

## BOOK REVIEW

**Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2017, xviii+300 p., index.**

Jahja Muhasilović\*

For centuries Balkans is playing an important role in Russia's foreign policy. During the Czarist Russia, the region served as one of the main polygons on the Empire's way to access the warm seas of the Mediterranean, thus ending its historical deficiency of lacking navigable waters during the winter months. With the establishment of the Soviet Union, Russia was present in the region through the ideological camp formed together with the socialist regimes in the Balkans. Later on, two unusual Socialist regimes of Albania and Yugoslavia severed their ways with the Kremlin. But, despite all Soviet influence in the region would remain pretty strong throughout the Cold War. Moscow's influence will start diminishing with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For a decade to come, through the 1990s, Russia will struggle to keep its status as a relevant power in the Balkans. With the wars in Former Yugoslavia the region entered a period of "Pax Americana" where Washington the first time in history acted as the main foreign actor that was deciding about the future restructurings in the region. This was made possible by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It has lanced the US as the only global superpower. At the same time, Russia was suffering from a painful

---

\* Assist. Prof. Dr., International University of Sarajevo, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7641-112X,  
e-mail: jahjam87@windowslive.com

transition back home, plus a full-scale war inside its borders. Kremlin just lacked the capacity to deal more actively with the crisis in the Balkans. It will have to wait for the beginning of the next millennium to start regaining once lost influence.

Under Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia managed to overcome many internal and external problems. Consolidation of Kremlin's power under Putin and economic advance of the 2000s and 2010s helped with the export of oil and gas, heightened Russia's foreign ambitions. The rise of Putin's Russia was felt in the Balkans as well, where Kremlin emerged as an energy powerhouse through its natural gas monopoly in the region. Kremlin's influence appeared to be benign until the eruption of the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. After that point, external pressure felt by the NATO's eastward expansion pushed Russia to start operating as a major disrupter in the Balkans. Kremlin's post-2014 strategy in the region includes active work on planting and growing the seeds of anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment. Like, Czarist Russian Empire before, Putin's Russia is heavily relying on the Orthodox-Slavic population in its new strategy. But, unlike Romanovs, Putin's Russia has shown willingness to work with all the elements in the Balkans that would nurture 'anti-Westernism'.

Dimitar Bechev's, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe* written in 2017, is providing a fair insight into foreign policy that Putin's Russia nourishes in the Balkans. As it would be seen from the chapters the author carefully compiled, there are some parallels with Russia's strategies during the era of Romanovs or Cold War, but there are probably many more novelties in that strategy, where Russia in a flexible manner is not reluctant to use whatever asset it possesses as a part of its "asymmetric war against the West" from blackmailing the customer states with its energy capacities or allying with the region's Orthodox Churches and nationalists to weaponizing unemployed IT experts across to region that would spin conspiracy theories or influence public opinion to help Kremlin achieve its geostrategic goals. Bechev's book particularly focuses on the foreign policy of the Russian Federation that survived the ruins of the Soviet Union. The author starts his journey with the wars in Former Yugoslavia where actually seeds of the post-Cold War Russian foreign policy were planted.

*Chapter 1: Balkans Rediscovered: Russia and the Breakup of Yugoslavia*

When Milosevic-regime launched a killing spree across other former Yugoslavia, Belgrade was in a need of international support for its wars. As the majority of the Western states were critical of the killings committed by the Serb-majority Yugoslav Army, Milosevic had to turn to Serb's historical ally, which was the newly established Russian Federation. Although the transition in the Soviet Union was not as bloody as it was in Yugoslavia things were not shiny in Russia neither. After the turbulent transition of power in the Kremlin, Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) managed to seize power. One of the first things that Milosevic's regime will do in its foreign policy was trying to get Russia's support for their cause in the war that was already taking civilian lives in Former Yugoslav republics. Milosevic was not so lucky in getting Yeltsin on the board. He made a strategic mistake by being supportive of Yeltsin's rivals from the old Soviet establishment whom the latter just managed to overthrow.

