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RETURN TO INSTABILITY: HOW MIGRATION AND GREAT POWER POLITICS THREATEN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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SUMMARY

- With Europe distracted, Russia and Turkey are increasing their influence in the Balkans. Moscow, in particular, is taking the opportunity to undermine Western influence, fan the flames of underlying conflicts and promote an anti-EU message.
- The region is under great pressure from the migrant crisis. Its countries have been cooperative with Europe on the issue, but this could change fast if borders close to the north.
- There is a rising tide of illiberalism as local elites have wavered in their commitment to democratic reform, encouraged by the Putin and Erdoğan models, and the sense that EU accession is no longer a realistic prospect.
- Some of the region's governments are playing a game of balancing between the West and other powers – despite its EU candidacy, Serbia has formed a strategic partnership with Russia.
- To counter these trends, the EU should show that it is serious about enlargement. Europe should include the Western Balkans in decision-making on the refugee crisis, demand strategic alignment from candidate countries, and impose sanctions on local leaders who undermine stability in the region.

Geopolitics is back in the Western Balkans. Competition between great powers has returned to the region, and the European Union – absorbed by other crises – has failed to respond. There is a growing sense in the region that the EU is falling apart and is not serious about integration. This is creating a power vacuum into which other actors, particularly Russia but also Turkey, are inserting themselves. Unless it takes decisive action, the EU's influence in the Western Balkans, and the long-term project of integrating and democratising its countries, could be undermined.

This competition is taking shape as Europe and the Balkans struggle to deal with a refugee crisis of unprecedented scale. The EU has been slow to assist the countries along the Balkan migrant route and has largely failed to craft joint solutions. The crisis has in a sense reversed the traditional roles of the EU and the Balkans, as the EU has become a net exporter of instability to the region: refugees entering it in 2015 came from a member state – Greece – and ended up stuck in the region as EU member states further north blocked their passage. The crisis has strained bilateral relations, fuelled long-standing animosities, and strengthened illegal networks and organised crime.

The new geopolitical competition in the Western Balkans has allowed its countries to balance between the EU and other powers. This game, which has a long tradition in the former Yugoslavia, has gained new momentum in an era of European weakness, and is often used as a tool of geopolitical blackmail to obtain concessions from Europeans.

Russia has become more proactive in the region since the

annexation of Crimea, as Moscow has sought to rewrite the rules of the European security order and push back against Europe's interests. Russia no longer passively accepts that the Western Balkans will move towards the EU – let alone NATO. Instead, it seizes on opportunities to disrupt EU and Western objectives, intervening in local politics and promoting an anti-Western, populist narrative. This narrative resonates among certain political and social groups in Belgrade, Banja Luka, and even Podgorica. Moscow's actions threaten to slow these countries' processes of democratisation, exacerbate latent tensions, and even create Trojan horses that could one day undermine the cohesion of the EU and NATO.

The Western Balkans are the EU's soft underbelly,¹ and could end up being the greatest casualty of a weak or failing EU.² Yet divided Europeans are wary of Balkan entanglements. They face tough dilemmas, some of which go to the very core of the EU as a values-based project. If the EU and its member states want to avoid seeing the region drift away again, they must face these problems head-on.

To begin with, the EU and individual member states must work to reduce the destabilising impact of the refugee crisis by including the Western Balkan countries in decision-making on the issue. Europe should work to restore the credibility of the Union through a firm commitment to its accession criteria on democracy and the rule of law, rather than compromising these for short-term political gain. The accession process is still crucial, but given the current scepticism among member states about enlargement, the EU and its members should also deploy a range of strategic tools – particularly in the areas of security, energy, and the rule of law. In addition, they should restore the credibility of the Union through a firm commitment to its accession criteria on democracy and the rule of law.

The EU should take steps to counter Moscow's inroads in the region, and to prevent Russian efforts to weaken the European accession path of these countries. In this new and adverse geopolitical environment, the EU should make it clear to candidate countries that strategic alignment is not optional but mandatory for joining the Union.

The refugee crisis and the Western Balkans

The refugee crisis has forced Europe to put the Western Balkans back on the agenda. The Balkan migrant route – running through Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary, or Croatia, Slovenia and Austria – became the main entry point for refugees making their way to northern Europe in 2015.

The crisis has put tremendous pressure on the region and has stretched institutional capacities to breaking point. Since 2014, the number of migrants crossing this route

has increased 16-fold, with close to 800,000 migrants, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, taking it to date.³ Between October 2015 and March 2016, more than 500,000 migrants arrived in Serbia and Macedonia.⁴ Importantly, the crisis has also strengthened the illicit economic sectors that hamper the region's democratic and rule of law development. The profits to be gained from human trafficking have resurrected mafia networks from the time of the embargo against Yugoslavia.

Despite these pressures, the Western Balkan countries have been largely cooperative in responding to the crisis – at least in the early stages, as long as the migrants continued northward. Fresh memories of the refugee flows caused by the Balkan wars of the 1990s mean that large parts of the population are sympathetic to the plight of refugees and willing to support humane policies – in contrast to many EU countries. Regional leaders have also seen the crisis as an opportunity to be “good Europeans”, partly driven by a desire to offset the criticism that the region is a source of illegal migration to the EU.

However, this cooperation has rested on the condition that the borders to the north remain open and that the Western Balkans do not become Europe's dumping ground for refugees. When Hungary fortified its southern border, and Croatia and Slovenia restricted entry in September 2015, acrimony quickly followed. Bilateral relations in the Western Balkans quickly deteriorated, and regional leaders traded insults and accusations, drawing on tensions dating back to the Yugoslav wars. “Until I see the Budapest–Belgrade axis stop burdening Croatia with refugees, I will remain convinced that [the Serbs] are doing something behind our back”, Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović said at that month's EU summit on migration.⁵ This episode revealed not only the fragility of the region but also the interdependence of the Western Balkans and the EU in managing flows of refugees, as unilateral actions had a direct and often negative impact on neighbours.

In November 2015, Slovenia and Croatia closed their borders to economic migrants and restricted entry to Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis. Macedonia and Serbia immediately followed suit.⁶ In February 2016,⁷ pressures to close the Balkan route gained traction in Austria and the Western Balkans, leaving thousands of refugees stranded in Greece. The EU–Turkey summit of March 2016 announced that the Balkan route had “come to an end” but focused on the urgency of the situation in Greece, failing to adopt any groundbreaking measure for

³ See “Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: Compilation of Available Data and Information – Reporting Period 2015”, International Organization for Migration, available at <http://doe.iom.int/docs/Flows%20Compilation%202015%20Overview.pdf>.

⁴ Source: UNHCR, Politico.

⁵ Aleksandar Vasovic and Ivana Sekularac, “Serbia bans Croatian goods as ties hit low over migrants”, Reuters, 24 September 2015, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-migrants-serbia-croatia-idUKKCNORNoRY20150923>.

⁶ Peter Teffer, “Balkan countries close borders to ‘economic migrants’”, *EUobserver*, 20 November 2015, available at <https://euobserver.com/migration/131192>.

⁷ “Austria hosts Balkan refugee conference without Greece”, DW, available at <http://www.dw.com/en/austria-hosts-balkan-refugee-conference-without-greece/a-19069784>.

¹ Ivan Krastev, “The Balkans are the soft underbelly of Europe”, *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015, available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2287ba66-8489-11e4-bae9-00144feabdco.html#axzz4124xvsqA>.

² Professor Raymond Detrez, remarks at Utrecht University, 8 March 2016.

the non-EU Western Balkan countries.⁸

As a result, thousands of migrants got stuck at the Greek-Macedonian border in a makeshift refugee camp near the village of Idomeni, after a three-week standoff between Greece and Macedonia, along with other Balkan countries, which adamantly oppose allowing refugees to continue their journey to the prosperous north. Having become a buffer zone or, worse, a dumping ground for refugees, the countries on the Western Balkan route are finding it hard to cope with the humanitarian, security, and administrative burden. In a sense they have become the guardians of the Schengen space, without even being close to EU membership.

Leaving the Western Balkans out of the EU's framework for handling the inflow of refugees simply does not make sense. Like Turkey, the region has gained leverage over the EU because it holds some of the keys to managing the refugee flows. While a heavier and more visible involvement of Frontex – the EU's border control agency – would help stabilise the situation in the short term, a common approach towards the EU's external borders, one that takes into account the institutional weaknesses of non-EU members in the Western Balkans, should be the long-term goal.

A rekindled great power contest

As the Western Balkan countries began the complex transition from post-conflict zones to stable democracies more than a decade ago, the EU took on a leadership role in driving reform in partnership with the elites of each country in the region. The unspoken premises for this ambitious process of stabilisation and democratic transformation were threefold: geopolitical stability with buy-in from other powers, backed by credible Western security deterrents; sustained international commitment to support the transition, especially from Europe; and commitment to reform, power-sharing, and institution-building among local political elites.

