

The Influencers' Futile Toils: Russia and Turkey in the Balkans

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Oddly, the Western Balkans, a region with a population constituting barely 3.5% of the European Union's total population, regularly manages to attract the interest and engagement of all three world powers – the US, Russia and China –, as well as major regional actors such as Turkey and the Islamic states in the Gulf region.¹ The roots of this unlikely competition go back to the post-1991 disintegration of non-aligned Yugoslavia. It coincided with the end of the Cold War in Europe and triggered a quest among external powers to fill the emerging void in this geopolitically important part of the continent. After all, the region connects the east and west, and north and south of the continent. In modern history, it has been the arena for conflicts among great powers, including the outbreak of the First World War. This competition has persisted to the present day, three decades after the outset of Yugoslavia's disintegration. In the first place, however, it is the EU that is still labouring to achieve its long-standing goal to usher into membership the so-called Western Balkans, while avoiding the real or imagined risks that may entail.

Since 1991, the EU has taken it upon itself to be the driving force behind settling the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Its most effective instrument was the promise of membership to the warring parties once the conflicts were resolved. In 2003, at its Thessa-

loniki summit, the EU extended to the Western Balkans, meaning the former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia (this country being at that moment already at the gates of the EU) plus Albania, a formal offer of membership once conditions were fulfilled. The motivation was to put an end to the conflicts for Yugoslavia's succession, which in the previous decade had escalated into the first war on the continent since 1945, and repeatedly caused division among the Western allies. In parallel, the US strategy for the region focused on making it part of a continent that was "whole and free," meaning that every European state should be as much a part of Euro-Atlantic integration as possible.

Thus, the EU is offering supranational economic, social and political integration to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia as well as Serbia and Kosovo, the so-called Southeast Europe Six (SEE6).² NATO is making a similar offer in the field of security and defence. For the SEE6, membership of these two organizations would mean giving up central sectors of national sovereignty in exchange for the promise of rising prosperity and unquestionable security.

In the meantime, the EU has enclosed the region, leaving only the SEE6 outside of its territory: Croatia became an EU member in 2013. Albania and Montenegro entered NATO in 2009 and 2017, respectively, so that there is now a chain of NATO states stretching from the Baltic to the Black sea. Essentially, the SEE6 have been economically "swallowed" by the EU, and the ring of NATO states around the region isolates it from power projections by third parties.

¹ BONOMI, Matteo and RELJIĆ, Dušan. "The EU and the Western Balkans: So Near and Yet so Far." *SWP Comments*, No. 2017/53, December 2017.

² Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia are the EU members that are refusing to recognize the secession of Kosovo from Serbia that took place in 2008. China and Russia are the two members of the United Nations Security Council also withholding recognition.

Stalled Drive for EU Membership and External Spoilers

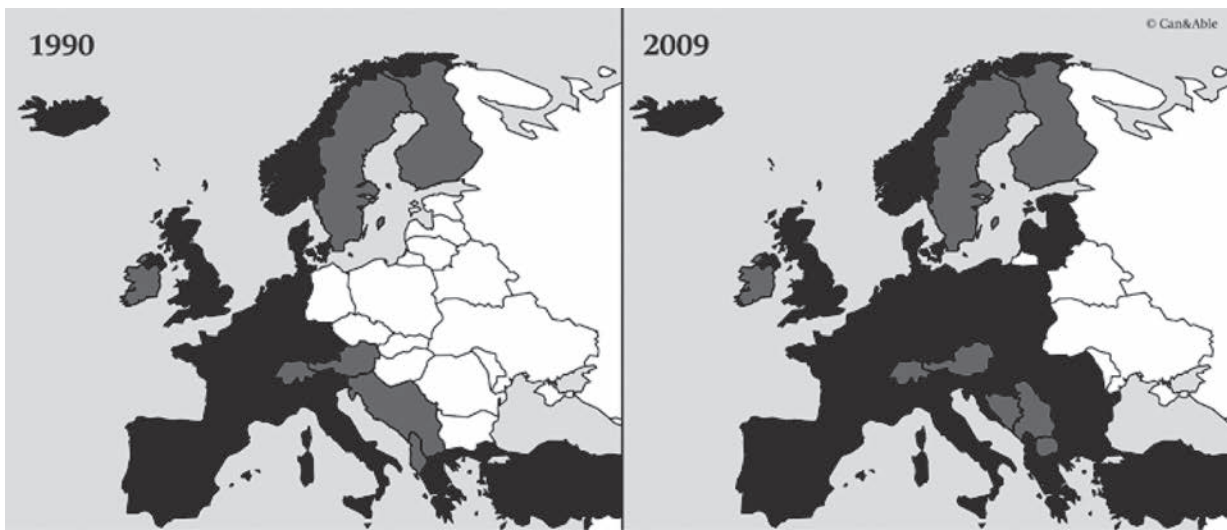
Map 1 shows several “blank spots” in the Western Balkans surrounded by NATO and/or EU Member States: Serbia with Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Pristina (because of its unresolved international status), Belgrade (because of NATO's war against Serbia in 1999) and Sarajevo (because most Serbs in this country see the West as the protector of their Croat and Muslim compatriots and contenders) are not likely to join the Western military alliance any soon. Similarly challenging is their bid to enter the EU, not only because of the