Despite the ideological differences Russia generally supported Belgrade's position during the war. Yet, there is not much that Kremlin could do through the official state channels. On certain occasions, it was forced to order Russian troops that were part of the peacekeeping mission in the region to stay put against the advancement of NATO. The reason was simple. Russia lacked the capacity to help Serbs with concrete military action. During the 1990s Russia was facing a serious economic downturn back home and had to fight a bloody war in the Northern Caucasus against the Chechen separatism. Kremlin was not able to put things under the control at home, let alone in a distanced and proved to be a not that important region as the Balkans was. While state officials and the military were too careful not to anger the NATO, the Russian public and some opposition parties were openly supporting the Serbian position during the war. Many Russians would help Serbs through non-state channels.

Kremlin's passiveness was criticized by Slavophil circles in Russia. Especially Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev (1990-1996) was under harsh criticism for siding with the international sanctions against the Milosevic-regime. As official Kremlin was reluctant to conduct concrete steps in helping the Serbs, many politicians from the opposition parties, Slavophil thinkers, fanatic Orthodox Christians, and volunteer weekend fighters will visit the region during the wars. Many Russian fighters will participate in the atrocities along with the Serbian troops. Even Aleksandar Dugin, promoter of Neo-Eurasianism, that some two decades later will be an important ideology in Putin's Russia, has paid his visit to the region.

In 1995 the United States decided to actively engage in the war. The US Air Forces air-bombarded Bosnian Serbs pressuring all the fighting factions to sign a ceasefire in 1995. The ceasefire agreement will be known as the Dayton Peace Agreement. It will serve as the basic state document of the post-war Bosnian and Herzegovina. Although Russian troops were present in the region, the operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was NATO-led which meant Russia was excluded from participating in it. Later on, Russian political leadership, especially Foreign Minister Kozyrev, will be harshly criticized by the public for letting NATO bomb Bosnian Serbs. Kremlin even failed to become a broker of the peace agreement. After the war ended in Bosnia and Herzegovina Russia continued its presence in the political life of the war-torn country, generally supporting the position of the Bosnian Serbs. It did not join the Western camp in weakening the Bosnian Serbs in the political life. Russia generally opposed Western decisions and criticized Americans for relying on the force in imposing the measures against the Bosnian Serb forces. Due to its internal weaknesses, this was pretty much all Russia achieved in this country in the second half of the 1990s. Probably the greatest achievement for Russia was securing a place in the steering board of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC)-the international body responsible for overseeing the Dayton settlement and the work of the UN-appointed High Representative.

Another crisis where Russia proved to be unable to act was the Kosovo War (1998-1999). After NATO decided to bomb the Milosevic-regime in Operation Allied Force, Russians could only watch from the side. Despite the failure to do more in preventing NATO's bombardment, the war in Kosovo will represent an important symbol of the West's hypocrisy and American unilateralism in the Russian eyes. Later under Putin, the case of Kosovo would often be used as a counterargument against the Western double standards and unilateralism. This rhetoric was increased after this province gained its independence from Serbia in 2008. At the time Kosovo War served to the new Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov (1996-1998) to promote the idea of Russia reinventing itself as an independent center of power in a multipolar world. It was too early for such ideas, as Russia was still weak and the United States was at the height of its power in a still unipolar world.

*Chapter 2: Meddling in Europe's Backyard: Russia and the Western Balkans*

The second chapter provides details of Russia's relations with the particular countries in the Western Balkans. The level of Russian influence varies from country to country in the region. What was common to

Kremlin's relations with all the particular countries that its attitude has changed after 2014. For a long period of time, Kremlin tried to communicate to the West that Ukraine is a red line that should not be crossed as it served as a useful buffer between its territory and the NATO alliance. The mass protests that have erupted in Ukraine against the pro-Russian government changed the tone in Russo-Western relations. After the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of the Crimea, the rivalry between Russia and the West that loomed for some years started being led more openly by both sides. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Western governments imposed limited sanctions on Russia and some of its firms. Russia also decided to act more aggressively in order to protect its national interests. Aggressiveness served as Kremlin's defense strategy against the Western pressure. As Russia was pressured in its own sphere of influence, Kremlin transferred that rivalry to other regions and tried to hit the West in its own "backyard". Among the first regions where Russia tested its new strategy was the Western Balkans.

