



The Balkans and Russia

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Following the end of the Balkan wars in the 1990s, periods of stability allowed several of the nations of Southeast Europe to pursue reforms, incorporate Western values, and join the European Union (EU) and NATO. Recently, however, the Western Balkans have experienced various degrees of political instability involving elements of nationalist politics, stagnating economies, public frustration over corruption, ethnic tensions, and violence. Although some of the tension has receded, many observers remain concerned that the region's stability could unravel again. For some, at the core of this uncertainty lies Russia, which could provoke such a turn of events.

The Balkans' Uneasy Relations with Russia

The unsettled nature of the Balkans has given Moscow a geopolitical opportunity to aggressively exploit and a chance to reassert itself as a significant influence in the region. Russia considers much of the Balkans an area of historical linkages, whether through ethnic connections to Slavic populations or through its perceived role as protector of Orthodox Christians. During the Communist years, the Soviet Union exerted significant regional influence, despite Russia's tensions with Yugoslavia. After the Soviet collapse, Russia's political and economic influence waned but did not disappear. Beyond historical and religious ties, Russia's influence today generally is grounded in popular support (which remains high), the large number of Russians who live or vacation in the region, its financial support, and its energy monopoly.

Perhaps believing it had caught the West off guard in Ukraine, sensing a vacuum left by a distracted EU and a largely absent United States, and determined to oppose EU and NATO expansion, Russia has increased its diplomatic and intelligence presence in the Balkans; expanded its use of soft power; offered economic and financial opportunities, particularly by proposing to build new energy infrastructure; and apparently pursued widespread disinformation and fake news campaigns often designed to destabilize parts of the region.

Some observers, however, see Moscow's role as limited to being a "spoiler" or counterweight to the West,

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seeking to discredit the EU and the United States while offering the region little in the way of closer ties. Russia has had opportunities to create mischief and appears capable of stirring political unrest and ethnic tension in the Balkans. Nevertheless, Moscow's efforts to diminish Balkan resilience and blunt the region's Western drift have failed to gain significant traction in some countries, such as Croatia, Kosovo, and Bosnia (outside the Republika Srpska, Bosnia's autonomous Serbian entity) and have faltered in others despite some initial gains. In an unsuccessful attempt to derail Montenegro's NATO membership, Russia may have resorted to more extreme, dangerous methods, allegedly supporting an October 2016 attempted coup against the government, reportedly with the assistance of intelligence agents operating in Serbia. In Macedonia, Moscow continues to support political leaders who oppose Podgorica's attempts to join NATO and who initially refused to surrender control of the government after the 2016 national elections, leading to political and ethnic unrest.

Serbia is arguably Russia's most important regional partner. Moscow has gone to great lengths to preserve its relationship with Belgrade through the use of soft power and economic support. But even in Serbia, successive governments have deepened their relations with the EU while persuading Moscow that Serbia has little interest in severing ties with Russia or joining NATO. Russia has had success in the Republika Srpska, where it has emboldened Bosnian Serbs to preserve or even strengthen their autonomy from the central government in Sarajevo.

The Security Dimension

Moscow has been partially successful in promoting a pro-Russian, anti-Western narrative at the expense of the EU and United States. It has had less success, however, in its security relations with the Balkans. The Russian military appears to have little or no relationship with the militaries of Albania, Croatia, and Montenegro (all NATO members); the Bosniak-Croat entity in Bosnia; or the Kosovo Security Force (a small, lightly armed, national guard). It has had only marginal success with Macedonia.

The one exception is, again, Serbia. Despite Serbia's 2007 declaration of military neutrality, the long-established Serbian-Russian military relationship flourishes, with Russia supplying Serbia with combat equipment, including a recent transfer of MiG aircraft and tanks. Serbian military forces have trained extensively with Russian forces, including four joint exercises in 2016 and 2017. Russia also operates a reported Humanitarian Training Center established in 2012 in the city of Niš. The United States and NATO have expressed concern that this could become a subtly disguised military and intelligence operation established to spy on U.S., EU, and NATO interests in the Balkans.

Belgrade has been under constant political pressure from Moscow to keep Serbia out of NATO and other Western institutions. Nevertheless, Serbia is far along in its EU accession process and participates in NATO's Partnership for Peace program (which it joined in 2006). Belgrade permits a small NATO office to operate in Serbia. In 2015, Serbia signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, establishing a higher level of cooperation. In 2016, it signed a Status of Forces Agreement that offered NATO troops diplomatic status and immunity, as well as access to Serbian military facilities. In 2017, various Serbian forces reportedly held 18 joint exercises with NATO and U.S. military troops.

Despite Balkan relations with the West being subject to constant interference from Moscow, some observers question whether Russia is being given too much credit for influence it may not really wield. They believe Moscow's efforts to prevent the Balkans from becoming more integrated with the EU, and even NATO, have not been particularly successful. Some also do not share the idea that Moscow is responsible for many of the region's problems, noting that "dysfunctional democracies and authoritarian politics are, on the whole, homegrown ills, and not a sinister plot by Moscow."

Despite Russia's effort to influence the Balkans' political orientation, which has led the United States and, more significantly, the EU to increase attention to the region, some observers believe that Moscow likely will not be successful in realigning any of the Balkan states away from the West in the long run.

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