These conditions have faltered. On the first premise, while the main institutions aimed at overseeing peace arrangements and providing a security deterrent are still in place in the Western Balkans, there is no longer a strong consensus behind them. Other foreign policy issues have taken precedence for the EU, from Ukraine to Syria, and the Western Balkans have inevitably fallen down its list of foreign and security priorities, accompanied by a drawing down of NATO and EU military presence in the region. A Balkan fatigue has set in, after two decades of international involvement. Bar the occasional crisis management initiative or project to revive “momentum”, Europeans have largely relied on the institutional and bureaucratic dynamics of enlargement in the Western Balkans, and its approach to achieving its objectives offers the “carrot” of membership, with no coercive “stick” to back it up.

⁸ “Statement of the EU Heads of State or Government”, 7 March 2016, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press-releases-pdf/2016/3/40802209668_en_635929986600000000.pdf.

On the second, support for enlargement has declined in an EU engulfed by crises, the rise of populism, and anti-migration sentiment, even against migrants from within the EU. Some national parliaments have started to draw red lines on the topic. One of enlargement's strongest supporters in the past, the United Kingdom, is absorbed by its debate over the EU, although it has recently demonstrated a more engaged stance. Germany is looking more closely at the Western Balkans, though it is unclear whether it will be able to craft a pan-European approach.

On the third, the incentives for local elites in the Western Balkans to move ahead with reforms and abandon polarised politics have diminished. Local stakeholders have begun to question Europe's commitment to Western Balkan membership, after European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called for a “five-year freeze” on enlargement in 2014.⁹ They also question what it actually means to be in the EU today, seeing that free-riding on European solidarity has become the rule within the Union.

Meanwhile, other players are also establishing their own mechanisms of influence and moving in from the sidelines – not only Russia, but also Turkey and the Gulf countries. Even China is becoming a player in the Balkans, investing heavily in much-needed infrastructure across the region as part of a broader impetus to build relations with Central and Southeast Europe, manifested in the creation of new political frameworks parallel to EU structures, such as the 16+1 forum.¹⁰ Beyond the classic strategic tools of finance or energy, other outside players are spreading new political narratives in the region, in competition for the hearts and minds of the Western Balkans.

The Russian challenge

In October 2014, while Russia and its proxies were fighting in eastern Ukraine, and months after the annexation of Crimea, Belgrade welcomed President Vladimir Putin with military parades and the highest honours. The Kremlin's actions in the region since – including meddling in the domestic politics of Macedonia, Bosnia, or Montenegro, and wielding its UN Security Council veto on Balkan matters, or threatening to – have only reinforced the notion that Russia “is back” in the region.¹¹

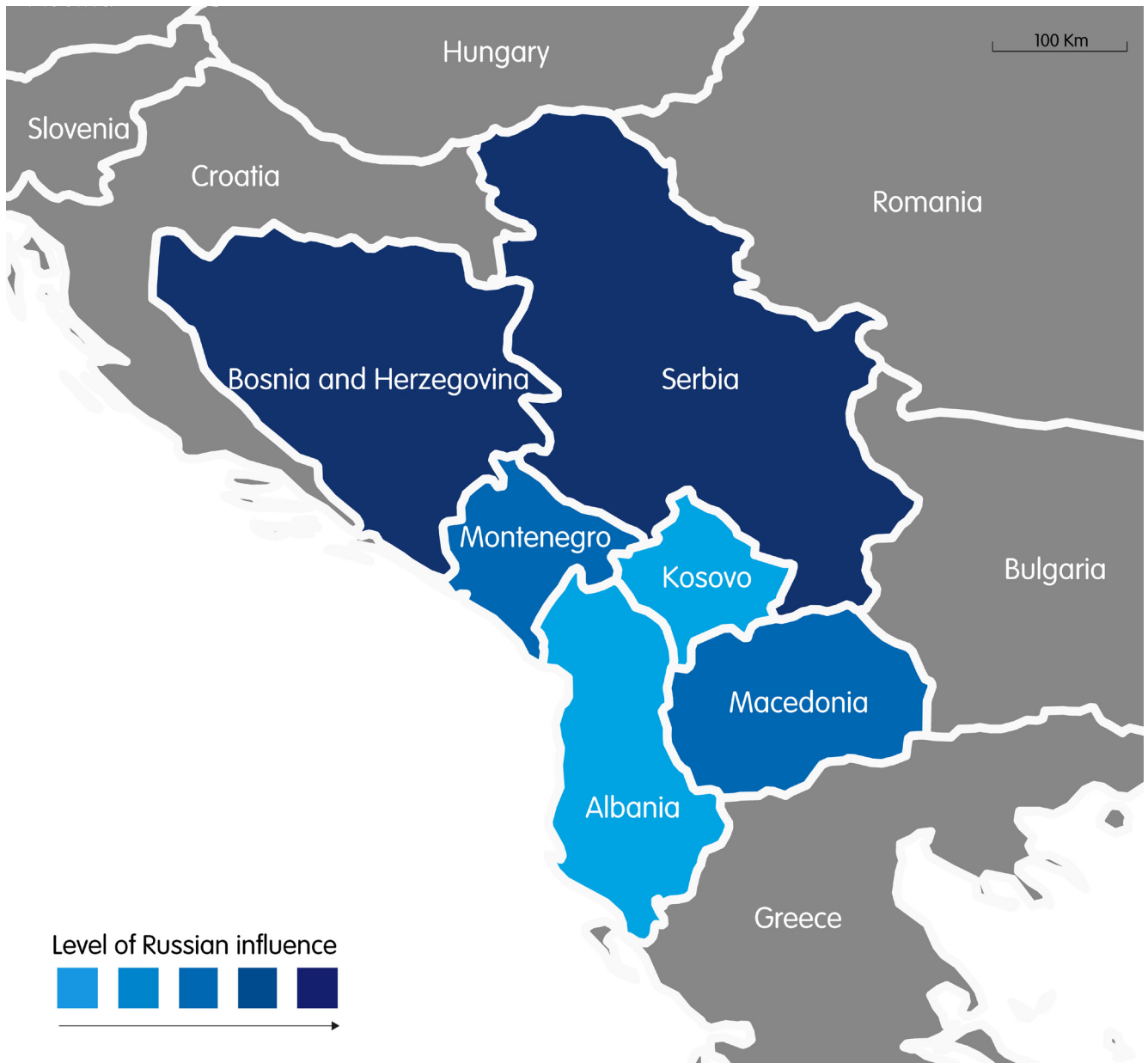
The Western Balkans – volatile in economic and security terms, and a traditional area of strategic interest for Moscow – present a tempting opportunity for Russia to extend its influence, particularly at a time of European weakness. Indeed, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has voiced her

⁹ See “Juncker to halt enlargement as EU Commission head”, *EUbusiness*, 15 July 2014, available at <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29>.

¹⁰ “Balkan States Woo Chinese Investors at Summit”, *Balkan Insight*, 26 November 2015, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/china-seeks-closer-ties-with-balkans-11-25-2015>. Also, interviews in Skopje, November 2015.

¹¹ See Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2016: “But new issues have come to the fore since then [2007], such as sustainable economic development, inequality and poverty, unprecedented migration, new forms of terrorism and regional conflicts, including in Europe. I am referring to Ukraine, the volatile Balkans, and Moldova that is teetering on the brink of a national collapse”, the Russian Government's official website, 13 February 2016, available at <http://government.ru/en/news/21784/>.

Russian influence in the Western Balkans



concerns that Russia's aggression might not be limited to Ukraine, but could extend to the region.¹² Moscow may not have a grand strategy for the Western Balkans but it does seek to exploit openings to disrupt Western interests; the Western Balkans offer low-cost opportunities to do this.

Russia has a soft-power allure that resonates in some corners in the region, such as Serbia and Republika Srpska – the Serb-majority entity of Bosnia – but also Montenegro and even Macedonia. Its anti-Western and anti-European narrative has for some time been occupying the public space and debate in the Western Balkans, while the EU has become mostly a source of bad news and even an object of

¹² Alison Smale, "Merkel Issues Rebuke to Russia, Setting Caution Aside", the *New York Times*, 17 November 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/world/europe/russia-deports-german-polish-diplomats-retaliation.html?_r=1.

derision. Pro-Putin and pro-Russia merchandise – featuring slogans linking Crimea with Serbia's claims on Kosovo, and the "anti-fascist Patriotic War" – is visible in the streets of Belgrade, the villages of Republika Srpska and northern Kosovo, and Montenegro. Russia is using its soft power to increase its influence in the region and win hearts and minds, while consolidating its presence in strategic sectors.

Russia's policy towards the Western Balkans, in the present circumstances of confrontation and assertiveness towards the West, constitutes an immediate challenge to the EU's objectives of transformation. Russia is back, though its presence varies across different countries, and in an unpredictable manner.