The region that is for decades waiting at the doors of both the EU and NATO was ideal for Kremlin to disrupt the West and NATO and keep it away from its own borders. Prior to 2014 Russia's presence in the region was almost totally limited to gas export. Russian businessmen were active on the Montenegrin coast. Although Russian capital was often described as "dirty" in general West was not alarmed by the Russian limited investments in the region. After 2014 that attitude will change on both sides. Russia started playing a disrupter role by trying to undermine the region's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. It started portraying itself as an alternative to the region rather than as a power that was promoting multilateralism as the EU and NATO did. Although Russia seriously lacked a capacity to replace the role EU or NATO had in the Western Balkans, its every move would alarm the Western camp. Russia created its own channels of influence in the region, often from the Slavic and Orthodox Christian backgrounds. It works more actively in synchronizing any eurosceptic or anti-NATO voice in the region. Local media that is ideologically close to Russia would often serve as a megaphone in promoting the anti-Western sentiment.

Serbia is the closest of countries in the Western Balkans to Russia. This country has a long tradition of close to Russia that stretches back for centuries. Especially under Putin Kremlin tried to restore those historical ties with Russia. Serbia is the only country that prefers to stay neutral in terms of a military alliance, which fits Moscow's interests in the region. Although it is the closest ally in the Western Balkans the share of trade and

investment that comes from Russia to Serbia is dwarfed by the EU's share. Close ties between the two countries were best seen in the military parade that was organized in 2014 where Russia's president was a special guest. Two countries also work closely in military terms, but again, this is insignificant when NATO's military influence over the Serbian military is compared. In 2012 two countries opened a joint humanitarian center in the city of Nis. Its opening has caused a lot of concern for NATO as it has the potential to be turned into a Russian military base. But, nothing concrete in that direction had been done since the launching of the center. Serbia under Aleksandar Vucic also showed some interest to participate in the restructured gas corridor project of TurkStream, but as with many ambitious goals proclaimed by Russia in the region, this project also is advancing very slowly. Serbia might face a geographical obstacle in joining the project, as there are few countries that are basically blocking Serbia from the stream.

The first concrete step where Russia tried to undermine NATO in the region was the failed coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016. A coup was an attempt by Russians in cooperation with the local Serbs in order to prevent the tiniest Balkan country from becoming a NATO member. Luckily the plot was discovered on time and nothing serious has happened. This event proved that Russia is not willing to back down in the region. It also showed that there are elements in the Balkan countries that were ready to come under Russia's patronage.

Another country of contention between Russia and the West is North Macedonia. For a long time, Kremlin nurtured good relations with the eurosceptic VMRO party in this country. This party is receiving its support mainly from the ethnic Macedonian Slavs who form a majority of the population. As Albanians are the largest minority in the country and generally leaning toward NATO, political parties in this country are deeply rooted in the country's ethnic division. After 2014 one of the Kremlin's strategies was to play the identity card in North Macedonia in order to postpone the country's NATO membership as much as possible. Being supportive of eurosceptic elements in North Macedonia is one of the main strategies of the Kremlin in North Macedonia. This also turned to be a failed ambition as North Macedonia joined the alliance in 2020.