many political and economic flaws these applicants still have to overcome, but also because of Brexit, the populist wave, the repercussions of the financial and economic crises in 2008 and the other facets of the EU's current travails.

However, the EU as a pole of attraction in terms of economic and political integration is far from being substituted by external competitors. Overwhelmingly, foreign direct investments, financial sector ownership, remittances from migrant workers and foreign trade stem from the EU, mostly from Germany and Italy. Trade between the EU and the SEE6 is about ten to 15 times bigger than with China, Russia or Turkey. About 1.7 million people from the former Yu-

MAP 1

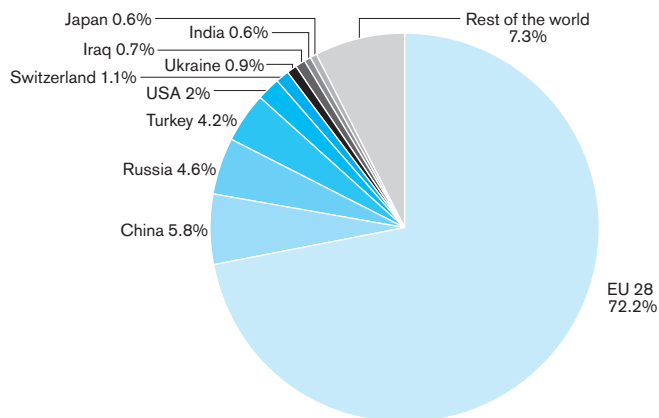
NATO Member States 1990 and 2009



Source: SWP 2017.

CHART 10

Western Balkans 6, International Trade. Top Trading Partners 2018



Source: IMF, EU DG Trade.

goslavia have migrated to Germany alone. Vienna is probably the third biggest Serbian city in terms of the number of inhabitants of that ethnic origin.

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Yet, as long as the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans is stalled, Russia, Turkey and the other external “influencers” have the opportunity to act as “spoilers” in the region, mostly through political manoeuvres, public diplomacy and agitation as well as, particularly in Moscow’s case, according to Western allegations, through undercover subversion.

Three Instruments of Russia’s Influence in the Region³

Alongside its strategic and economic displacement from southeast Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the instruments of Russian leverage in the region are becoming less and less effective. The first instrument was always more imagined than enacted: although Serbs, Montenegrins and Slavic Macedonians share Slavic roots and the Orthodox religion with Russia, and while memories of historical alliances with Russia continue to play an important role in the construction of their identities, the region’s numerous ethnic minorities, such as the Hungarians and Albanians, are indifferent to tales of historical and religious ties with Russia. On the contrary, overstated closeness to Russia breeds ethnic tensions that no one government in the region can afford, in light of the determination to join the EU. Also, many Orthodox Slavs in the region view Russia with scepticism, as a great power whose actions, as demonstrated by a number of episodes in the past centuries, have not always been supportive of their goals.

Surveys have shown that even in a country such as Serbia, where a majority of the population favours alliances with Russia and overwhelmingly rejects NATO membership, support for joining the EU hovers at around 50 percent. In fact, the public opinion towards the EU in the whole region is contradictory and shifting. The percentage that approve membership shot up after each successful step in the EU accession process, such as the lifting of visa requirements in 2010, only to fall again when bad news came from Brussels – whether in connection with the euro crisis, the flow of migrants through the Balkans, the difficulties in the EU-brokered talks between Belgrade and Pristina, or most recently the Brexit referendum. The foreign policy leanings of the Serbs and other Western Balkan nations considering EU accession are plainly shaped more by political perceptions of current events than by supposedly deep-seated preferences and animosities.

Moscow’s second instrument of influence – south-east Europe’s dependency on Russian energy supplies and especially natural gas – is also diminishing. In 2015, Russia abandoned the planned construction of the South Stream gas pipeline partly on account of the EU’s strict conditions, alongside high construction costs and uncertain price trends for fossil fuels. The Western Balkan countries are members of the EU’s Energy Community and have agreed to adopt its *acquis*. This has prevented Russia’s Gazprom from using South Stream to expand its predominance in southeastern Europe.

