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ARAřTIRMA MAKALESİ – RESEARCH ARTICLE

RUSSIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A RECEDING POWER

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ABSTRACT

This study explores Russia's efforts to move closer to the Western Balkan states of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia which have expedited following the fall-out with the EU and the USA because of Crimea. Russia has intensified its dialogue with some political parties in these states, invested in key sectors of the economies of these countries' and enhanced military cooperation with some of them. Russia's efforts up to now have yielded mediocre results. The political influence of the EU in the region has increased to the detriment of Russia, Moscow has been surpassed by Brussels in the economic realm and all of these states with the exception of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina continue to maintain military relations with the EU and NATO.

Keywords: Russia, Western Balkans, Political Alliance Formation, Economic Expansion, Security Cooperation

BATI BALKANLAR'DA RUSYA: GERİLEYEN BİR GÜÇ

ÖZ

Bu çalıřma AB ve ABD ile Kırım nedeniyle yařanan sürtüřme sonrasında hızlanan Rusya'nın Batı Balkan devletlerinden Bosna-Hersek, Karadağ, Kuzey Makedonya ve Sırbistan'ı yanına çekme çabalarını inceler. Rusya bu ülkelerdeki bazı siyasi partiler ile diyalogunu arttırmıř, bu ülkelerin ekonomilerindeki kilit sektörlerle yatırım yapmıř ve bazıları ile askeri iřbirliđini geliřtirmiřtir. Rusya'nın řu ana kadarki gayretleri vasat sonuçlar vermiřtir. AB'nin bölgedeki nüfuzu Rusya'nın aleyhine artmaktadır, Moskova ekonomik düzlemde Brüksel'in gölgesinde kalmıřtır

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ve Bosna-Hersek'in Sırp Cumhuriyeti entitesi dışında bütün bu devletler AB ve NATO ile askeri bağlarını korumaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Batı Balkanlar, Siyasi İttifak Oluşumu, Ekonomik Yayılma, Güvenlik İşbirliği

Introduction

In the post-Cold War period, the Western Balkans did not appear to be vital to Russia's national interests. Russia held back during the break-up of Yugoslavia and the subsequent conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, acknowledging the growing importance of the United States and Europe in the region. In July 2003, Russia withdrew its peacekeepers from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo and limited its interest in the Western Balkans to marketing its hydrocarbon resources to regional states. However, this situation changed with the launch of an Association Agreement between the European Union (EU) and Ukraine in 2012. Russia considered this move a gross encroachment on its sphere of influence and began an active policy of derailing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of some Western Balkan countries, namely, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Russia did not share borders with the Western Balkans, nor did it feel a direct threat from them. Russia's objection to North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) inclusion of the Western Balkans stemmed primarily from the fear that renewed NATO enlargement would imbue the Alliance with renewed zeal and determination to extend membership to Georgia and Ukraine. Such a development posed a security risk to Moscow, as the two countries shared land borders with Russia. The fact that the EU took the Western Balkans under its wing did not augur well for Russia either, as membership of the Union would require political adjustment on the part of the Western Balkan countries in terms of energy agreements, visa systems and the implementation of sanctions policy against Russia¹

Russia intended to pursue a policy of disruption in the Western Balkan region which aimed to drag out the resolution of the regional disputes, delay and if possible, obstruct the integration of the Western

¹ Maxim Samorukov, "Russia and the Western Balkans: A Last Stand or More of the Same?", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 04 September 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/2019/09/04/russia-and-western-balkans-last-stand-or-more-of-same-pub-79796>, (21.02.2021).

Balkan states to the EU and NATO. The endurance of regional conflicts, political instability, weak institutions and social tensions in the Western Balkans would urge the EU to devote more attention, time and resources to its near neighbourhood, thus would have less desire and wherewithal to make significant headway in its Eastern Partnership initiative which anticipated building stronger political and economic ties with the former Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine which Russia still considered as part of its near abroad. In line with this reasoning, the February 2013 Foreign Policy Concept stated that the Balkan region was of great strategic importance to Russia and declared that it intended to develop comprehensive pragmatic and equitable cooperation with the countries of the region.² Shortly after the declaration of the Concept, Moscow threw its weight more strongly behind nationalist, illiberal, Eurosceptic political groups in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, augmented loans and investments offered to these countries and even expedited military collaboration with some of them.