Another country where the Kremlin follows the strategy of disruption is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Two decades after the bloody war this country is still struggling with ethnic division. Kremlin is supporting Bosnian Serbs and has good ties to Serb-majority entity Republika Srpska. Particularly with its leader Milorad Dodik. Dodik's SNSD Party serves as the main ally

of the Kremlin in this country. Often Russian politicians who visit Bosnia and Herzegovina would first pay a visit to Banja Luka then to the rest of the country. On a few occasions, he even tried to instrumentalize his close ties to Russia during the election campaigns, when he brought folklore groups close to the Russian government to march on the streets of Banja Luka. After 2014 Russia more openly support Dodik and his secessionist policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Dodik also enjoys close ties to Russian energy firms, where some of them with his blessings operate gas refineries in Republika Srpska. Because of the Dodik factor, almost all of Russian investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina are located in the Serb-majority entity of Republika Srpska.

### *CHAPTER 3: Across the Black Sea: Bulgaria and Romania*

Eastern Balkans unlike the western part of the peninsula is more stable, which means there is less space for Russia's disruptive role. Both countries entered NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007 which made it very hard for Russia to meddle in the internal affairs of those countries. Yet, Russia is historically present in those two countries, especially in Bulgaria, and still, there are some domestic elements that would like to see more Russian influence in those two countries. Although both countries are members of the EU, like in many other member countries, there are eurosceptics with whom Kremlin nurtures good ties. Especially in Bulgaria, Russia is having links to ultra-nationalist *Ataka* which officially is known to be a Russophile political party. Russian influence was historically much smaller in Romania than it was in Bulgaria, which until lately was often described as Russia's main ally and a satellite in the region. Romania on the other hand because of its Romance origin was always more oriented toward the West and saw itself rather as part of the Latin World than of Orthodox Christian one.

Both Romania and Bulgaria have good relations with the United States in terms of military cooperation. As two are crucial in NATO's plan to counter Russian advancement to the west and their access to the Black Sea, Washington is more active in terms of military cooperation in the eastern part of the peninsula than it is in the western part. Romania is home to American anti-missile systems and the US operates together with the Bulgarian Armed Forces three small military facilities in Bulgaria. Too close relations with the US military and strict allegiance to the NATO, plus Bulgaria's withdrawal from the South Stream project have caused slight tensions in their relationship with the Kremlin.

### *CHAPTER 4: Friends with Benefits: Greece and Cyprus*

Relations of Greeks in Greece and Cyprus with Russia are even more ambiguous than those of Bulgarians or Serbs. Greece is home to Orthodox Christianity, which Putin's Russia in its foreign policy holds high, and was for a long time in history a leader of the Orthodox Christianity. With the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, that role will be undertaken by Russia. While Czarist Russia's role in the independence of Serbs and Bulgarians was crucial, Greeks and Cypriots won their independence thanks to Western European powers, British in the first place, rather than through Russian support. Greece was the first country in the Balkans to enter the EU and together with Turkey to NATO. Because of its importance to the West, Greece always in its modern history cultivated good ties with those countries and was always considered an ally of the same. The reality that Greeks are also adhering to Orthodox Christianity has created an ambiguous attitude towards Russians which was translated into politics. Russia is seen as culturally close, but on the other hand also as a rival in terms of who will be dominating the Orthodox World. Greeks often are not so happy with Russia's own image as the "leader of the Orthodox World".

With the rise of the Syriza Party as a consequence of the economic crisis that Greece was going through, at the time Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reached Russians for help. He also tried to use the Russia card to blackmail European partners as his country was often cornered by Germany and other rich members for not implementing enough measures to save the Greek economy. Putin welcomed Tsipras' move, but nothing substantial did not happen from Syriza's Russian strategy. Greece's importance rose in the eyes of the Kremlin when the talks of the possible inclusion of this country to the TurkStream evolved. Because of its geostrategic position the island of Cyprus is important for Russia, as well as it is to the West. For a long time, the island served as an offshore destination for the money of rich Russians. There was a fear that the island might become a hostage to Russians because of the large amounts of money that were held in Cyprus, which also proved to be an unfounded fear.

