

*Bojana Zorić*

Masaryk University, Brno  
bojana.zoric@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8317-2291>

*Jan Holzer*

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin  
jan.holzer@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4142-219X>

## Russia in the Balkans in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Conflicts, Activities and Perspectives

### Introduction

*Powder keg* is often how the Western Balkans region is described in domestic and international communities.<sup>1</sup> The term “Western Balkans” was coined by Western policy-makers in the early 1990s who distinguished the countries of the Balkan Peninsula that had been part of Yugoslavia but were not included in the European Union (EU) or the Euro-Atlantic community (NATO). The importance of the region lies in its geostrategic significance for the security of Mediterranean and Southern Europe, which serves as an incentive for international actors to

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<sup>1</sup> For more references to the term, see: F. Whitlow, *The Balkans Powder Keg*, “A Path for Europe (PfeU)”, 03 II 2022; J. Vann, V. Zeneli, *From Powder Keg to Power House: Engineering the Western Balkans for Success*, “Modern Diplomacy”, 30 VI 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/06/30/from-powder-keg-to-power-house-engineering-the-western-balkans-for-success/>, access 28 IX 2022; T. Dokos, *Conclusion: The EU and the Western Balkans as a Single Security Space*, “European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)”, 2017.

strive to include the Western Balkans countries into any sort of regional (EU) and/or global (NATO) security complex.<sup>2</sup>

That said, much of Russia's policy towards the Western Balkans is a reflection of global West-Russia relations. The beginning of President Putin's reign in the early 2000s coincided with a period of easing in West-Russia relations, i.e. the US-Russia-EU triangle. During President Putin's second term, he demonstrated great assertiveness towards the EU, showing that Russia's foreign policy was no longer based on the same cardinal values as it was at the start of his first term.<sup>3</sup> A serious deterioration in West-Russia relations came about after Russia's legal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of a large-scale war in the Eastern Ukraine, which led to the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia by the West.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 brought about a geopolitical shift in Europe and further deteriorated Russia's standing within the international community. This subsequently changed the perception of Russia in the region. Even prior to the war, the perception of Russia among the citizens of the Western Balkan was diminishing. The Balkan Barometer opinion poll shows a decrease of three percentage points in support for Russia as a reliable partner in a period of three years. In 2022, 33% of respondents preferred their government improve trade and investment relations with Russia, whereas in 2020, that number was 35%. The shift was in Turkey's favour, as support increased from 36% in 2020 to 41% in 2022. The most preferred partner for all Western Balkan citizens, however, remains the EU (63% in 2022).<sup>4</sup>

This article examines Russia's role in the Western Balkans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and assesses a myriad of actions by the Kremlin since Putin came to power. By looking at the official statements and reports from the Western Balkan countries, expert analysis, and policy papers, this analysis proves that Russia has adopted a pragmatic policy towards the region that serves the Kremlin's interests and only at times is complementary to the Western Balkan policies. Russia sees the region as a tool that can be used to project its great power status on the one hand, while obstructing the West and sowing the seeds of unrest on the other.<sup>5</sup> Against the

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<sup>2</sup> B. Zoric, *Assessing Russian Impact on the Western Balkan Countries EU Accession: Cases of Croatia and Serbia*, "Journal of Liberty and International Affairs", 2017, vol. 3(2), pp. 23–24.

<sup>3</sup> T. Gomart, *EU-Russia Relations, Toward a Way Out of Depression*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2008, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer Public Opinion 2022*, <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/home>, access 13 X 2022.

<sup>5</sup> W. Zweers et al., *Little substance, considerable impact. Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*, Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2023, p. 13.

backdrop of the geopolitical and economic crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, this article seeks to answer two research questions: (1) What types of tools and strategies are at the Kremlin's disposal to influence the Western Balkan countries? And (2) To what extent is Russia's interference in the countries' internal affairs impacted by the broader geopolitical Euro-Atlantic context of the region?

### Ukraine in Western Balkans rhetoric

The war in Ukraine generated different reactions among the Western Balkan countries. During the United Nations vote in October 2022 to condemn Russian annexation of four regions of Ukraine, all five Western Balkan countries<sup>6</sup> aligned with the majority (143) of countries. When it came to imposing sanctions on Russia over the invasion of Ukraine, though, the countries showed less unity. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia unequivocally condemned Russia's actions and supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, clearly stating that they stood with its NATO and EU allies. Kosovo took the same direction and aligned with the West.

Serbia, on the other hand, remains the only European country not to have joined the sanctions on Russia. Belgrade publicly supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine – as stated by President Aleksandar Vučić during his address at the UN General Assembly in September 2022 – but while doing so does not fail to mention the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia that was violated during the NATO bombing in 1999. After the war in Ukraine broke out, thousands of citizens in Belgrade took the streets and protested against NATO and in support of Russia. The protests were organized by nationalist and anti-migrant organizations, such as the “People's Patrol” and “Cheek”, where slogans, such as “Russia is liberating the world from NATO's threats”, “Russian President Vladimir Putin proves to be the strongest and most courageous statesman in the world” and “every Russian is a brother to every Serb” could be heard.<sup>7</sup> The traditional duality of Serbia's foreign policy being oriented neither towards the West nor the East was therefore only accentuated by the war and after more than two years into the war Belgrade is faced with strong pressure from the international community to stand with the EU. President Vučić interprets the

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<sup>6</sup> Kosovo as a country is not a member of the United Nations, and therefore cannot participate in any voting process.

<sup>7</sup> N1, *Protest podrške Rusiji u centru Beograda*, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/protest-podrške-rusiji-u-centru-beograda/>, access 14 XI 2022.