Moscow’s third - and most effective - instrument of influence in the region relates to Serbia, and is the threat to use its Security Council veto if the West attempts to make Kosovo a member of the United Nations. This is the only critical tie between the two states. Moscow is keen to draw Serbia further from the West because no politician who wants to succeed in Serbian politics can risk losing Russia’s support over the Kosovo conundrum. A sign of Moscow’s advancement in this respect would be for Serbia to raise its military and security cooperation with Russia to the same level that it has with the US and NATO. According to Russian figures, there were 22 Serbian military exercises with NATO in 2015,

³ For a detailed analysis see RELJIĆ, Dušan. “The impact of Russia.” In LANGE, Sabina; NEČEV, Zoran and TRAUER, Florian (eds.). *Reports EUISS Resilience in the Western Balkans*. Paris: EUISS Report No.36, August 2017.

and two with Russia. The numbers have not changed significantly since then.

Turkey: Dissonance between Ambitions and Capabilities⁴

The Balkans is especially important for Turkey's relations with the EU and presence on the European continent in general. Simply put, there is no point in Europe to which Turkish political and other influence reaches further west than Bosnia and Herzegovina. Consequently, Turkey acted as a fierce ally to Bosnian Muslims during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later wholeheartedly supported the pursuit of Kosovo Albanians for secession from Serbia. In this manner Ankara gained standing and influence among those population groups that it considered from the very beginning to be inclined to re-establish close ties with Turkey after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the end of the Cold War. In his speech at the opening ceremony of the conference "Ottoman legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities today" held in Sarajevo in October 2000, former Turkish Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Ahmed Davutoglu claimed that it was only during the Ottoman era that the Balkans had a central role in the world's politics. In his vision, the countries in the Balkans could escape the destiny of being on the periphery or a victim of geostrategic competition of great powers, by re-establishing their success from the Ottoman period.

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Around 2010, when peace consolidations and the quest for EU membership was on the top of the agenda in the region, Turkey also invested much dip-

lomatic effort in a political rapprochement with Serbia, particularly in the context of opening channels of communication between the more politically conservative Bosnian Muslim leaders and Belgrade. Parallel to this, Turkey gave special focus to strengthening its economic and cultural influences in the whole region. The political gains that Turkey accomplished during the times of crises and war in former Yugoslavia started dissipating in times of political stabilization in the region. There are five main reasons for this:

- Turkish public diplomacy did not convince the political actors in the region that its interests and goals would also benefit those communities that were not marked as potential Turkish political "clients" in the region from the very beginning, e.g. Muslims of various ethnicities;
- The "Leitmotif" of the Turkish public diplomacy discourse directed at the Western Balkans, focusing on a romantic and rose-tinted interpretation of the history of Ottoman rule in the region, rekindled resentments and stirred suspicion in many parts of the region, rather than fostering commonality;

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- Turkey has not achieved substantial progress in the field of trade and investments in the Western Balkan regions and has been unable to catch up with Germany, Italy, Russia, and, more recently, China, who remain its main external economic partners;
- Turkey has not significantly progressed on its path towards EU membership, whereas Western Balkan countries consider EU membership

⁴ Cf. BOŠKOVIĆ-MITROVIĆ, MARIJA; RELJIĆ, Dušan; and VRAČIĆ, Alida. "Elsewhere in the Neighbourhood: Reaching Out to the Western Balkans." In Çevik, B. Senem; and Seib, Philip (eds.). *Turkey's Public Diplomacy*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2015.

as the paramount goal of their domestic transformation and foreign policy: the capability of Turkey to present itself as an example of successful “Europeanization” has regressed;

- Turkey’s domestic conflicts and its tarnished record regarding human rights and the rule of law has diminished its international image, and, consequently, the country does not currently have potential to act as an example for modernization and development in the eyes of the majority of the population of the Western Balkans.

Conclusions

Russia and Turkey’s toils to gain a decisive standing as geo-political “influencers” in the Western Balkans will remain futile as long as the EU credibly pursues its enlargement goals in the region. However, should the presently narrow and restricted approach taken by the EU and its most important Member States towards integrating the SEE6 persist, the other “influencers” might gain more traction. But they have a long way to go in terms of strengthening their trade relations, financial ties and human interaction with the SEE6. Even if the authoritarian political models emanating from Moscow and Ankara resonate today in significant parts of the population in SEE6, there are no indications that Russia and Turkey are willing

or able to invest enough political and financial capital to match the region’s already existing level of integration with the EU.

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