Country	Russia's influence	Level of influence
Serbia	<p>Criticism of NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999 and Western support for Kosovo's independence in 2008 form a central part of Russia's narrative in the country. Local nationalist groups see Russia as a protector of Serbia's interests and as a model of conservative values, opposed to those of the West and Europe. Russia retains influence over Kosovo through its diplomatic presence, especially at the UN Security Council. It has used its veto right to support Serbia's objectives (e.g. by rejecting the Security Council's Srebrenica resolution of 2015).</p> <p>Soft power: Russian soft power is high in Serbia. Russia and Putin appeal to nationalists, ultranationalists, and fringe groups, including paramilitaries, which seek various levels of alliance or association of Serbia with Moscow.</p> <p>Propaganda: Russia actively uses Kremlin-sponsored media (Russia Today, Sputnik, etc.) and other outlets to spread propaganda in the country.</p> <p>Economy: Serbia depends on Russia for its natural gas and oil imports. Russia also provides substantial financial assistance and loans to Belgrade.</p> <p>Security: In recent years, Serbia has reinvested in its military and foreign policy partnership with Russia, although it also pursues relations with NATO.</p> <p>Sanctions: The country did not align with EU sanctions against Russia.</p>	High
Bosnia and Herzegovina	<p>Russia supports the Serb-majority region of Republika Srpska, and its challenge to the Western presence in the country and the tenets of the Dayton Agreement. It has supported Republika Srpska's plans for a referendum on Bosnia's judiciary, and its challenges to the Office of the High Representative and to EUFOR's executive mandate, though Moscow has refrained from endorsing plans for independence of the entity. Moscow has used its veto and blocking powers over Bosnia-related questions at the UN (e.g. the Srebrenica resolution) and at the Dayton framework.</p> <p>Soft power: Moscow's pro-Serbian and anti-Western populist narrative appeals to many Bosnian Serbs, especially regarding the protection of Republika Srpska, and on the war.</p> <p>Economy: Russian companies control parts of the energy sector. Russia provides loans and other financial assistance to Republika Srpska's leadership, but with strings attached.</p> <p>Security: Russia and Republika Srpska have recently been reinforcing security cooperation.</p> <p>Sanctions: Bosnia did not align with EU sanctions against Russia.</p>	High
Macedonia	<p>During last year's protests against the Gruevski government, Moscow derided the protests as Western plots to overthrow a legitimate government enjoying good relations with Moscow. It played the ethnic card on the violent incidents in Kumanovo, and accused Albania and Bulgaria of attempting to partition the country.</p> <p>Propaganda: Moscow's narrative was assisted by propaganda, while pro-government fringe groups have at times brandished Russian flags.</p> <p>Economy: Currently, Russia only has a small economic network in Macedonia.</p> <p>Sanctions: Macedonia did not align with EU sanctions against Russia.</p>	Medium
Montenegro	<p>Having historically supported Montenegro, Russia is now in a confrontation with the pro-Western and pro-NATO government, and enjoys significant support among pro-Serbian and anti-NATO groups involved in protests.</p> <p>Propaganda: Moscow's narrative resonates among some pro-Serbian and anti-NATO opposition parties and leaders, who have visited Moscow for support. Supporters of these groups sometimes brandish Russian flags in protests, as well as anti-NATO slogans.</p> <p>Security: Moscow has called for a referendum on the country's path to NATO membership, which it considers to be a red line, and has warned Podgorica against this.</p> <p>Economy: Russia remains Montenegro's top investor, especially in the private sector, though this might change given the souring relations between Moscow and Podgorica.</p> <p>Sanctions: Montenegro aligned with EU sanctions on Russia.</p>	Medium
Kosovo	<p>Kosovo forms a key part of Russia's narrative of Western abuses and hypocrisy. Russia could be a spoiler at key decision-making points on Kosovo and Serbia, thanks to its position as a UNSC permanent member. It enjoys significant influence with some segments of the Serb minority in Kosovo.</p>	Low
Albania	<p>Albania, a NATO ally, is probably the most pro-Western and pro-EU country in the region. Russia's influence there is limited, though it can play a disruptive role by tapping into fears of a "greater Albania" and weighing into controversies between the Serbian Slavs in the region and the Albanians.</p> <p>Sanctions: Albania aligned with EU sanctions against Russia.</p>	Low

We can outline three basic roles Russia plays: spoiler, strategic partner, and soft power player.

Russia as spoiler

Stakeholders on the ground characterise Russia as a tactical opportunist that takes advantage of opportunities as they appear. Moscow's role as spoiler manifests either in terms of disrupting some of the Western Balkan countries' stability and EU or Euro-Atlantic paths, or in countering Western objectives in the region, especially at moments of crisis (in Bosnia, Macedonia, or Montenegro), or in lending support to local spoilers. In the latter category, there are clear examples of Moscow's support for well-known spoilers, such as Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska.

Dodik, who deploys a populist and highly controversial rhetoric over the Srebrenica massacre and other sensitive topics,¹³ has repeatedly threatened that the entity will secede. He has called for a referendum on the status of the Bosnian judiciary and on the authority of the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia (OHR) – held by an EU diplomat – threatened an independence referendum in 2018,¹⁴ and called for the removal of the mandate of the EU military mission (EUFOR) in Bosnia.¹⁵ Russian officials have come out publicly in favour of a referendum on state institutions and the OHR.¹⁶ In the past two years, Russia has also abstained rather than support Security Council resolutions to extend EUFOR's mandate.

While Russia has not officially supported the independence of Republika Srpska, it has supported Dodik by blocking or watering down language on Bosnia's territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic path at the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council, the international body that oversees implementation of the Dayton Agreement; abstaining from otherwise unanimous statements of condemnation of the referendum as a "direct challenge" to Dayton;¹⁷ and stating that any review of Dayton that weakened the Serb entity would be a red line for Russia.¹⁸ Moreover, Dodik capitalised on the crisis over Ukraine to strengthen relations with the Kremlin, visiting Putin and stating that Crimea was an example for Republika Srpska.¹⁹ There was concern in Sarajevo when Russian Cossacks, some of whom had taken part in the Crimea annexation, appeared

13 Katharina Bart and Maja Zuvela, "Bosnian Serb leader: Srebrenica was 20th century's 'greatest deception'", *Reuters*, 25 June 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-serbia-arrest-idUSKBN0P51OL20150625>. Also, "Milorad Dodik: U Srebrenici nije bio genocid, nego veliki zločin", *Radio Sarajevo*, 9 July 2014, available at <http://radiosarajevo.ba/novost/158124/milorad-dodik-u-srebrenici-nije-bio-genocid-nego-veliki-zlocin>.

14 "Republika Srpska to hold independence referendum in 2018", *Bosnia Today*, 25 April 2015, available at <http://www.bosniatoday.ba/republika-srpska-to-hold-independence-referendum-in-2018/>.

15 Kurt Bassuener and Bodo Weber, "EUFOR: In Urgent Need of a Plan B", *Democratization Policy Council*, 29 October 2014, available at <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/eufor-in-urgent-need-of-a-plan-b>.

16 Danijel Kovacevic, "Bosnian Serb Leader Postpones Controversial Referendum", *Balkan Insight*, 9 February 2016, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnian-serb-leader-puts-controversial-referendum-on-hold--02-09-2016>.

17 "Statement by the Ambassadors of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council", Office of the High Representative, 14 July 2015, available at <http://www.ohr.int/?p=31027&lang=en>.

18 "Lavrov warns against revision of Dayton Agreement", *TASS*, 13 September 2014, available at <http://tass.ru/en/russia/749438>.

19 "Dodik: We are learning from Crimea's example", *InSerbia*, 23 March 2014, available at <http://inserbia.info/today/2014/03/dodik-we-are-learning-from-crimeas-example/>.

in Banja Luka ahead of the October 2014 elections.²⁰

Beyond its support to local spoilers and endorsement of anti-Western or anti-NATO groups, Russia has demonstrated its spoiler power in the UN Security Council. In July 2015, Russia vetoed a Western-backed resolution that referred to the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. This scored points with Serbia, which had reportedly asked Russia to use its veto power.²¹ A few days later, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić and his delegation were pelted with stones by an angry mob at commemorations of the massacre held in Srebrenica itself.²²

Russia's support for spoilers such as Dodik comes with strings attached, despite its rhetoric.²³ Yet the risk for Europe is that spoilers feel further legitimised in their polarising politics, exacerbating negative dynamics in already volatile contexts – and increasing the risk that a miscalculation by one of these actors could spark wider conflict.

Recent unrest in the Western Balkans illustrates how easily Russia can use divide-and-rule tactics in the region, either between countries or between their internal political groupings, fanning the embers of underlying conflicts. In these interventions, Moscow combines the narrative of victimhood and conspiracy theories about Western meddling with the tools of "hybrid" interference, chiefly propaganda campaigns executed by pro-Kremlin outlets and groups, and even by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov himself. Russia has successfully used these hybrid tools in Ukraine and even within the EU, for instance over the refugee crisis.²⁴

For example, as anti-government protests rocked Skopje in spring 2015, Lavrov put forward the same conspiracy theories that Moscow has used time and again in the post-Soviet space. Referring explicitly to Ukraine and the spectre of "colour revolutions",²⁵ he accused the West of orchestrating the protests to force Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to comply with the sanctions regime against Russia and drop his support for Russia's South Stream natural gas pipeline, which has now been scrapped. Lavrov commented that this kind of "notorious 'colour revolution' scenario, which is fraught with grave consequences ... can be further aggravated by ethnic tensions", but proceeded to do exactly that, conflating

20 Angelo Young, "Cossacks in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Troupe Celebrating Russian Ties Led by Crimea Takeover Veteran", *International Business Times*, 3 October 2014, available at <http://www.ibtimes.com/cossacks-bosnia-herzegovina-troupe-celebrating-russian-ties-led-crimea-takeover-veteran-1699404>.