Western pressure as “an attempt to consolidate the Western front against Russia given that neither of the sides in the war is likely to win”.<sup>8</sup>

The President of the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH),<sup>9</sup> entity of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, tried to prevent the BiH ambassador from voting in support of the UN resolution that condemned Russian aggression. In September 2022, seven months into the war, President Dodik publicly supported the Russian aggression against Ukraine, justifying it as a “necessary step since the Ukrainian leadership prevented 15 million Russians living in Ukraine from using the Russian language”. By doing so, he compared the situation with those of Bosnian Serbs who cannot live with Bosnian Muslims and have a “natural inclination” towards Serbia,<sup>10</sup> and has made clear his intent not to impose any sanctions. Eventually, BiH joined the sanctions against Russia at a declarative level but the country has so far fallen short of practical implementation due to the lack of consent from the Ministers from Republika Srpska.

Recognizing the danger of escalating the security situation in BiH, the EU mission Althea EUFOR was quick to react by deploying additional 500 troops, and also increasing its publicly visible military presence with military flyovers to reaffirm its determination to maintain peace and stability in the country.<sup>11</sup> Another country that was put under international scrutiny from a security point of view is Kosovo, particularly its northern province where the majority of Serbian municipalities are located. Fears about yet another escalation of conflict caused by Serbs in Kosovo who might rise up against the governing structures – just as Russians did in Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine – are real, despite the strong NATO presence in the country.

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<sup>8</sup> Al Jazeera, *Vučić: Srbiju očekuju najteži pritisci da uvede sankcije Rusiji*, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2023/8/18/vucic-srbiju-ocekuju-najtezi-pritisci-da-uvode-sankcije-rusiji>, access 21 VIII 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The 1995 Dayton Agreement divided Bosnia and Herzegovina into two federal entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, with the Brčko District set as a self-governing administrative unit.

<sup>10</sup> TPortal, *Dodik podupro agresiju na Ukrajinu: Ona je bila nužna radi zaštite ukrajinskih Rusa*, <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/dodik-podupro-agresiju-na-ukrajinu-ona-je-bila-nuzna-radi-zastite-ukrajinskih-rusa-20220919>, access 18 X 2022.

<sup>11</sup> BiEPAG, *Western Balkans: Reactions and Implications of the Russian Aggression of Ukraine*, <https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/>, access 27 X 2022.

## Kosovo as Russia's entry point into Western Balkan high politics

The turning point for Russia's stauncher engagement with the Western Balkans, not only from the economic but also political angle, was the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia as a result of failed peace talks between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The operation's official code name was "Operation Allied Force", while the US called it "Operation Noble Anvil". The seventy-eight-day bombing campaign of the FRY was the first large-scale military action by the alliance in its history.<sup>12</sup> The opposing attitudes on this operation between NATO and Russia have had broad geopolitical implications. NATO's decision to use force despite opposition from Russia and without an explicit UN mandate prompted Russian concerns about possible intervention in other regions, such as those vital for Russia's interest – the post-Soviet space.<sup>13</sup>

The non-recognition of Kosovo by Serbia has been the centrepiece of the EU accession process in the Western Balkans up to the present day. Ever since 2011, when the EU established high-level dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, "Belgrade–Pristina dialogue" became a key element of efforts at reconciliation and good neighbourly relations, and a reflection of the fulfilment of the EU vision for the region.<sup>14</sup> On various occasions, representatives of the EU, including the EU Special Representative for the "Belgrade–Pristina dialogue and other Western Balkans regional issues", underlined that without normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo there is no way forward towards the EU, so the legacy of the past needs to be overcome.<sup>15</sup>

The *status quo* on Kosovo represents a window of opportunity for Russia; having a veto in the UN Security Council makes it an indispensable part of the entire process but also prevents Serbia from joining the "Western alliance" and advancing on the EU membership path. Russia's foreign policy is anchored exclusively in the Kremlin's entrenched interests in the Balkans and shows the tendency of duality. Russian leadership generally favours the Serbian authorities

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<sup>12</sup> R. Wedgwood, *NATO's campaign in Yugoslavia*, "The American Journal of International Law", 1999, vol. 93(4), p. 828.

<sup>13</sup> O. Antonenko, *Russia and the Deadlock over Kosovo*, "Russie.Nei.Visions", 2007, no. 21, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> European Union External Action, *10 years of Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue*, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/10-years-belgrade-pristina-dialogue-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/10-years-belgrade-pristina-dialogue-0_en), access 19 X 2022.

<sup>15</sup> European Union External Action, *Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue: Press statement by EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčák following the meeting*, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-press-statement-eu-special-representative-miroslav-lajcak-following\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-press-statement-eu-special-representative-miroslav-lajcak-following_en), access 19 X 2022.

and their often-disputed policies (as it did throughout the decade preceding the Kosovo crisis), but, more importantly for its own relevance, it felt the urge to oppose the NATO intervention and the post-interventionist Western discourse and policy choices.<sup>16</sup> Following a series of conflicts in northern Kosovo between Serbs and ethnic Albanians that included local police and NATO officers due to Serbs boycotting the April 2023 local elections, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs blamed the EU, the US and Kosovo for intentionally spurring tensions and bringing the region on a brink of (security) collapse.