#### *CHAPTER5: The Russian-Turkish Marriage of Convenience*

Relations between Russia and Turkey are specific when compared to other Balkan countries. Because of the many wars fought between the two countries in the past and the sheer size of Turkey, Ankara is rather seen either as an ally or as a rival of Russia. Mainly the second was the case. The nature of relations between two countries under Putin and Erdogan is hard to define. On occasions they act as allies, on different occasions, they are

rivals, sometimes even enemies. Yet, what is common for the two is that they pretty much resemble each other in the methods they use in ruling their population.

For a long time, Russia was seen as the main security threat both by the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. With the end of the Cold War, that changed. Ankara stopped seeing Russia as a security threat but rather as an economic opportunity. In the early 1990s, two countries started normalizing their ties. It was the economic sphere that benefited the most from the normalization of ties. Especially when Putin came to power in Russia and Erdogan in Turkey economic ties between the two countries started skyrocketing. During the early 2010s amount of economic cooperation between the countries had reached its zenith and will generally stagnate on that level in the coming years, failing to reach a hundred billion dollars of trade amount proclaimed some decade ago. When Turkey shot down a Russian airplane over Syria in 2015, there was a short interruption in relations until 2016, when the two countries normalized their relations as a consequence of the Kremlin's empathizing with Turkey during and after the failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 2016.

Turkey is on the gas routes that brings natural gas from the Caspian Basin and Russia to Europe. Ankara tried to turn that geographical reality into a geopolitical advantage. After the South Stream project was abolished Moscow and Ankara rearranged a new deal and renamed it as a TurkStream. Yet, it remains to be seen whether this pipeline will reach Europe anytime soon. To an extent it helped the Kremlin's ambition of expanding its gas network, on the other hand, it works in consolidating Turkey as an important energy hub for the European market. For many years Turkey is trying to diversify Russia's share in its domestic energy market. Russian dominance among Turkey's gas suppliers is giving an upper hand to Kremlin over its partners in Ankara. Also, Russia is active in the construction of energy facilities inside Turkish borders, of which the most important one is Akkuyu nuclear power plant, which according to the deal signed by the two countries will be run by the Russian experts for some time.

The countries are competing in different hinterlands. They are sitting on opposite sides of the spectrum in the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia. The first time after the Cold War the two countries entered a race for dominance was in Central Asia during the 1990s which the author of the book calls a "scramble for Eurasia". Ankara and Moscow are on different ends when it comes to allies in the Syrian Civil War. The two

countries are also rivals in the Caucasus region. In the crisis over Crimea, two countries had differing stances. Ankara openly supported Crimean Tatars, who generally were against the Russian occupation, remembering all the atrocities in the past they faced from the Russian hands. Besides Syria Balkans is the place of contention between the two countries. Turkey is generally supporting Muslims in the region, Albanians, Bosniaks, and Balkan Turks. Especially Albanians and Bosniaks are not on good terms with Russia's allies in the region, with Serbs primarily. They are also very suspicious of Russia. At the same time, Ankara is openly supporting the Euro-Atlantic ambitions of those two Muslim peoples. As a NATO member sits Turkey is on the opposite side of the region.

*CHAPTER6: From a Military Standoff to Hybrid Warfare*

Although the military power is one of the strongest aspects of Russia as a macro-regional player, due to the strong presence of Western states militarily in the Balkans, Kremlin's room for maneuver is very limited. It generally tries to undermine the dominant position of NATO by working with the countries that are not members of the alliance and have retained a neutral status like Serbia and Cyprus. The only NATO member in the region with whom Russia has distressing cooperation is Turkey. Military purchase of the S-400 anti-missile systems from Russia has caused many headaches to Ankara, getting this country close to being passivized by its NATO counterparts. Although there is not a concrete competition between Russia and NATO in the Balkans, the same could not be said for the Black Sea region. Here both Russia and the West are displaying their muscles more often. The factor of Turkey is decisive in this region which side could prevail in terms of dominating the Black Sea basin. The problem of the annexation of Crimea is complicating further the real possibility that Turkey might shift the sides in this competition, and it also has similar ambitions like Russia to become a relevant factor in the Black Sea region. On the other hand, Bulgaria and Romania which cannot compete militarily with those two countries are heavily relying on the US presence on their territory. Turkey was also supportive of the Romanian initiative of establishing a permanent NATO naval task force in the Black Sea. In the Western Balkans, it is Serbia that is the most interested in seeing more military cooperation with Russia. The two established a joint humanitarian center in the Southern Serbian town of Nis, which according to some analysts has the potential to be turned into a military base. But, all that seems far from realization. NATO is even more influential in Serbia in terms of the military than Russia is at the moment. Lacking a military capacity and the support from the locals, the only tactics Russia is left to