This article argues that all the Russian attempts whose chief aim has been to counter the West's advances in former Soviet geography which are deemed detrimental to Russian interests, has not paid off well. The political factions backed up by Moscow were either removed from power or were side-lined by their pro-Western rivals. Russia could not surpass the EU as the major trade partner, investor and financial aid provider of the Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, being part of the NATO proved to be much more an attractive security option for most of the Western Balkan states than a vague military association with Russia. This paper, which is divided into three parts, examines the Russian efforts in the political, economic and security spheres to strengthen its hand in the Western Balkans and explores the reasons of their moderate success.

1. Russia's Search for Political Allies in the Western Balkans

Russia attached particular importance to the consolidation of political ties with the like-minded political parties in target countries. Moscow improved relations with the nationalist and conservative Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for

² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", 18 February 2013, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186, (22.05.2020).

Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) in Macedonia and retained bonds with the small pro-Russian parties of Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (DPSM) and United Macedonia. The country closed ranks with the Russophile formations of New Serb Democracy (NSD/NOVA) and Democratic People's Party (DNP) in Montenegro following the deterioration of relationship with the ruling Social Democratic Party (DPS). The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the governing party of the Republika Srpska (RS) entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, came out as one of the close allies of Russia in the Western Balkans while in Serbia Moscow preferred playing the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) against the small pro-Russian nationalist parties such as Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), Dveri, Serbian People's Party (SNP) and Serbian Radical Party (SRS).

The VMRO-DPMNE had erstwhile a pro-EU and pro-NATO orientation. However, as the accession process dragged on for long time mostly as a result of the Greek veto over the country's name, the Party lost its enthusiasm and became much more receptive to the Russian overtures. The turning point came in February 2015 when Zoran Zaev, the leader of the Social Democratic Union (SDSM), the major opposition party in Macedonia accused the Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski who also served as the head of the VMRO-DPMNE, along with his Counter-intelligence Chief Saso Mijalkov, of organizing the wire-tapping of more than 20,000 people, including ambassadors, journalists, judges, politicians and religious leaders.³ Following the incident, while the EU expressed its concerns regarding the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedom of media in Macedonia⁴ and mass protests broke out against the ruling regime in the country, Russia defined the event as a foreign ploy and claimed that Gruevski came under fire because of his refusal to join sanctions against Russia as well as his support for the Russian-initiated Turkish Stream natural gas project.⁵ Russia

³ Kole Casule, "Macedonia Opposition Leader Says PM Ordered 'Massive Wire-tapping'", *Reuters*, 09 February 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-opposition-wiretapping/macedonia-opposition-leader-says-pm-ordered-massive-wire-tapping-idUSKBN0LD1U120150209>, (22.05.2020).

⁴ "Wiretap Scandal Threatens Democracy in Macedonia", *Euractiv*, 23 April 2015, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/wiretap-scandal-threatens-democracy-in-macedonia/>, (22.05.2020).

⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions During Government Hour at the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly", 20 May 2015,

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also stood by the Gruevski government concerning the shoot-outs in Kumanovo where the Macedonian security forces and Albanian militants clashed and 18 people lost their lives. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticized the EU for condoning Albanian expansionism and denying the existence of an organizational force behind the skirmish.⁶

The VMRO-DPMNE, despite coming first in December 2016 general election, failed to form the new government much to the disappointment of Russia. The new government led by Zaev pursued a resolute policy of drawing closer to the EU and kept Russia at arm's length which was revealed initially with the expulsion of a Russian diplomat from Macedonia out of solidarity with the Union in the wake of the Skripal poisoning case in March 2018.⁷ Zaev's boldest move came out on June 17, 2018, with the signing of the Prespa Agreement with Greece which changed the name of the country to North Macedonia, thus removing the main obstacle towards its membership to the EU and NATO.⁸

The referendum process of the Prespa Agreement engendered the coming into light of the implicit rivalry between the Euro-Atlantic institutions and Russia in Macedonia. The NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and the then US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis visited Skopje and urged the Macedonian people to give their approval to the agreement. Merkel even stated that she hoped Macedonians would vote for the name change and start accession talks with NATO and the EU.⁹ Russia, on the other hand, extended support to the pro-Russian

http://www.mid.ru/en_GB/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/1299243, (22.05.2020).

