884.

66 Engjellushe Morina, 'The politics of dialogue: How the EU can change the conversation in Kosovo and Serbia' (*European Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 March 2023) <<https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-politics-of-dialogue-how-the-eu-can-change-the-conversation-in-kosovo-and-serbia>> accessed 10 June 2023.

67 Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, 'Russia may pressure Serbia to undermine western Balkans, leaders warn' (*The Guardian*, 11 March 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/11/russia-may-pressure-serbia-to-undermine-western-balkans-leaders-warn>> accessed 10 June 2023.

68 *ibid.*

69 'Osmani: Serbia vazhdon të mbetet kërcënimi më serioz i sigurisë së Kosovës' (*Kosovapress*, 18 April 2023) <<https://kosovapress.com/osmani-serbia-vazhdon-te-mbetet-kercenimi-me-serioz-i-sigurise-se-kosoves>> accessed 10 June 2023.

70 Interview with Mr. Shemsi Sylá, First Deputy Minister, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kosovo, 18.04.2023, (conducted by authors for the purpose of this article).

71 Mersiha Gadzo, 'Kosovo, Bosnia call for NATO membership as war rages in Ukraine' (*Al Jazeera*, 5 April 2022) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/5/nato-membership-indispensable-for-kosovo-bosnia-leaders>> accessed 10 June 2023.

support that comes from international interactions with other states.⁷² This brings us to the concluding point, that the best way for small states to preserve their security is by creating alliances with larger and powerful states and by becoming part of international organisations and multilateral forums as they cannot protect themselves through dependence on only their military power. According to the Deputy Minister of Defense of Kosovo, even in the cases of possible threats that can arise due to global risks in the security field created after Russia's aggression in Ukraine,

“Kosovo is in full coordination with its strategic Western allies and KFOR. Together with them, Kosovo is prepared for these risks.”⁷³

Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a warning that the capacity and military power of a state continues to play a crucial role in the security of states. Thus, small states, or states with weak military power, will always either be or feel threatened by bigger and more powerful states, regardless of international law and other international mechanisms. Although Kosovo has increased budgetary investments in military purchases, according to Kosovo's Deputy Minister of Defense, “for 95% increase of investments,”⁷⁴ Kosovo (as a small state) is not strong enough to face threats without the support of its allies. For this reason, membership in international organisations and the formation of alliances with other states is a strategic advantage, providing a guarantee for the safety of a weak state. One of the examples of strategic decisions on foreign policy and behaviour in the international arena is the situation in which global sanctions were imposed against Russia as a response to its military invasion of Ukraine.

According to Orhan Dragaš, Director of the International Security Institute in Serbia,

“Since it invaded Ukraine, Russian pressures on Serbia have been exposed, and they aim to open a new crisis to which the West would be much more committed and thus reduce its involvement in supporting Ukraine. For Russia, it would be ideal if this new Balkan crisis would be armed and bloody, and Kosovo is the ideal place for such a thing.”⁷⁵

Preserving peace and stability in the Balkans is far more important and difficult since Russian aggression in Ukraine has taken the form of Russian hybrid methods of war. Aggression in Ukraine pressures Serbia to increase the tensions in the north of Kosovo. Propaganda is one of the tools that “Russia, in cooperation with Serbia and Serbs of the north, are interested to maintain the tensions between the two countries,”⁷⁶ according to Xhemajl Rexha, President of the Board of Association of Journalists of Kosovo, who stated that Kosovo has countered this propaganda attempt through the contribution of Ukrainian journalists in Kosovo in the form of the “Journalists in Residence – Kosovo Program,” offering credible and verifiable information to the Kosovar opinion regarding the unprovoked Russian invasion.

“Ukrainian journalists in Kosovo have continually given their contribution to report the truth of Ukraine and Kosovo. Continuing their work in the media in Kyiv and cooperation with media in Kosovo, the refugee journalists through the program “Journalists in

72 Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (Frank Cass 1981).

73 Interview with Mr. Shemsi Sylja, First Deputy Minister, Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Kosovo, 18.04.2023.

74 *ibid.*

75 Orhan Dragaš, ‘Russia needs a militarised Serbia: Interview for Oslobođenje’ (*Orhan Dragaš*, 27 January 2023) <<https://orhandragas.com/en/2023/01/27/interview-by-dr-orhan-dragas-for-oslobodenje>> accessed 10 June 2023.

76 Interview with Xhemajl Rexha – President of the Board of Association of Journalists of Kosovo, 04.04.2023.

Residence – Kosovo” have offered credible and verifiable information to the Kosovar opinion regarding the unprovoked Russian invasion, resisting the Russian propaganda.⁷⁷

In addition to media, civil society organisations are another vulnerable aspect to Russian influence according to Mentor Vrajolli, Executive Director of the Kosovo Center for Security Studies, who believes that the possibility of Serbia inciting an armed conflict in Kosovo is limited because of international military presence and Serbia's inability to challenge NATO and KFOR's mandate in Kosovo.⁷⁸ According to Vrajolli, CSOs, particularly in the north of Kosovo, who struggle for financial stability are quite vulnerable to Russian influence. The NGOs who work to attract funds and have no criteria regarding funding are vulnerable and can install destabilising exponents operated, financed, and directed by Belgrade.⁷⁹

According to Daniel Serwer,

“Russian military aggression in Ukraine has a counterpart in the Balkans where the aggression is via hybrid warfare directed from Serbia, mainly against Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia.”⁸⁰

He further emphasises that:

“If Russia succeeds in gaining territory in Ukraine, we should expect a far more aggressive effort in the Balkans. If Russia fails in Ukraine, it will fail as well in the Balkans.”⁸¹