21 "Serbia Asks Russia to Veto UN Resolution on Srebrenica", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 July 2015, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/serbia-russia-srebrenica-genocide-un-resolution/27109972.html>.

22 "Incident u Srebrenici: Vucic pogoden kamenom u lice, delegacija evakuisana", *Blic online*, 11 July 2015, available at <http://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/incident-u-srebrenici-vucic-pogoden-kamenom-u-lice-delegacija-evakuisana/ohunyn3>.

23 It is a shared perception among Bosnians and Western officials in Sarajevo that the perks Dodik might obtain from this revamped pro-Russian stand are sometimes flimsy. With Republika Srpska (RS) in dire financial straits, Dodik boasted after his visit to Putin in late 2014 that he had secured a loan that could enable him to scuttle the IMF and its conditionality. Yet the actual conditions of the terms of the loan are opaque. Sources on the ground also note that RS had obtained a commercial loan through a Florida-based private fund owned by Russian businessmen, although this loan has yet to materialise.

24 Lucian Kim, "Russia having success in hybrid war against Germany", *Reuters*, 7 February 2016, available at <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2016/02/07/russia-having-success-in-hybrid-war-against-germany/>.

25 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the growing tensions in Macedonia", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 9 May 2015, available at http://www.mid.ru/en/maps/mk/-/asset_publisher/Bx1lWHR8ws3J/content/id/1257608.

the protest with the issue of ethnic conflict, following a deadly clash between security forces and an armed group in the city of Kumanovo. Moscow then added more fuel to the fire by raising the sensitive Macedonian Question, when Lavrov referred to supposed plans to partition Macedonia between Albania and Bulgaria²⁶ – a claim that was forcefully condemned by both of the accused countries.²⁷

By contrast, Moscow openly endorsed the October 2015 protests in Montenegro against the government of Milo Djukanović, who had complied with EU sanctions against Russia and aimed to join NATO. A similarly populist narrative that Moscow employed in Republika Srpska and eastern Ukraine cropped up again in Montenegro, as Russia called for a popular referendum on the country's membership of NATO, and warned that the alliance's enlargement to the Western Balkans would be a red line – sending similar messages to Podgorica. Montenegro claimed that Moscow was responsible for stirring up dissent, as pro-Russian Serbian opposition parties and other groups displayed Russian flags and Putin banners.²⁸

These disruptive tactics serve clear strategic purposes: to regain influence for Russia in the Western Balkans, and to slow or block the region's alignment with Europe and the West. Russia seems to be aiming to keep the Western Balkans in a strategic limbo, or even as a buffer zone between the West's and Moscow's areas of interest.

Russia as strategic partner

Moscow has been increasing its investment in key strategic sectors in the region for some time – diplomacy, military, security, finance, and energy – especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska.

From the perspective of European interests, the most important example of this is Russia's revamped relations with Serbia. In 2013, during a visit to Putin's summer residence in Sochi, Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić signed an ambitious strategic partnership agreement with Russia, including military and intelligence cooperation as well as coordinated positions in international bodies. That same year, Serbia became an observer to the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military alliance. After a flurry of high-level visits between Moscow and Belgrade, Russia and Serbia signed a 15-year bilateral defence treaty in late 2013,²⁹ with provisions for training operations, joint exercises, arms sales, and intelligence sharing. Serbia, officially a neutral country and NATO partner which recently

signed a Partnership for Action Plan with the Alliance,³⁰ has hosted Russian-led military exercises and has officially expressed its desire to acquire, among other weaponry, a Russian S–300 surface-to-air missile system.

Putin personally endorsed this partnership in late 2014, elevating it to the category of alliance, and attending as guest of honour a military parade in Belgrade to commemorate the 70-year anniversary of the Soviet-led liberation of Belgrade from the Nazis. Welcomed by throngs of Serbian nationalists and tapping into the “anti-fascist” narrative of World War II that he has also used in Ukraine, Putin described Serbia as Russia's “closest ally”³¹ and reaffirmed his support for Serbia's claims in Kosovo. Eyebrows have been raised in European capitals, not least Berlin, over Russia and Serbia's opening of a joint “humanitarian centre” in the Serbian city of Niš.³²

The energy sector is another key target for Russian influence. Russian state-owned companies, such as Gazprom or Zarubezhneft, as well as private companies led by oligarchs close to the Kremlin, have led Russia's “scramble for the Balkans” in recent years, benefitting from the hasty privatisation of businesses in the region and loose institutional governance. Russian firms have acquired a significant stake in the energy sectors of countries such as Serbia³³ and Bosnia,³⁴ consolidating the country's dominant position in the Balkan oil and gas markets.

Russian trade relations and financial investments in the region have also increased, though they are paltry compared to those of the EU. According to some data, taking EU trade as a whole, Russia is the second-largest trading partner for both Serbia and Bosnia (9.5 percent and 5 percent of total trade volume, respectively, in 2014),³⁵ but it is not a significant trading partner to the rest of the region. The exception in terms of foreign direct investment is Montenegro, where Russia – at least prior to the deterioration of relations with Podgorica – was the top investor, with interests concentrated in real estate, banks, and private companies. Russia was the fourth- and fifth-biggest investor in Serbia and Bosnia respectively in 2015, though the sums are modest compared to those of some EU member states.³⁶

³⁰ “Participation of the Republic of Serbia in the Partnership for Peace Programme”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, available at <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/security-issues/partnership-for-peace-programme>.

³¹ “Putin guest of honour at Serbia military parade”, BBC News, 16 October 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29641642>.

³² “Putin's Reach: Merkel Concerned about Russian Influence in the Balkans”, *Der Spiegel*, 17 November 2014, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/germany-worried-about-russian-influence-in-the-balkans-a-1003427.html>; “Russia opens ‘humanitarian’ base in Serbia”, *EurActiv*, 18 October 2011, available at <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-opens-humanitarian-base-in-serbia/>; “Russia ‘not secretly installing military base in Serbia’”, b92, 4 September 2014, available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=09&dd=04&nav_id=91512.

³³ In 2008, Gazprom acquired a majority stake in the Serbian energy giant Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) – which enjoys a monopoly of oil and gas production in Serbia – for some €400 million, allegedly without tender, in a deal signed by Putin and including promises for infrastructure investment.

³⁴ Zarubezhneft acquired key oil assets in Bosnia, such as the Rafinerija nafte Brod oil refinery and the Rafinerija ulja Modrica motor oil plant, privatised in 2007, both located in Republika Srpska, as well as the local retailer, Nestro Petrol, which owns a chain of 82 petrol stations.

³⁵ “European Union, Trade in goods with Serbia”, European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, p. 8, available at http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2008/august/tradoc_140028.pdf; “European Union, Trade in goods with Bosnia-Herzegovina”, European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, p. 8, available at http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113358.pdf.

³⁶ “Coordinated Direct Investment Survey”, International Monetary Fund, available at <http://data.imf.org/?sk=40313609-F037-48C1-84B1-E1F1CE54D6D5&slid=1390030109571>.