### Political instability as a linchpin of Russian interference

The myriad of destabilizing activities by the Kremlin in the Western Balkans demonstrates Russia's penetration into the political, social and cultural arenas of those nations. Over the years, Moscow has been deliberately trying to spur conflicts in several Western Balkan countries not only to trigger a reaction from Europe but also to derail their advancement towards EU and NATO membership.<sup>17</sup>

Along these lines, President of BiH's entity of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik is known as the most pro-Russian politician in the region; Dodik has been cultivating ever-closer ties with Russia and is reported to have met President Putin seven times since 2014, the most of all the Western Balkan leaders.<sup>18</sup> Being publicly against the Office of the High Representative in BiH, a requirement set forth by the Dayton Peace Agreement, Milorad Dodik has his back covered by Russia, which opposed the naming of Christian Schmidt as a successor to the former High Representative in BiH, Valentin Uzko. The Russians and Chinese advocated for abolishment of the Office of the High Representative in BiH, hoping thereby to secure President Dodik's internal aspirations in BiH. In July 2023, several members of the European Parliament urged the EU to impose targeted sanctions on Dodik for constituting "a direct attack on Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional order and a blatant violation of the Dayton Peace Agreement",<sup>19</sup> which is much in line with Russia's intentions in the country.

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<sup>16</sup> B. Radeljic, *Russia's Involvement in the Kosovo Case: Defending Serbian Interests or Securing Its Own Influence in Europe?*, "Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia", 2017, vol. 6(2), p. 276.

<sup>17</sup> S. Secrieru, *Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical wins, strategic setbacks*, "European Union Institute for Security Studies", 2019, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> H. Karcic, *Putin's Most Loyal Balkan Client*, "Foreign Policy", <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/07/bosnia-elections-milorad-dodik-putin-russia>, access 28 X 2022.

<sup>19</sup> European Parliament, *Leading MEPs urge the EU to 'finally impose' sanctions on Milorad Dodik*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/leading-meps-urge-the-eu-to-finally-impo/product-details/20230704DPU36681>, access 21 VIII 2023.



The 2018 Prespa agreement, that resolved long-standing name dispute with Greece was a turning point for North Macedonia, paving the way for the country to complete its bid for NATO membership. Regardless of the positive outcome of the Prespa agreement that eventually led North Macedonia to join NATO in March 2020, internal divisions mounted after the signing took place. The conservative, right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE largely criticized the Social Democratic government led by the then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and were not ready to prioritize the country's European integration over any other name-related considerations.<sup>20</sup> VMRO-DPMNE supporters were more inclined to support former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who was under Moscow's patronage throughout the election campaign and during his tenure as PM. Russian businessperson Sergey Samsonenko, owner of the Macedonian football club FK Vardar and handball club RK Vardar, became a prominent member of VMRO-DPMNE and in 2014 even publicly appeared in a party pre-election music video, supporting Nikola Gruevski for Prime Minister.<sup>21</sup> While the party leadership itself is formally pro-EU and NATO, the grassroots have turned anti-Western, which is precisely where Moscow saw its entry point into the domestic politics of North Macedonia.<sup>22</sup>

To this end, Russia had expanded its diplomatic outreach by establishing honorary consulates in Bitola and Ohrid, while the Russian embassy in Skopje had overseen the creation of many "friendship associations" between Macedonians and Russians and opened a Russian cultural centre in Skopje.<sup>23</sup> Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) informed of EUR 300,000 provided to affiliates of VMRO-DPMNE, members of radical organizations, and soccer hooligans from the Vardar club who were actively participating in riots against the name change. The donor of these funds was revealed to be Ivan Savvidi, a Russian billionaire and a former member of the Russian parliament.<sup>24</sup> The leaked files also indicated Russia conducted espionage through its Skopje

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<sup>20</sup> C. Stratulat (ed.), *EU integration and party politics in the Balkans*, "European Policy Center", 2014, no. 77, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Macedonia*, [https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user\\_upload/publications\\_library/files/2018\\_01/CSD\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_71\\_Macedonia.pdf](https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2018_01/CSD_Policy_Brief_71_Macedonia.pdf), "Policy Brief No. 71", access 11 XI 2022, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> D. Bechev, *Understanding Russia's influence in the Western Balkans*, Hybrid CoE, Strategic Analysis, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Dr. S. Eisentraut, S. de Leon, *Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: How the EU Can Counter Russia's Information War*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, no. 294, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> S. Cvetkovska, *Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia*, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia>, access 26 X 2022.

embassy, where the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) coordinated with the GRU base in Sofia.<sup>25</sup> Russia dismissed such allegations, which led to deterioration in relations with North Macedonia that persists today.

With respect to Montenegro, ever since the referendum to secede from the State of Union of Serbia and Montenegro (known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia until 2003), Montenegro was set to independently pursue its foreign policy goals. In this respect, the 2007 adoption of the Constitution stipulated “dedication to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration” as one of the main foreign policy objectives.<sup>26</sup> Even prior to that, relations between Montenegro and Russia reached an all time low during the failed *coup d'état* in 2016. The alleged *coup d'état* was planned by the Montenegrin opposition and Russian intelligence agents for the day of the parliamentary elections. Without any official confirmation of Russia's meddling, State Prosecutor Miliwoje Katnic stated that there were reasonable doubts based on written evidence, witness' statements, copies of travel documents, and reports from competent public authorities of the Republic of Serbia that the organizers of the criminal organizations had been Russian nationals, Eduard Shirokov and Vladimir Popov.<sup>27</sup> The perpetrators extended to the leaders of two parties within the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandić (New Serbian Democracy) and Milan Knežević (Democratic People's Party), the two most prominent opposition parties and traditional anti-NATO advocates in the Montenegrin parliament at that time.<sup>28</sup> The aim of such a plot between the allegedly pro-Russian Montenegrin opposition with help from a Russian intelligence service would cause a shift in Montenegrin foreign policy, thus preventing the country from joining NATO and reversing its trajectory towards EU membership.