rely on is the so-called “hybrid war”. Like in its immediate neighborhood Russia is using tactics that include propaganda, cyberattacks, political subversion, and infiltration of governments. Chances for these tactics to be successful as they were in Ukraine or other post-Soviet republics seem to be pretty slim.

*Chapter 7: Playing the Energy Card*

The energy sector is the only area where Russia is a hegemon in the region. Especially when comes to gas the region is almost completely dependent on Russia. This provides a strong bargaining chip in its relationship with the Balkan countries. The EU suggested for decades now the diversification of the region’s natural gas imports, but mainly failed to succeed. LNG terminal that is supposed to be constructed on the Adriatic shore is part of that strategy. Also, the EU had an ambitious project of bringing the gas from the Caspian Basin through Turkey in an ambitious pipeline named “Nabucco”. This project proved to be a good advertisement rather than a concrete step in limiting Russia’s dominance in the gas sector. Russia came with the South Stream Project in 2007 that was supposed to deliver 63 billion cubic meters of gas to Europe. The pipeline would go through Europe. In that sense, it would position Kremlin as even stronger in the region’s gas sector. After the crisis over Ukraine and Crimea in 2014, the EU pressured regional countries to leave the project. While on one had the region was pressured to leave the South Stream pipeline project. Germany and Russia proceeded with the plan to finalize the Nord Stream, thus securing the inflow of 55 billion cubic meters of gas to Germany and from there to the rest of Europe.

To some extent, Kremlin managed to bypass the EU’s abolition of South Stream by making a separate deal with Ankara and restructure the project under the new name of TurkStream. Turkey was also interested in new pipeline projects that would go through the region as it had the ambition to become an energy hub for the European market. On the other hand, Turkey itself is not in a much different position from other Balkan states when it comes to Russian gas as it is also searching for alternative gas corridors to limit Russia’s monopoly over its domestic energy market. Energy remains probably the strongest asset in the hands of the Kremlin.

*Chapter 8: The Allure of Russia's Might*

What was a novelty in post-Soviet Russia is the fact that the Kremlin has evolved into an energy hegemon not only in the Balkans but in Europe as a whole. Despite all the noise both in Russia and the Balkans about the Russian comeback to the region, this rhetoric became more aggressive after 2014, the real parameters on the ground are proving the opposite. Kremlin doesn't have allies in the region as it had during the Cold War, or the ideology of Putin's Russia is not popular as Socialism was between 1945 and 1991. The only area where Russia can actually rely on is its energy and a very limited number of eurosceptics and Russophiles in the region. The economy remains the main aspect of Russian influence in the region and the Kremlin is lagging way behind the EU in that area. The entire Balkans is streaming to enter the EU and with exception of Serbia to NATO as soon as possible. Dissatisfaction caused by the reluctance of the EU particularly has opened some space for Russia to enter with its propaganda. But, yet this propaganda did not cause any significant geopolitical changes in the region. Also, Bechev's book is showing that some patterns in the relation between Russia and the Balkans have continued through decades. As this book successfully demonstrated the politics of the small states in the Balkans would often cause a headache for the Russians. Small Balkan nation-states on many occasions proved to be very successful in getting from Russia what they want, after which very often Russia will be a victim of the versatile nature of the politicians in the Balkans. That pattern and attitude were transferred in relation Balkan states have with Russia today.