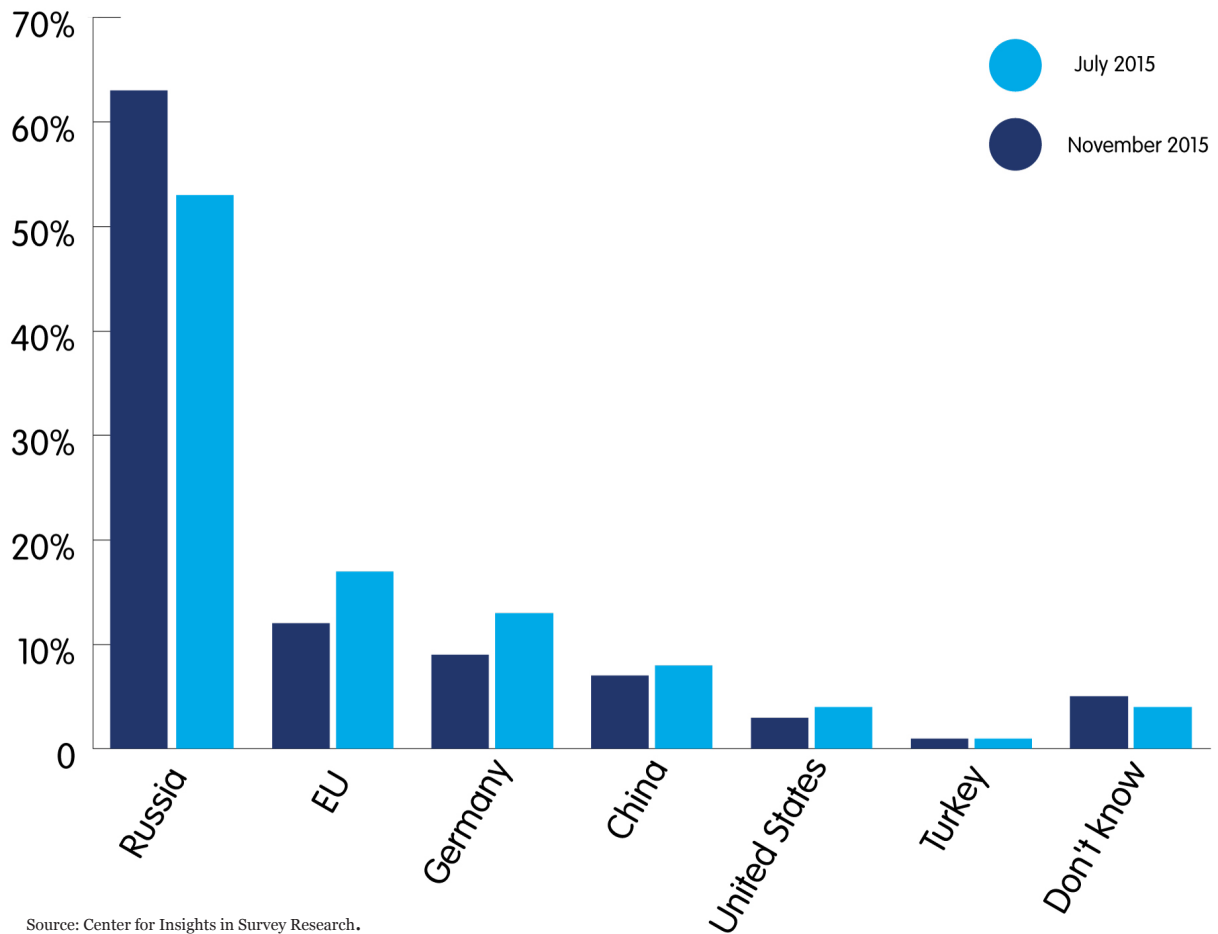
²⁶ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions during Government Hour at the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly, Moscow, May 20 2014”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 20 May 2015, available at http://archive.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcb3/88ff7a4dc2f54dc643257e4c0022d5e8!OpenDocument.

²⁷ “Bulgaria Rejects Russian Allegations of Macedonia's Partitioning”, Novinite.com, 20 May 2015, available at <http://www.novinite.com/articles/168690/Bulgaria+Rejects+Russian+Allegations+of+Macedonia%E2%80%99s+Partitioning>.

²⁸ Dusica Tomovic, “Russia, Montenegro Trade Barbs Over Protests”, *Balkan Insight*, 28 October 2015, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russia-montenegro-bicker-over-podgorica-protests-10-28-2015>.

²⁹ “Serbia, Russia sign agreement on defence cooperation”, b92, 13 November 2013, available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=11&dd=13&nav_id=88325.

Opinion poll (Serbia): Relationship that best serves Serbia's interests



Source: Center for Insights in Survey Research.

Russia's economic network in the region is strengthened by various loans and banking arrangements – which some call “rouble diplomacy” – through which Russia provides bailouts and financial support to beleaguered leaders in Serbia or Republika Srpska.

Russia has not always been able to translate this selective economic presence into diplomatic leverage, as illustrated by Montenegro's resistance to Russian pressure on its sanctions stance or its NATO candidacy. It remains to be seen what effect the decline of Russia's economy will have on its investments and economic leverage in the Western Balkans. But the web of economic and personal relations between Russia and the region's elites and oligarchs adds to the levers it can muster if need be. They serve strategic considerations, beyond any economic rationale.³⁷ This could especially be the case given what some European officials have called the “creeping oligarchisation” of the Balkans and southeast Europe.³⁸

³⁷ Sabina Kajnc Lange, “The Western Balkans: back in the EU spotlight”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 8 March 2016, available at <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/the-western-balkans-back-in-the-spotlight/>.

³⁸ Kiran Stacey and Christian Olivier, “William Hague warns about ‘creeping oligarchisation’ of Balkans”, *Financial Times*, 15 April 2014, available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/aa455136-c4b1-11e3-8dd4-00144feabdco.html>.

Russia as soft power player

While the EU may have succeeded in winning the minds of many in the Western Balkans, Russia, with smaller material investments, is making clear progress towards winning the hearts of Serbs, Bosnian Serbs, and perhaps even Montenegrins and Macedonian Slavs. This is shown in polls, notably in Serbia, where, given a choice between Russia and a crisis-ridden EU, much of the population seems to be tilting to the former, especially if respondents have to choose between the two, or if EU accession is paired with the notion of “dropping Kosovo”.³⁹ According to local sources,⁴⁰ this Eurosceptic and even anti-EU sentiment has increased in early 2016, with dwindling support for European integration and growing support – including among young voters – for Russia and for a close military alliance with the country.⁴¹ Similarly, stakeholders in

³⁹ In this country, polls show that 36 percent saw Russia as a bigger donor to Serbia than the EU (21 percent). 57 percent would vote against EU membership if it entailed recognition of Kosovo, as opposed to 13 percent, compared to 40 percent and 20 percent, respectively, in 2010 and 2011. Source: Center for Insights in Survey Research.

⁴⁰ Civil society organisation, Belgrade, February 2016.

⁴¹ “Growing Russian influence, declining support for EU”, b92, 22 February 2016, available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=22&nav_id=97130.

Montenegro – currently mired in protests – note that levels of public support for Russia are increasing.⁴²

The sharp discrepancies in attitudes support the idea of a cleavage along national and even religious lines that translates into foreign policy. Albania – a NATO member – and Kosovo, the most pro-Western and pro-European countries in the Balkans, consistently align with the EU and the United States, while Serbia and others maintain close relations with Russia.

In Orthodox corners of the region, Russia, and Putin personally, enjoy significant soft power. Russia appeals to many in these areas of Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia, especially in times of economic hardship. It benefits from the contrast with the EU, which is perceived to be on the brink of collapse,⁴³ promoting “decadent” morals (such as LGBT rights) and imposing its will on the people (for instance, on recognition of Kosovo). In a context where supposed Western hypocrisies and abuses still loom large,⁴⁴ the Kremlin’s narrative of a clash of civilisations between the Russian world and the decadent West – based on social conservatism, nationalism, rejection of liberal norms, and victimhood – resonates among Serbian ultranationalists; radical groups,⁴⁵ several of which are poised to meet the threshold to enter parliament in Belgrade;⁴⁶ and paramilitary movements.⁴⁷ It also has the support of some more mainstream political actors and nationalists. These groups see Russia not only as a brother power challenging the West with force in Ukraine and Syria, but also as espousing a different and often more persuasive set of values to Europe and the West. Putin himself is very popular, and looked up to as a role model and strong leader by these political groups.

In Macedonia, for example, Russian flags briefly appeared at rallies of the ruling Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO), which plays on the theme of socially conservative values in opposition to European liberalism, after Russia backed Gruevski’s government against “the sweeping Orange revolution” last spring. However, Gruevski later made a point of distancing himself from Russia’s statements.

Beyond this amplified soft power, Moscow is actively spreading its worldview and narrative on topics such as Ukraine, the EU, and NATO, through political groups,

42 Local source, Podgorica, February 2016.

43 These polls also show that almost 60 percent of respondents see the state of the EU as unstable (Center for Insights in Survey Research).

44 The conflicts in the Balkans during the 1990s, the NATO bombing of Serbia, and the independence of Kosovo are all perceived by Serbian nationalist and radical groups alike as Western abuses.

45 This is the case of Serbian ultranationalist and anti-Western groups, such as “Dveri” or “Zavetnici”, which tend to demand an end to negotiations with the EU, call for closer alliance with Russia (Savez sa Rusijom), and have been prominent in recent massive demonstrations in Belgrade against NATO, displaying Russian flags and Putin banners.

46 “Srbija pred izborima”, *Vreme*, 25 February 2016, available at <http://www.vreme.co.rs/cms/view.php?id=1370309>.

47 Serbian volunteers and paramilitary units, including some with a dark history of fighting in the Balkan conflicts, have joined the separatists in eastern Ukraine, fighting with the Kremlin-supported pro-Russian rebels and militias. Marija Ristic, “Ukraine Separatists Hail Arrival of Serb Volunteers”, *Balkan Insight*, 19 August 2014, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbs-join-pro-russian-forces-in-donetsk>; “At least 100 Serbs fight in Ukraine on pro-Russian side”, *InSerbia*, 6 August 2014, available at <http://ins Serbia.info/today/2014/08/at-least-100-serbs-fight-in-ukraine-on-pro-russian-side/>.

civil society, foreign policy-shaping actors such as think-tanks,⁴⁸ media⁴⁹ such as Kremlin-sponsored *Russia Today* or *Sputnik*, and even the Orthodox Church. As well as maintaining a complex web of influence among the elites, Russia also focuses on winning over societies at large.