Unique among the Western Balkan countries, the Russia-Serbia relationship has it all – pan-Slavic, pan-Orthodox and cultural ties; strong historical links that to the present day are perceived as “brotherly”; and political partnership

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<sup>25</sup> A. Muratovic, *In Balkans, Russia Dismisses Macedonian Meddling Charges*, Voa News, <https://www.voanews.com/a/in-balkans-russia-dismisses-macedonian-meddling-charges/3888088.html>, access 25 X 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Constitute project, *Montenegro 2007*, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Montenegro\\_2007?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Montenegro_2007?lang=en), access 13 XI 2022.

<sup>27</sup> M. Seroka, *Montenegro: Russia accused of attempting to organise a coup d'état*, Center for Eastern Studies, 03 VI 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2017-03-06/montenegro-russia-accused-attempting-to-organise-a-coup-detat>, access 25 X 2022.

<sup>28</sup> D. Bechev, *The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding?*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018, p. 4.



over the status of Kosovo that extends to other politically controversial issues.<sup>29</sup> In this case, not only historical, ideational and religious ties play roles, but also memories of the past in the minds of Serbian citizens, stimulated by the war in Ukraine, play well into the supporting narrative for Russia and against NATO. When asked about their support to NATO membership, 79% of citizens are against, 10% for and 11% indecisive. That Serbia would gain no benefits from NATO membership think 63% of citizens, whereas 18% hold it would. Likewise, the majority of citizens – 59% – is against any cooperation between Serbia and NATO.<sup>30</sup> Citizens' sentiments against NATO give wind to the sails of President Vučić, who remains firm in his refusal to join NATO. During a campaign rally in March 2022, he publicly stated that Serbia would not join NATO because it “cannot forget the children who were killed in the conflict in 1999”.

So far, Serbia has managed to sit in two chairs, even when the pressure from the West became stronger than ever. Serbia's political elite has been facing the daunting and sometimes contradictory tasks of maintaining the state's current territorial boundaries, attracting investments in the economy and infrastructure, improving its trade relations with major partners, managing its relations with various international organizations and navigating the complex security structure of the contemporary Western Balkans.<sup>31</sup> Belgrade's support for Ukraine is forced upon it rather than truly representing a firm foreign policy trajectory. In the meantime, the pressure from the EU is mounting; although the European Commission was going along with Belgrade's *modus operandi* of neutrality when it came to Moscow and NATO, the longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the harder it is for Belgrade to withstand the pressure. Serbia is trying to side with the international community on a declaratory level and on selected occasions – such was the Serbian vote in favour of the UN resolution condemning the illegal annexation of four regions in Ukraine. These rather small-scale concessions could buy Serbia time in negotiating with the West, while assuring the Kremlin that it remains an ally.

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<sup>29</sup> M. Samorukov, V. Vuksanovic, *Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is So Resilient in Serbia*, Carnegie Endowment for Democracy, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/01/untarnished-by-war-why-russias-soft-power-is-so-resilient-in-serbia?lang=en>, access 12 V 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Institut za Europske Poslove, *Od bombardovanja do saradnje, Srbija i NATO 22 godine kasnije*, <https://iea.rs/blog/2021/03/23/od-bombardovanja-do-saradnje-srbija-i-nato-22-godine-kasnije/>, access 23 X 2022.

<sup>31</sup> A. Konitzer, *Serbia between East and West: Bratstvo, Balancing and Business on Europe's Frontier*, The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEER), Working Paper, 2010, pp. 2–3.

## Russia's economic footprint

When contemplating Russia's economic contribution to the region, the first thing that comes to mind is energy. Energy security in the Western Balkans has further weakened with the war in Ukraine, at a time when Europe is looking for alternatives in order to become *Russia gas supplies-free* in the next few years. Throughout 2023, the EU and the US have been promoting EUR 3.5 billion worth plans for gas and LNG projects for the region to steer the region away from Russian natural gas, but this has proven to be challenging due to the low gas consumption and lack of necessary infrastructure, which brings along new economic and security challenges for energy transition.<sup>32</sup>

Out of six countries in the region, three are highly dependent on natural gas supplies from Russia. BiH and North Macedonia are 100% dependent on Russia for gas supplies, whereas Serbia is 89%. The country's stronghold in terms of economic trade with Russia rests particularly in the natural gas sector. Albania relies mainly on hydropower, while Montenegro and Kosovo do not have the infrastructure for natural gas distribution. North Macedonia previously received Russian gas via Turkey to avoid the insecurity surrounding the Russia-Ukraine tensions ever since 2014. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the North Macedonia government has been working closely with Bulgaria to ensure alternative energy sources and receive gas from Azerbaijan.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, early in 2022, Serbia signed a three-year-contract with Russia at what President Vučić described as “the most favourable price in Europe”. Gazprom will provide Serbia with gas at a price three times lower than any other European nation pays. In wintertime it would be 10 to 12 times lower.<sup>34</sup> This can be interpreted as a courtesy of Russia extended to Serbia for not imposing sanctions on Moscow due to the invasion of Ukraine, despite increasingly strong Western pressure. In 2008, Russia backed Serbia's stance on Kosovo and Russian Gazprom acquired the majority stake in Serbia's oil company Naftna Industrija Serbia (NIS). At present, the company is 56% owned by the Russian oil company

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<sup>32</sup> Global Energy Monitor and Bank Watch Network, *New plans to hook the Western Balkans on gas will make the region's energy transition even harder*, <https://bankwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GEM-Bankwatch-W-Balkans-Briefing.pdf>, access 21 VIII 2023.