In the case of the Western Balkans, Euro-Atlantic integration is the only way to guarantee peace and prosperity. Similarly, if any of the Balkan states remain outside the EU and NATO, it would cause instability and threaten the prosperity interests of the EU and the long-term security of NATO. Kosovo leadership has raised the flag to the international community regarding Serbia's coordinated actions with Russia to shift NATO and the international community's focus from the war in Ukraine through criminal groups in northern Kosovo, which intend to destabilise the country. In February 2023, Kosovo's President, in an interview for the Telegraph, claimed that “mercenaries from Russia's notorious Wagner Group are working with Serbian paramilitaries to smuggle weapons and unmarked military uniforms into Kosovo.”⁸² As the fears about the Wagner Group's presence in the region remain, in March 2023, Kosovo designated the group as a significant transnational criminal organization.⁸³ Moreover, Serbia has also used its state-direct channels to threaten Kosovo's peace. The direct threats from Serbia towards Kosovo reached a peak as the Serbian army was put on a heightened state of alert over tensions with Kosovo multiple times in recent years.⁸⁴ The similarity of threatening rhetoric between Serbia and Russia is reflected particularly in the declarations of Serbian Member of the Parliament (MP), Vladimir Dukanovic, that

77 *ibid.*

78 Interview with Mentor Vrajolli – Executive Director of Kosovo Center for Security Studies (KCSS) 24.03.2023;

79 *ibid.*

80 Daniel Serwer, ‘The Easy Way Out Leads to Failure’ (*Peacefare.net*, 9 March 2023) <<https://www.peacefare.net/2023/03/09/the-easy-way-out-leads-to-failure>> accessed 10 June 2023.

81 *Ibid.*

82 Nick Squires, ‘Wagner mercenaries helping Serbia prepare potential attack on our nation, Kosovan president warns’ (*The Telegraph*, 11 February 2023) <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/02/11/wagner-mercenaries-helping-serbia-prepare-potential-attack-nation>> accessed 10 June 2023.

83 ‘Kosova zbaton sanksionet e SHBA-së ndaj Wagner-it’ (*Radio Evropa e Lirë*, 22 March 2023) <<https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kosova-sanksione-grupi-wagner-/32329308.html>> accessed 10 June 2023.

84 ‘Serbia puts troops on high alert as tensions with Kosovo rise’ (*The Guardian*, 27 December 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/27/serbia-puts-troops-on-high-alert-as-tensions-with-kosovo-rise>> accessed 10 June 2023.

“Belgrade may be forced to start the denazification of the Balkans,” a phrase used by Russia to justify the Ukrainian invasion.⁸⁵

4 CONCLUSIONS

The Western Balkans remains an area of interest for international actors as they seek influence over one another. As mentioned previously in this article, the Western Balkan states are also at the center of Russia’s foreign policy as it seeks to return to multipolarity in world affairs, opposing the Western unipolar influence as a tool of its diplomacy in the absence of other plausible instruments to overcome the downfall of its status and position in the international system since the Cold War. Russia has continued to use the region to push against Western influence, simultaneously using NATO’s actions in the region to justify its military campaigns and to criticise Western intervention. Additionally, Russia’s policy towards the Balkans, and in particular Serbia, reflects both Serbia’s willingness to negotiate with Russia as well as Russia’s interests in destabilising relationships with the West.

The Western Balkans are particularly vulnerable to external influence due to past ethnic conflicts, organised crime, corruption, and the need for economic cooperation. The violent history in former Yugoslavia has limited trust and cooperation, making these states a suitable environment for information disorder and propaganda, which have been used by Russia constantly in past decades. In particular, the unresolved conflict between Kosovo and Serbia has been a convenient ground for Russia due to its close ties and cooperation with Serbia.

Kosovo has become a desirable distraction from difficulties resulting from the war in Ukraine. Tensions that could be sparked in the region may further Russia’s desire to deflect international attention from a war that is not as successful as it anticipated. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine revealed once again to the U.S., NATO, and the EU the Western Balkans’ level of fragility and how urgent the integration of these states is to protect them from Russian influence and the possible scenarios trying to destabilise the region. This importance is recognised also by the European Commission’s enlargement strategic document, which considers the integration of the Western Balkans from a geostrategic perspective. Meanwhile, through institutional and social support in Serbia, Russia has continued to maintain its interests in the region through financial support of pro-Russian political parties and civil society organisations in Serbia and other Balkan states, allowing Russia to increase its influence. While Kosovo has countered Russian propaganda concerning the war in Ukraine through the contribution of Ukrainian journalists, our findings show that Kosovo Civil Society organisations in the northern part of Kosovo are quite vulnerable to Russian influence due to their financial instability.

The war in Ukraine has had a mirroring effect in the Western Balkans. Russia, as the sole aggressor in Ukraine, has sought to destabilise the Balkans by activating passive conflicts, especially in Kosovo, aiming to shift the global attention from its possible power decline in Ukraine. Although, as previously mentioned in this article, Kosovo and the Western Balkans are considered a distraction from Russia’s weakening and downfall position in Ukraine, Daniel Server considers that the increase of Russia’s progress in Ukraine will increase its destabilising actions in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, the recent tensions in Kosovo have testified once again to the necessity of a strong and coordinated policy from NATO and the West towards the Western Balkans. EU and NATO memberships are the best solutions

85 ‘Serbian ruling party MP: Serbia might have to begin denazification of Balkans’ (NI, 31 July 2022) <<https://n1info.ba/english/news/serbian-ruling-party-mp-serbia-might-have-to-begin-denazification-of-balkans>> accessed 10 June 2023.

to decrease and prevent Russian influence and provide direct interference in the Balkans, to further prevent any future conflict among Balkan states.

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