The close personal ties between Russian elites and Serbia’s ruling elites are an example of Russia’s strengthening of ties with the region’s political actors.⁵⁰ Pro-Putin movements and nationalist parties in Russia are furthering relations with Serbian nationalist parties in Serbia and Bosnia, and with opposition parties in Montenegro. These Montenegrin opposition groups, chiefly the Democratic Front coalition, which is composed of several anti-NATO parties, have moved from denying links with Russia to openly deepening ties with key Russian officials such as EU-blacklisted Dmitry Rogozin,⁵¹ and with Russian parties such as United Russia and Rodina. This has been accompanied by declarations from high-level Russian officials warning the Montenegrin government against the NATO path⁵² and reiterating their support for a referendum on the issue.

The Kremlin has a deep reach into society in these countries, allowing it to channel its pro-Russia, anti-EU, and anti-Western message through highly influential public figures, including religious ones. For example, criticising the Montenegrin government’s decision to support the EU’s stance on Crimea, the head of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church stated: “‘May he who is not loyal to the same language, same-blood Russia, have the living flesh fall off him, may he be cursed thrice and 3,000 times by me’. This is what Saint Peter of Cetinje left to his Montenegrins, and it would be good if the current prime minister of Montenegro read these words at a time when he, for the first time in history, introduced sanctions against Russia.”⁵³

As local actors note, gaining a critical mass of pro-Russian actors helps Russia achieve its goals of “[stopping] the process of stabilization and democratization”, and decreasing “the importance and attractiveness of European integration”.⁵⁴

The role of Turkey

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey, another long-time actor in the Western Balkans, has also been reasserting its interests in the region for some time, with a special focus

48 For example, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, with offices in Belgrade and Sofia.

49 Branka Mihajlovic, “Russia Seeking Serbian Media Outlet?”, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 14 February 2016, available at <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/russian-seeking-serbia-media-outlet/27551794.html>.

50 From personal discussions, local actors in Belgrade talk about a number of “Moscow men” in senior government positions.

51 “Rogozin invited Knezevic and Bulatovic to Moscow”, CDM, 30 January 2016, available at <http://www.cdm.me/english/rogozin-invited-knezevic-and-bulatovic-to-moscow>.

52 “Rogozin: Crna Gora će zažaliti zbog odluke da pristupi u NATO”, *Vijesti Online*, 12 January 2016, available at <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/rogozin-crna-gora-ce-zazaliti-zbog-odluke-da-pristupi-u-nato-869751>.

53 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money”, the *Interpreter*, p. 33, available at http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf.

54 Jelena Milic, Director of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS) in Belgrade, quoted in “Growing Russian influence, declining support for EU”, *b92*, 22 February 2016, available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2016&mm=02&dd=22&nav_id=97130.

on Kosovo, Albania, and Muslim and Albanian majority areas. This re-engagement mostly consists of renewed investment in bilateral relations with the countries of the region, particularly in terms of increased trade and soft power – the latter chiefly made up of cultural and religious projects (for example, the construction of mosques, such as Tirana’s new Namazgja Mosque, which was funded by Turkey and inaugurated by Erdoğan on his official visit last year). A Turkish model of moderate political Islam combined with a tightly controlled democracy has allure in some conservative Muslim communities in the Western Balkans, and some note that it could act as a bulwark against radical Islam, if not as a building block for liberal values.

Many Muslims across the Western Balkans see Turkey as a traditional friend and protector, and Erdoğan as a champion whose political and economic support has reinforced their positions, even if political actors sometimes resent Turkey’s role. In November 2015, Erdoğan’s admirers in Muslim-majority areas of the region took to the streets to celebrate the election victory of his Justice and Development party (AKP). Hundreds of Kosovars in the southern town of Prizren, Macedonian Albanians in Skopje and Tetovo, and Bosnians in Sarajevo joined the celebrations, some carrying banners with Erdoğan’s picture and chanting his party’s slogans, waving Turkish flags.⁵⁵ The Bosniak Party, a junior member of the ruling coalition in Montenegro, said the victory would allow Turkey to safeguard the peace and security of the Balkans.

This Turkish influence has a deep resonance in the region, summoning up memories of the Ottoman Empire. Ankara’s role in the settlement of the region’s conflicts (both in Kosovo and Bosnia, where it sits on the Peace Implementation Council’s Steering Board and is the top non-EU contributor to EUFOR) and close ties with some of its leaders, such as the leadership of the Federation, Bosnia’s Muslim-majority entity, feed into this perception. According to the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), an international development agency of the Turkish government, one of Turkey’s top priorities in the Western Balkans is the “preservation of [the] region’s multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious social structure”.⁵⁶

Ankara has made forays into political intervention in the Western Balkans, building on the sympathies of local Muslim communities. Erdoğan’s party already has good relations with some of the parties that make up the Bosnian government, particularly the Party of Democratic Action. In Macedonia, a new Albanian political party, Besa, which gathered thousands at an anti-government protest in Skopje seeking the resignation of Gruevski,⁵⁷ is reportedly supported by Ankara and Erdoğan. Although the party’s leaders reject

these links, it does raise the question of whether Turkey’s influence goes beyond the party of ethnic Turks.

Ankara also wants to maximise its significant economic and investment presence, chiefly in Albania and Kosovo. Turkey has traditionally been supportive of Kosovo, where it is subsidising numerous projects, including religious schools and the rebuilding of mosques. Ankara is the largest investor in the country, accounting for 10 percent of foreign direct investment as of 2013. It has also expressed interest in assuming control over Camp Bondsteel, the US base in Kosovo, as US forces withdraw.⁵⁸ The Turkish-US consortium Bechtel–ENKA is investing in a highway valued at €700 million in Kosovo, while the Turkish conglomerate Çalık Holding has expressed interest in purchasing the Kosovo Electricity Distribution and Supply Company, and the Turkish Economy Bank has opened 24 branches in the country.

In Albania, some of the most notable Turkish investments are by the telecoms companies Kurum Company, ALBtelecom, and Eagle Mobile, as well as the National Commercial Bank (Banka Kombëtare Tregtare).⁵⁹ Turkey also has interests in Macedonia, where Tosyali Holding participates in projects to modernise the management of the airports in Skopje and Ohrid, and in Montenegro.

Political Islam combined with highly centralised rule, limits to media freedom, and a conception of democracy as a dictatorship of the majority, make the Erdoğan model a dangerous example for Balkan leaders. This is especially so at a time when Balkan leaders perceive Erdoğan to be cracking down on media freedom and other dearly-held European principles and yet retaining leverage with EU leaders and not suffering consequences.

Moreover, though Turkey is influential among Muslims in the region, it is also considered as a distinct foreign power with its own interests and agenda. Indeed, Turkophobia and Russophilia often go together, and this has been an element in fanning nationalist and religious conflicts. For example, Erdoğan’s rhetoric on Kosovo – he stated in an emotional appeal during a 2013 state visit that “Kosovo is Turkey” – has heightened tensions on the ground and triggered an angry response from Serbia. It is an open question whether the revived power contest between Russia and Turkey in Syria could eventually spill over to other sensitive areas in the Western Balkans, through clashes between these powers’ local client elites.⁶⁰ In some areas of the region, such as Macedonia or Albania, there is concern that Turkish influence in domestic politics could polarise Albanian populations and the various political parties competing for the Albanian vote. The spats in Macedonia over the Besa party and hedging by

⁵⁵ “Erdoğan Victory Strengthens Turkey’s role in Balkans”, *Balkan Insight*, 11 February 2015, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/electoral-victory-strengthens-turkish-president-s-role-in-balkans-11-02-2015>.

⁵⁶ “Analysis: Turkey’s Balkan policy not interest-oriented”, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, 9 February 2016, available at http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/analysis_turkeys_balkan_policy_not_interest_oriented-21145.

⁵⁷ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Macedonia’s Embittered Albanians Look to New Parties”, *Balkan Insight*, 23 September 2015, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-albanians-fed-up-with-politicians-09-23-2015>.

⁵⁸ David L. Phillips, “Turkey’s Islamist agenda in Kosovo”, the *Huffington Post*, 29 December 2015, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/turkeys-islamist-agenda-i_b_8891634.html.

⁵⁹ “Interview with Turan: The experience of a Turkish living in Albania since 2001”, Invest in Albania, 20 March 2015, available at <http://invest-in-albania.org/interview-with-turan-his-experience-in-living-in-albania-since-2001/>.

⁶⁰ Recent developments in neighbouring Bulgaria testify to this trend. See “Mitov: Bulgarian-Turkish relations cannot depend on a political crisis in a party”, the *Sofia Globe*, 6 January 2016, available at <http://sofiaglobe.com/2016/01/06/mitov-bulgarian-turkish-relations-cannot-depend-on-a-political-crisis-in-a-party/>.

the traditional Albanian parties point to this.

The role of the Gulf countries

To a lesser extent than Russia or Turkey – though still significant – the Gulf countries are also seen by local actors as staking out a growing role in the Western Balkans. This follows their engagement in the wars of the 1990s, based on protection and support for Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. Saudi-funded mosques and charities have been popping up in the region for years as hubs of Islamism, and there has been an apparent rise of Salafism in recent years, particularly in villages of Bosnia and Kosovo.