<sup>33</sup> B. Jovanovski, *North Macedonia and Bulgaria agree to work together on new energy deal*, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/18/north-macedonia-and-bulgaria-set-aside-differences-in-quest-for-alternative-energy-sources>, Euronews, access 09 XI 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Radio Free Europe, *Vucic Says Serbia Secures Gas Deal With Russia Following Phone Talks With Putin*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-gas-deal-russia/31873908.html>, access 09 XI 2022.

Gazprom Neft, while Serbia's owns the remaining 30% and 14% stakes.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, in economic terms, the share in total imports of Russia until June 2023 is tenfold lower (5.8%) than that of the EU (56.8%)<sup>36</sup> and, thus, cannot be considered as an alternative to the Union's trade potential.

For BiH, the situation might get more complex. Up to 2021, the country was receiving Russian gas through Ukraine and Hungary, but that changed when Gazprom sealed the deal with a company called Gaspromet Pale in Republika Srpska, replacing the BH Gas company located in the Federation of BiH. With the new deal, gas now arrives in BiH at the entry point located in Republika Srpska. Thus, various attempts by Milorad Dodik to connect Republika Srpska to Turk Stream have come to fruition, an effort that involved visiting Moscow on a couple of occasions, and with strong backing from Belgrade. In addition, two oil refineries that are situated in Republika Srpska – Oil Refinery Modrica and Oil Refinery Brod – are owned by Russian state-owned Zarubezhneft. Most of Russia's economic power is visible in Republika Srpska. As of December 2021, total direct investments from the Russian Federation in BiH amounted to EUR 234 million, of which close to EUR 232 million was invested in Republika Srpska only, placing Russia fifth on the list of the most important investors in the entity – and about EUR 2.2 million in the Federation of BiH – the second entity.<sup>37</sup> The current ambassador of BiH to Moscow, Zeljko Samardzija, explained that his country's reluctance to join the sanctions gives BiH a privileged status in foreign trade with Russia, including purchasing gas supplies at a favourable price this winter.<sup>38</sup>

With respect to Montenegro, Russia managed to establish a strong economic foothold in the country through services (tourism) and the real estate industry. Even during the COVID-19 restrictions, Russians flocked to Montenegro, with 5,000–7,000 of them being permanent residents. Before the pandemic crisis, Russians accounted for 29.1% of all overnight stays in Montenegro, ahead of

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<sup>35</sup> Eur Activ, *Commission OKs plant acquisition by Serbian Gazprom-owned oil company*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/commission-oks-plant-acquisition-by-serbian-gazprom-owned-oil-company/>, access 24 X 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *Statistical Release, Statistics of external trade*, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/PdfE/G20231207.pdf>, access 22 VIII 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Sarajevo Times, *Republika Srpska ignores Sanctions and openly attracts Russian Investments*, <https://sarajevotimes.com/republika-srpska-ignores-sanctions-and-openly-attracts-russian-investments/>, access 08 XI 2022.

<sup>38</sup> N1, *BiH Ambassador to Russia: Republika Srpska prevents sanctions against Russia*, <https://n1info.ba/english/news/bih-ambassaros-to-russia-republika-srpska-prevents-sanctions-against-russia/>, 2022, access 08 XI 2022.

citizens of Serbia, BiH and Montenegro.<sup>39</sup> According to the Central Bank of Montenegro, Russians remain the country's biggest real estate buyers, investing EUR 41.6 million since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This, coupled with the fact that more than 40% of real estate in Montenegro belongs to Russians, including former politicians and billionaires, speaks volumes about Russia's presence.<sup>40</sup> Not even the sanctions that Montenegro imposed on Russia interfered with the increasing trend of Russian investments in the country. In terms of FDI, Russians invested EUR 95 million in 2020, making them the undisputed leaders. Out of the countries in the region, Serbia invests most in Montenegro, with EUR 44 million in 2020.<sup>41</sup> In the long run, Russian exports to Montenegro have decreased at an annualized rate of 6.09%, from USD 43.4 million in 2006 to USD 18 million in 2020, whereas exports from Montenegro to Russia increased at a rate of 32.6%, from USD 338,000 in 2006 to USD 17.6 million in 2020.<sup>42</sup>

### Diverse methods of influence

Russia is driven by geopolitics and economic objectives in the Western Balkans, as much of its intervention has had the goal of pushing for those two elements to turn in the Kremlin's favour. This, however, does not prevent the Kremlin from using complementary instruments to penetrate with more efficiency into countries' domestic affairs. Pan-Slavic identity, Orthodox Christianity, and close historical and cultural ties are used as secondary tools to serve the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives.

Russia's strategy in the region and beyond is known as *hybrid warfare*, a mix of military and non-military, conventional and irregular components, and can include all kinds of instruments such as cyber and information operations.<sup>43</sup> In the view of Russia, victorious states or coalitions in hybrid wars successfully

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<sup>39</sup> S. Kajosevic, *Montenegro Urges Russian tourists to Save Summer Season*, "Balkan Insight", <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/06/16/montenegro-urges-russian-tourists-to-save-summer-season/>, access 08 XI 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Idem, *Russian Interest in Montenegrin Real Estate Spikes Despite Sanctions*, "Balkan Insight", <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/07/russian-interest-in-montenegrin-real-estate-spikes-despite-sanctions/>, access 08 XI 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Invest in See, *Russians Biggest Investors in Montenegro*, <http://investinsee.com/news/montenegro/russians-biggest-investors-in-montenegro>, access 08 XI 2022.

<sup>42</sup> The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), *Russia/Montenegro*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/mne>, access 22 X 2022.

<sup>43</sup> H. Reisinger, A. Golts, *Russia's Hybrid Warfare: Waging War below the Radar of Traditional Collective Defence*, NATO Defense College, 2014, p. 3.

impose their worldview, values, interests, and understanding of the “fair” distribution of resources on a target state with the overall objective to gain power beyond the battlefield.<sup>44</sup> The war in Ukraine demonstrates the use of a plethora of instruments of disinformation to sell the idea of the war as liberating Ukraine from Nazis to the public in Russia but also abroad.<sup>45</sup> Along the same lines, the Kremlin has been using information operations, including cyber activities and propaganda, to influence the Western Balkan countries’ decision-making.

For example, Montenegrin state institutions and IT services were the target of a coordinated cyberattack during summer 2022. The government of Montenegro succeeded in countering the attacks, which were a first for the country. The Agency for National Security blamed Russia for the organized cyberattack, saying it was a politically motivated action aimed at punishing Montenegro for joining the EU sanctions against Moscow.<sup>46</sup> This was the beginning of what seemed to be a hybrid war against European countries, as later in September 2022, both Moldova and Slovenia were under attack. In 2018, during the historic vote on the name change in the Macedonian parliament, hundreds of new websites appeared online spreading false information, such as one that claimed Google could remove Macedonian from its list of languages.<sup>47</sup> This wave of disinformation was joined by individual Russian propagandists, such as geopolitician Leonid Savin, who was announcing the “destruction of Macedonia by joining NATO”, and Andrew Koribko, who described the agreement as creating a “postmodern protectorate of Greece”, and sowed fear among the citizens, inciting destabilization and street protests across Skopje and Athens.<sup>48</sup>

As an instrument of information influence, the Kremlin has been using its “Sputnik” media outlet, which was established in 2014. With its Belgrade-based newsroom, “Sputnik” soon spread to become the most widely known Russian news outlet in the region, delivering news both in Cyrillic and Latin alphabets.

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<sup>44</sup> M. Clark, *Russian Hybrid Warfare*, Institute for the Study of War, Military Learning and the Future of War Series, 2020, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> TASS, *Russia’s victory means liberation of everyone willing from Nazi regime in Ukraine* – SVR, <https://tass.com/politics/1756013>, access 23 V 2024

<sup>46</sup> S. Kajosevic, *Montenegro Accuses Russia of Cyber-Attacks on Govt Server*, “Balkan Insight”, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/26/montenegro-accuses-russia-of-cyber-attacks-on-govt-server/>, access 08 X 2022.

<sup>47</sup> M. Santora, J.E. Barnes, *In the Balkans, Russia and the West Fight a Disinformation-Age Battle*, “New York Times”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/16/world/europe/macedonia-referendum-russia-nato.html>, access 08 X 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Z. Trajanoski, *Russian Disinformation Propaganda in Macedonia before the 2018 Referendum*, <https://truthmeter.mk/russian-disinformation-propaganda-in-macedonia-before-the-2018-referendum/>, Truthmeter, access 10 X 2022.

The most frequent narrative that was displayed in most of the articles, generating the most reactions from readers (likes and comments) across the Western Balkan countries, was “WB is a playground for a clash of interests between East and West” (see Figure 1).

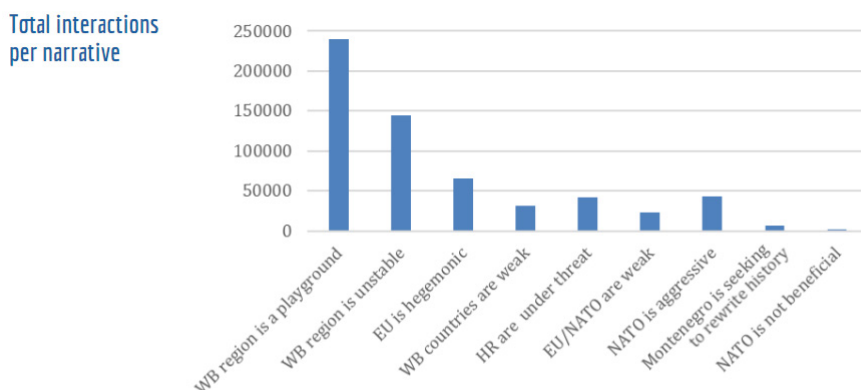


Figure 1. Total interactions per Russia’s narrative toward the Western Balkans

Source: NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence 2020: *Russia’s narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija*.

This narrative implies that the West always blames Russia for doing things at the hard end of the power spectrum, while doing exactly the same, while all Western Balkan countries other than Serbia are small and irrelevant pawns in the hands of international players.<sup>49</sup> In the same vein, articles with the dominating narratives of “WB region is a playground” and “WB region is unstable” received the most support from readers, similarly to the narratives “EU and NATO are weak” and “NATO is aggressive”, with support reaching as high as a 64% approval rate. Some of the narratives identified as dominant that were found in “Sputnik Srbija” were more likely to be published in local media, including but not limited to those related to the roles of the EU and NATO in regional tensions, societal traumas and other pressing challenges.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence 2020, *Russia’s Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija*, p. 15. [https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/analysis\\_of\\_sputnik\\_serbia\\_30-04\\_v4-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit](https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/analysis_of_sputnik_serbia_30-04_v4-1.pdf?zoom=page-fit), access 12 X 2022.

<sup>50</sup> T. Doncheva, *Tracking Russia’s Narratives in the Western Balkan Media*, NATO Strategic Communication Center of Excellence, 2020.