Beyond religious charities, the growing economic presence of Gulf countries in the Western Balkans has been welcomed by governments in desperate need of economic recovery, investment, and infrastructure. As a result, not only the Saudis but Qatar and the UAE are entering into ambitious economic partnership and investment agreements with Macedonia, Albania, and Bosnia.⁶¹ Local actors refer to Gulf money when discussing the new malls that have been popping up in Sarajevo and Serbia.⁶²

Notably, the Gulf's economic diplomacy also includes military elements (such as Belgrade's agreement with the UAE to develop its defence capabilities). Hence, beyond the clash of Europe and the West with Russia, competing Middle Eastern actors are gaining relevance across the region, and could project their rivalries there too, though it is still unclear what impact this will have in the near future.

The spectre of Islamic terrorism

A growing concern in the region in recent years is the rise of extremism, especially jihadism. This has taken place against the backdrop of the perceived Islamisation of hitherto moderate Muslim populations in the region. There has been an increase in low-level terrorist incidents and terrorist plots, sometimes against Western interests, starting with the attack on the US Embassy in Sarajevo in late 2011.⁶³ The profile of those behind these attacks seems to include local Muslims with ties to Islamic State (ISIS), as well as so-called lone wolf actors. There are reports of relatively high numbers of foreign fighters from the region, especially Bosnia and Kosovo, joining ISIS in the Middle East.⁶⁴ This has added another strain to these countries' weak law-enforcement capacities, as they rush to pass anti-terrorist

61 Mieczysław P. Boduszynski, "The Gulf and the Balkans: Islam, Investment and Influence", Gulf State Analytics, 13 February 2015, available at <http://gulfstateganalytics.com/archives/work/the-gulf-and-the-balkans-islam-investment-and-influence>; "Dubai developer to build \$4.5bn 'tourist city' in Bosnia", *Agence France-Presse*, 16 October 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/16/dubai-developer-to-build-45bn-tourist-city-in-bosnia>; "Bosnia catching up for Arab investments", *Money Times*, 16 December 2015, available at <http://www.moneytimes.com/articles/11615/20151216/bosnia-arab-investments-potential-destination-major-projects-sarajevo-capital-city.htm>.

62 Rory Donaghy, "The UAE's shadowy dealings in Serbia", *Middle East Eye*, 15 August 2015, available at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uaes-shadowy-dealings-serbia-44700108>.

63 Valerie Hopkins, "Bosnian Leaders Condemn Attack on US Embassy", *Balkan Insight*, 29 October 2011, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnians-react-to-friday-s-terrorist-attack-on-u-s-embassy>.

64 "Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Where Do They Come From?", Radio Free Europe, 29 February 2016, available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-is-isis-isil-infographic/26584940.html>.

legislation and improve cooperation.

The terrorist threat has an impact on the region's struggling economies, which depend on foreign investments and tourism.⁶⁵ Religious-inspired terrorism also risks damaging frail, post-conflict inter-community relations, as negative rhetoric in Bosnia between Republika Srpska and the Muslim-majority Federation illustrates.

The spectre of creeping Islamisation in some parts of the region has raised concern among Western security agencies. At a time of perceived European neglect or rejection – even Islamophobia, with the rise of movements like Germany's anti-Islam group PEGIDA – local actors fret that these forms of Islamism imported from the Middle East could erode the local tradition of ethnic and religious tolerance between Islam and secularism inherited from the communist period. The security challenge posed by fighters returning from combat with ISIS could become a very real threat – both for these countries and the EU – if the region continues to drift, struggling at the political, social, and economic levels, with no clear prospect of improvement.

Balkan strongmen and the disaffected

Democracy and good governance are in deep crisis in the Western Balkans. As illiberal forces increase their influence in the region, so do their models of governance, strengthening the legitimacy of authoritarian elites and stalling progress on Europe's transformative agenda. The impression on the ground is that Europe's momentum might be spent, as illiberal narratives of the sort embodied in "Putinism", "Erdoğanism" – or in the style of Hungary's populist President Viktor Orbán – gain sway.

In spite of EU-backed reforms, there is a growing perception of creeping authoritarianism in the Western Balkans, hand-in-hand with the region's oligarchisation.⁶⁶ The resulting political landscape in the Western Balkans today is one of strongmen accruing ever more power. Analysts warn of "state capture", clientelism, and organised crime, while independent monitors rate EU candidate countries such as Macedonia, Albania, and Bosnia as only "partly free".⁶⁷ International actors and civil society organisations have also warned of recent rollbacks of media freedom in Serbia, Macedonia, and Montenegro.⁶⁸

Most of the political systems in place across the region may have the trappings of European-style democracies, but they are ruled by a resilient caste of leaders and even

65 Rodolfo Toe, "Terrorist Threats Damage Tourism in Bosnia", *Balkan Insight*, 3 March 2016, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/security-threats-jeopardising-tourism-in-bosnia-03-02-2016>.

66 Florian Bieber, "The refugee crisis underlines the absurdity of Western Balkans states being outside of the EU", London School of Economics blog, 5 September 2015, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/09/05/notes-from-the-western-balkans-summit-in-vienna-small-steps-and-not-so-great-expectations/>.

67 Data sourced from various editions of Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* ranking, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2015>.

68 See the "World Press Freedom Index 2015" of Reporters Without Borders, available at <https://index.rsf.org/#/>. Similarly, Human Rights Watch's "World Report 2016: 'Politics of Fear' Threatens Rights", 27 January 2016, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/27/world-report-2016-politics-fear-threatens-rights>.

political clans. Local civil society actors refer to them as “stabilocracies”, as those in power benefit from the overriding fear of instability and conflict to consolidate their grip on power and institutions, undermining democratic checks and balances. These “untouchables” trump independent scrutiny and judicial review, employing a powerful rhetoric of populism and nationalism, and fuelling the polarisation of these societies.

The people are not happy with this status quo. Since early 2014, the Western Balkans have been rocked by large-scale protests in Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia – which witnessed a short lived “Bosnian Spring” – and most recently in Albania. The trigger factors vary across different national contexts. The protests and violence in Kosovo starting in summer 2015 were sparked by dissatisfaction over the EU-brokered agreement with Serbia. In Macedonia, demonstrators took to the streets of Skopje to protest against the rule of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, in the wake of a massive wiretapping scandal and the protracted deterioration of democratic institutions in that country. In Montenegro, beyond the anti-NATO and pro-Russian positions of the opposition Democratic Front party, other opposition movements and civil society groups protesting against the government demanded, among other things, reforms of the election system, which they accuse of bias in favour of the ruling party.

Despite their varying contexts, the underlying factors behind these protests have much in common: socio-economic deprivation, the impunity of untouchable elites and strongmen, coupled with an overall sense of worsening prospects, especially – but not only – in countries which still have unresolved status issues, such as Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo.⁶⁹ In a time of fast mobilisation through social media and widespread anger against established politics (democratic or not), these Balkan *indignados* are an important new actor in the region’s troubled political landscape.

These protests and the counter-protests they provoke open further scenarios for the contest between Europe and rival actors such as Russia. They are fertile ground for spoilers, local or regional, as shown by Moscow’s attempts to delegitimise the 2015 protests in Macedonia as Western-funded, or efforts by Republika Srpska or the Croat leadership in Bosnia to portray the previous year’s protests in Bosnia as ethnically driven.

The EU finds itself juggling the competing demands of protesters and elites in the Western Balkans, and thereby balancing conflicting principles, namely the need for order and fear of instability versus the imperative of democratic and political reform. These perceived inconsistencies and the failure of the EU to live up to its own standards and values have led to widespread criticism of European policies by protestors and civil society actors in Kosovo, Macedonia, or Bosnia.

⁶⁹ Francisco de Borja Lasheras, “Once again, Bosnia is a wake-up call for Europe”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 28 February 2014, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_once_again_bosnia_is_a_wake_up_call_for_europe.

Recommendations

Europe can no longer afford to rely on “business as usual” in the Western Balkans. In the face of geopolitical instability and the refugee crisis, the enlargement process is not enough. Enlargement cannot deliver reform or stability to the region in a sufficient and timely manner due to a poisonous confluence of factors, not least the weakened attractive power of the EU as it faces an existential crisis. Making the case for Europe in the Western Balkans is becoming increasingly challenging, as the EU rejects migrants from the Balkans and even refugees from Syria;⁷⁰ engages in xenophobic rhetoric at the highest level (as seen with the anti-Muslim language used by some EU leaders during the refugee crisis), paying no more than lip service to the values of European solidarity; and is reluctant to support enlargement.

In a context of clashing political models and competing powers, a strategic and realistic assessment of lessons learned or a stock-taking exercise on the EU’s policies in the Western Balkans, from the impact on the ground of enlargement to Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, would be useful, paired with the ongoing Global Strategy review led by the high representative.

Building on the results of that exercise, the EU and its member states should bring to bear a broader array of tools, such as strategic communication and conflict-prevention mechanisms. In a context of revived geopolitics, power games, and political gridlock, the EU cannot rely on incremental change and the “carrot” of enlargement alone – it will also need coercive “sticks”, and to move fast in anticipating challenges to its objectives. With other actors playing rugby, the EU cannot confine itself to badminton.