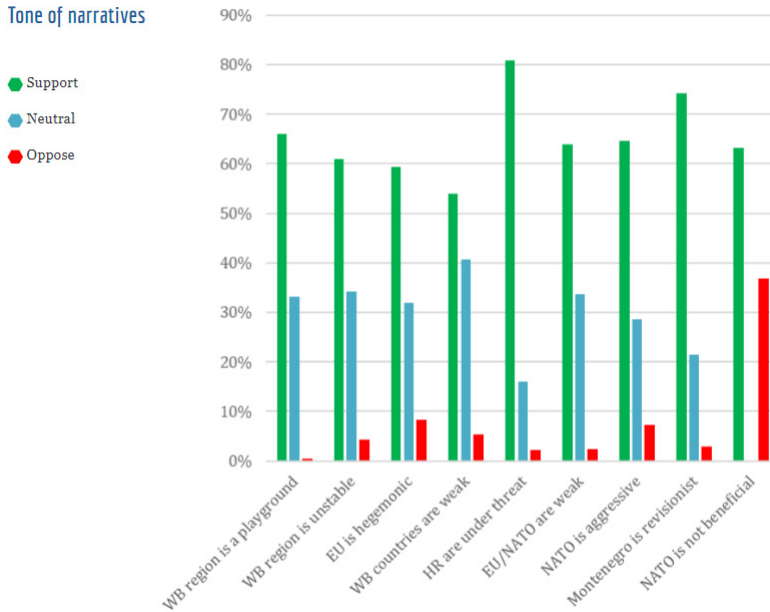


Figure 2. Tone of Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans

Source: NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence 2020: *Russia's narratives toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija*.

Religious and cultural diplomacy remains yet another tool for expanding Russian influence. In the Western Balkans, these efforts stem from the historical ties of Russia with the broader region of the Balkans and are deeply anchored in the pan-Slavic Orthodoxy that is used as a foreign policy instrument.<sup>51</sup> The Balkans are repeatedly constructed as the place where Russia borrowed all of the sacral features of its stately-existence (Christianization, cultural artefacts, the double-headed eagle, and the title of the Russian Tsars all coming from the Black Sea and Mediterranean area).<sup>52</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church uses the religious platform to politicize the dialogue between the Churches. The Serbian Orthodox Church replicates a large part of the Russian narratives presented above, thereby not only spreading conservative values but also political

<sup>51</sup> For more information on the subject, see: A. Metodieva, *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans*, "The German Marshall Fund of the United States", 2019, no. 16; S. Secieru et al., *Fire and Ice, The Russian-Turkish partnership*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2021, no. 168, [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP\\_168.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_168.pdf), access 15 XI 2022.

<sup>52</sup> V. Samokhvalov, *Russia in the Balkans*, "Insight Turkey", 2019, vol. 21(2), p. 190.

viewpoints of partnership between Russia and the three countries.<sup>53</sup> Ahead of the visit of Russian Patriarch Kirill to Belgrade in 2014, in a dialogue with his counterpart, former Patriarch Irinej, the Russian Patriarch reiterated the stance of the Russian Orthodox Church on “unconditionally supporting the stance of Russian Orthodox Church concerning Kosovo and Metohija”, which will be defended by Serbia together with the leaders of Russia and other countries.<sup>54</sup>

That religion can be used as a tool for politicization was demonstrated by the 2021 ceremony of enthronement in Montenegro of a new Serbian Orthodox Church Metropolitan Joanikije II, during which many Montenegrin nationalists took the streets chanting “This is not Serbia! This is Montenegro!” to protest against what they saw as the dominance of Serbian Orthodox Church, the largest religious community in Montenegro. The clashes gained a political dimension as the ruling majority, led by the then Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, was supportive of the new Metropolitan, whereas President Milo Đukanović, a member of Democratic Party of Socialists, praised the protesters for safeguarding the national interest and opposing the enthronement. Months before the ceremony took place in Cetinje, the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed serious concerns over the introduction of the 2019 Law on Religious Freedom and Institutions that jeopardized the properties and churches of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, particularly those owned by Montenegro prior to 1918.<sup>55</sup> The Serbian portal “Novosti” posted a text about two Russians making a video in support of Serbs in Montenegro and conveyed a statement of the President of the Russian All People’s Union and member of the Duma, Sergey Baburin, who noted that “Russia should protect what it has given to the Serbian churches and monasteries in Montenegro.”<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Russia’s foreign policy in the Western Balkans is a reflection of the overall Russia-West relations and is anchored in the Kremlin’s perception of Russia as a great power, determined to maintain its spheres of influence at all costs. For

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<sup>53</sup> W. Zweers et al., *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> S. Barisic, *The Role of the Serbian and Russian Orthodox Churches in Shaping Governmental Policies*, [in:] *The Warp of The Serbian Identity, Anti-Westernism, Russophilia, Traditionalism...*, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade 2016, pp. 116–117.

<sup>55</sup> N1, *Russia, Montenegro in exchange over law on religious communities*, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a557107-russia-montenegro-in-exchange-over-law-on-religious-communities/>, access 09 XI 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Digital Forensic Center, *Russian support to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro*, <https://dfcme.me/en/russian-support-to-the-serbian-orthodox-church-in-montenegro/>, access 09 XI 2022.

Russia, the Western Balkans do not lie within its direct sphere of influence, but the region fits into Russia's overall geopolitical strategy of preventing the unilateral dominance of the Western powers, namely the US, which is at the helm of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. Such a *multipolar approach* is then projected onto the region on a smaller scale and with less intensity.

Russia's approach to its historical animosity with the West has two main dimensions. The first is the policy of preventing the countries of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans from joining NATO. The Russian invasion of February 2022 is a continuation of Russia's intent to keep the eastern flank away from NATO. During the late 1990s, Russia entered the Western Balkans to oppose NATO intervention against Belgrade, advocating against the post-interventionist Western policies and discourse. The non-recognition of Kosovo and the complexities behind the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to be seen as an important regional actor, as the country that needs to be consulted on this issue due to its veto power in the UN Security Council. The second dimension implies the ideological caveat that transposes onto historical, religious, ideational and cultural links with the Western Balkans countries. The Russian mantra of being the *older brother* resonates better with some countries in the Western Balkans than others. Russia's two-fold approach seeks to maximize the Kremlin's economic and political influence in the Western Balkans, exploiting internal divides, bilateral complexities and animosities between the ethnic groups within the region and within countries themselves. The tools of influence that Russia uses are diverse, ranging from propaganda and disinformation, funding political campaigns and building special relations with the leaders of political parties, through economic pressure and dependency to the funding of religious, cultural and educational activities.

Seeing Russia's role through a broader geopolitical lens, the war in Ukraine is seen as the turning point for majority of Western Balkans countries. The war could determine Russia's standing in the region as much of Russia's soft power in the region is now put to the test. While it is true that Russia's role and position in the Western Balkans cannot be underestimated or eliminated, a century of Russian policy in the region is now seriously contested as the war in Ukraine continues to rage as it is highly likely to enter its third year. Russia's opportunities to interfere in the countries' internal affairs now largely depend on the countries' advancement towards joining the EU and NATO. Particularly after having gained NATO membership, Montenegro and North Macedonia have been alienated from Russia politically, remaining firm in their EU aspirations, and aligning with every decision of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. Serbia, with its pragmatic policy attempting to please both the EU and Russia, continues to stand

its ground, even against the background of the war in Ukraine and Belgrade facing criticism from the West. Republika Srpska with its President Dodik enjoys a special relationship with Putin and remains the Kremlin's main advocate in the country. Kosovo's foreign policy is firmly aligned with Euro-Atlantic objectives but Pristina continues to face stumbling blocks due to Belgrade–Pristina dialogue issues, where Russia poses as staunch advocate for Serbia. The broader geo-political context, notably the war in Ukraine, thus, continues to largely dictate the dynamics in the region, subsequently pushing almost all countries even more into the Euro-Atlantic prism due to security concerns that have emerged as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine.

That said, the outcome of the war might cause the shifting of alliances in the Western Balkans and could determine Russia's position in the region for years to come. Should Russia lose the war in Ukraine, it might lose international credibility and the possibility to influence the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue. If a peace agreement is brokered that suits Russia, the Kremlin will further extend its regional influence and build more alliances in the Western Balkans. To prevent this, it will be crucial for the EU to speed up the EU integration process of the Western Balkans to the extent possible. Waning enthusiasm for EU membership in the candidate countries open the door for more Russian influence. Additionally, insisting on the resolution of the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue within the EU framework would further fence off external influences. While the West is busy dealing with the war in Ukraine, it might lose sight of the region, thus, leaving the door wide open for other non-Western actors, as Russia is far from being the sole player in the region.

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**Abstract:** Following the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, six newly independent countries sought European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The advantageous geographical position and geopolitical importance of the region as a borderland between East and West gained international attention during the Balkan wars. In this period Russia started to consider the region with more interest, relying on its historical, ideational, religious and political ties with the countries therein. This article looks into Russia's presence and role in the region by focusing on two main dimensions: (1) the anti-Western sentiment reflected in the Kremlin's efforts to prevent the region's advancement towards NATO, and (2) the ideational element that includes a plethora of activities, covert activities, and tactics intended to exert political influence and maximize economic benefits. The broader geopolitical context is explained through the lens of the war in Ukraine, whose outcome could cause shifts in alliances in the region, subsequently affecting the Kremlin's decades-long aim of establishing itself as a regional power.

**Keywords:** Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; European and Euro-Atlantic integration; Balkans; Russia; anti-Western sentiment; geopolitical context; regional power

### Rosja na Bałkanach w XXI wieku: konflikty, działania i perspektywy

**Streszczenie:** Po rozpadzie Socjalistycznej Federalnej Republiki Jugosławii na początku lat 90. sześć nowo niepodległych krajów dążyło do integracji europejskiej i euroatlantyckiej. Korzystne położenie geograficzne i znaczenie geopolityczne regionu jako pogranicza Wschodu i Zachodu zyskały międzynarodową uwagę podczas wojen bałkańskich. W tym okresie Rosja zaczęła z większym zainteresowaniem patrzeć na ten region, opierając się na swoich historycznych, ideowych, religijnych i politycznych powiązaniach z tamtejszymi krajami. Artykuł analizuje obecność i rolę Rosji w regionie, koncentrując się na dwóch głównych wymiarach: (1) nastrojach antyzachodnich odzwierciedlanych w wysiłkach Kremla mających na celu uniemożliwienie awansu regionu na drodze do NATO oraz (2) elemencie ideowym obejmującym mnóstwo działań i taktyk mających na celu wywieranie wpływu politycznego i maksymalizację korzyści ekonomicznych. Szerszy kontekst geopolityczny wyjaśniony jest przez pryzmat wojny na Ukrainie, której wynik może spowodować zmiany w sojuszach w regionie, co w konsekwencji wpłynie na wieloletni cel Kremla, jakim jest ugruntowanie pozycji regionalnej potęgi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Socjalistyczna Federacyjna Republika Jugosławii; integracja europejska i euroatlantycka; Bałkany; Rosja; nastroje antyzachodnie; kontekst geopolityczny; mocarstwo lokalne