But beyond enlargement, in parallel, the EU should step up the integration of the region’s countries into European structures, such as the Energy Union, that are open to non-EU members. This would tie the countries closer to the EU, provide greater strategic coverage in the region and curb Russia’s strategy of using energy supplies to strike strategic alliances.

1. Include the Western Balkans in managing the refugee crisis

The most immediate challenge facing the Western Balkans is the refugee crisis and its destabilising impact, often due to the unilateral actions of EU member states. Even if the Balkan route through Macedonia and Serbia is actually closed, as declared by the EU in March 2016, alternative routes may emerge, such as through Albania. EU member states to the north and south of the Balkan route should ensure that their actions do not simply place the burden on the Western Balkan countries, but are coordinated with them.

⁷⁰ Francisco de Borja Lasheras, “Once again, Bosnia is a wake-up call for Europe”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 28 February 2014, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_once_again_bosnia_is_a_wake_up_call_for_europe.

When it comes to the refugee crisis, the Western Balkans are already part of the EU, and the Union should recognise this. The Western Balkans' handling of refugee flows is just as important as that of other affected member states, such as Austria or Croatia. The EU did well in inviting the Western Balkan countries to a summit in October 2015, but these countries need to be part of the mechanism for dealing with the refugee crisis, including in the decision-making processes.

2. Invest in conflict-prevention mechanisms

In a context where there is a likelihood of more instability, spill-over from geopolitical tensions elsewhere, and instances of rapidly developing civil unrest, Europeans should invest collectively in conflict-prevention mechanisms, instead of hoping that the prospect of enlargement alone will do the trick. The EU must make more effective use of existing arrangements on the ground (such as the OSCE's conflict-prevention mechanisms) and key partners such as the United States.

This should be part of a broader European recommitment to underwriting stability in the Western Balkans, as a signal to potential local spoilers and their foreign sponsors. EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains important as a tripwire and a forward base in case it needs to be reactivated to deal with unrest. It must regain its credibility as a military presence with reinforcements from key member states. Europeans should also prepare alternative options in the face of a Russian veto of the renewal of EUFOR's mandate and consider increasing the force's numbers. Clear assurances from NATO would have a stabilising effect on the region.

Moreover, the growing terrorist threat in the region also demands greater efforts from EU countries to intensify cooperation at the level of judiciaries, law enforcement, and security agencies with the Western Balkans, as well as through agencies such as Europol, part of a vision to help the region's integration into the European space of security and justice.

3. Counter the Russian gambit

The most effective thing the EU can do in the long term to counter Russia's inroads in the Western Balkans is to make clear that it is serious about enlargement, and show that the accession process actually delivers progress on democratisation, the rule of law, stability, and prosperity. Yet the fact remains that Russia could pose a serious challenge in the region. This does not mean that Russia has a grand strategy for the Western Balkans: it wants different things at different times and in different places. But it is clear that Moscow wants to thwart the region's Euro-Atlantic integration, and at the same time weave a web of Kremlin-friendly constituencies at the elite and societal level.

Europeans should not rule out the possibility, even if it now seems unlikely, of Russia taking even more forceful destabilising measures in the Western Balkans. This could include hybrid actions in the region's hotspots, such as Republika Srpska, at critical decision-making

points on controversial topics, such as NATO membership for Montenegro, or during outbursts of unrest. Europe should build local resilience and deny Moscow low-cost opportunities to act as a spoiler. Europe's problem with Russia is often one of underestimation, and a lack of strategic anticipation. The question for Europe is how to answer the Russian challenge and avoid an overreaction that could help legitimise Russia's positions in the region.⁷¹

The EU should not underestimate the power of Russia's hybrid tools, notably its propaganda machine, impact on public opinion, and capacity to spark social unrest by galvanising radical groups. The EU needs to step up its strategic communications and engage in more systematic myth-busting in the Western Balkans. A regional Strategic Communication (StratCom) unit – modelled on the recently created European External Action Service (EEAS) East StratCom initiative – should urgently be set up for this purpose.

4. Demand strategic alignment from candidate countries

The new geopolitical environment and the deteriorating relationship with Russia means that the EU can no longer afford to allow aspiring members to balance between the EU and Russia in strategic terms. Aligning with Russia in the face of its violations of international law in Ukraine and its active undermining of European security is not compatible with the aspiration to become fully-fledged members of the Union. The EU should make clear that any candidate country that is serious about becoming a responsible member state must align with the EU on foreign and security policy.

This particularly applies to Serbia, given its strategic partnership with Russia, which has taken on the trappings of a foreign policy and security alliance at precisely the time that the EU's objectives are being actively challenged by Moscow in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the neighbourhood. The argument often made is that putting more pressure on Serbia over its links to Russia will alienate the population and turn them against the EU. This is a tenuous argument, however. And even if it is true, Serbia will have to drop its balancing act when it joins the EU. At present the country is in a strategic shift away from the EU, through deepening its relations with Russia.

The EU should firm up the legal obligation that currently only speaks of "gradual alignment" by candidate countries to the EU's foreign policy, and make alignment with the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy a legal obligation for candidate countries from the outset.⁷² Opening Chapter 31 on foreign, security, and defence policy in membership negotiations with Serbia would be another way to strengthen strategic alignment.

⁷¹ European diplomatic official, Brussels, March 2016.

⁷² Marco Gestri, "Sanctions imposed by the European Union: legal and institutional aspects", draft paper presented at the International Conference on Coercive Diplomacy, Sanctions and International Law, at Istituto Affari Internazionali, 13 February 2015, p. 8, available at <http://www.comune.modena.it/summerschool/edizione-2015/materiali-didattici/gestri-draft>. Also see "EU 'not asking Serbia to impose sanctions'", b92, 19 November 2014, available at http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=11&dd=19&nav_id=92288.

The strengthening of strategic alignment should be accompanied by convincing measures from the EU to move ahead with the accession process. Moreover, European governments should offer non-NATO Western Balkan countries the kind of formal security guarantees they currently lack. More ambitious European measures through the Partnership for Peace programmes in NATO should be considered, for instance in the field of defence reform, as should more ambitious cooperation on the CSDP for partner countries in the Western Balkans, or other security and military cooperation arrangements that can buttress these countries' sense of security.

5. Take a tough line against Balkan strongmen

The rationale for the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans has traditionally been twofold: a geopolitical and security argument, coupled with a normative argument. The first stresses the need to anchor weak and fragile states in the EU framework, so that they do not turn into sources of insecurity (for example, havens for organised crime, incubation areas for ISIS fighters, or simply zones that could witness the return of ethnic conflict). This "better within than without" argument supports an acceleration of the accession process and a downgrading of the EU's Copenhagen criteria for entry. The normative rationale relies on the notion that the Western Balkan states can be transformed into fully-fledged democracies through the incentive of eventual EU membership. Under this rationale, the EU is engaged in the Western Balkans because it wants to project its model abroad and democratise the region through a conditions-driven accession process.

Under pressure from divisions at home and a volatile neighbourhood abroad, the EU is widely seen across the region as being too ready to lower democratic standards in the interests of the geopolitical rationale.⁷³ To some, the EU, facing great domestic and external pressures, is suffering from a need to move forwards with the enlargement process regardless of changing circumstances on the ground.⁷⁴ Often, the EU is regarded as supporting the Western Balkan "strongmen" as they deliver on difficult dossiers or play the pro-Western geopolitical card, despite their questionable reformist and democratic credentials. But simply accepting this geopolitical blackmail comes at the cost of a shallow Europeanisation and stalled institution-building, which disempowers citizens.⁷⁵ It also comes at the cost of further damage to the EU's normative credibility. Importing more illiberal leaders into its midst would likely serve to weaken its cohesion even further.

The EU should push back on the illiberalism and revisionism that is spreading in the Western Balkans, fuelled in part by Russian influence and political intervention. This is as essential as it is challenging, as Putin or Erdoğan's mode of

governance has an irresistible charm for many, not only in the Western Balkans but also in the rest of Europe. The EU and its member states should stick to the Union's core principles, putting the Copenhagen criteria and principles of democracy, the rule of law, and media freedom at the forefront of the accession process, and be clear about what they expect from local elites. This must be part of more agile engagement with pro-democratic and reformist forces in the region.

The EU and key member states should be firmer with Western Balkan leaders and with local spoilers, calling them out and holding them accountable for their actions. This does not mean that the EU should step in and play the role of local courts in prosecuting corrupt leaders. Rather, the EU should indicate that it is ready to go beyond its policy of incentives and deploy sanctions such as travel restrictions and asset freezes – as it has done effectively in other scenarios – against leaders who actively seek to undermine the fragile arrangements underpinning stability and peace in the region.

⁷³ European diplomat, Sarajevo, October 2015.

⁷⁴ EU COWEB official, Brussels, March 2016.

⁷⁵ Francisco de Borja Lasheras and Vessela Teherneva, "Is the EU losing the Western Balkans? What local experts think", European Council on Foreign Relations, 5 August 2015, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/is_the_eu_losing_the_western_balkans_what_local_experts_think3093.

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