⁶ "Macedonia Terrorist Raid May be Linked to Country's Support of Russia – Lavrov", *RT*, 16 May 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/259245-machedonia-shooting-russia-support/>, (22.05.2020).

⁷ "Expelled Russian Diplomat Leaves Macedonia", *TASS*, 02 April 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/997204>, (22.05.2020).

⁸ Republic of North Macedonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Final Agreement for the Settlement on the Name Issue", 17 August 2018, <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/8/post/1511/konechen-dogovor-za-reshavanje-na-makedonsko-grchkiot-spor-za-imeto-i-za-strateshko-partnerstvo>, (22.05.2020).

⁹ "US Says Russia Meddling in Macedonia Ahead of Name Referendum", *DW*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/us-says-russia-meddling-in-macedonia-ahead-of-name-referendum/a-45515175>, (22.05.2020).

parties and some nationalist groups which called on their followers to either vote against or boycott the referendum. These were the DPSM, the coalition partner of the Gruevski government that also signed a declaration for the creation of a militarily neutral zone in the Balkans with United Russia, Russia's ruling party in June 2016¹⁰ and United Macedonia which opted for stronger ties with Russia and Serbia. Prominent Russian nationalist figures such as Aleksandr Dugin¹¹ and Leonid Savin who had connections to the Russian foreign policy circles came together with representatives from the United Macedonia in conferences and training sessions in Skopje during the spring of 2018 and fanned the anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments in the country.¹² There were also allegations voiced by Zaev in the summer of 2018 which pointed finger at Russia. He claimed that Ivan Savvidis, the Greek-Russian businessman and former parliamentarian from United Russia with close links to the Kremlin, spent significant amounts of money to rally some politicians, nationalist organizations as well as fans of the Vardar football club against the Prespa Agreement and the referendum process.¹³

More than 90 percent of the Macedonian citizens who participated in the referendum that took place on September 30, 2018, endorsed the Prespa Agreement. However, the voter turnout was 36.8 percent, much lower than the required threshold of 50 percent.¹⁴ The Macedonian government, apprehensive of such a result, had announced that the referendum would be of consultative, rather than binding nature.¹⁵ This paved the way for realization of constitutional amendments through the

¹⁰ "Putin's Party Signs 'Military Neutrality' Agreements with Balkan Parties", *Balkan Insight*, 29 June 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/29/putin-s-party-signs-military-neutrality-agreements-with-balkan-parties-06-29-2016/>, (22.05.2020).

¹¹ Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, "There is Life Behind the EU: Russia, Turkey and China in the Western Balkans", *ISPI*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/there-life-beyond-eu-russia-turkey-and-china-western-balkans-20528>, (22.05.2020).

¹² "Could Macedonia Become Russia's Satellite?", *b92*, 08 June 2018, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=06&dd=08&nav_id=104363, (22.05.2020).

¹³ Margarita Assenova, "Moscow Pushes to Derail Macedonia's NATO Membership", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume XV, No 117, 06 August 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-pushes-to-derail-macedonias-nato-membership/>, (22.05.2020).

¹⁴ Simon Tisdall, "Result of Macedonia's Referendum is Another Victory for Russia", *The Guardian*, 01 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/01/result-of-macedonia-referendum-is-another-victory-for-russia>, (22.05.2020).

¹⁵ Cvete Koneska, "The Macedonia Name Dispute: A Few Drivers and Spoilers of Success", *Insight Turkey*, Volume XXI, No 2, Spring 2019, p. 4.

Macedonian Assembly and the approval of the Prespa Agreement on January 11, 2019. With Greek Parliament's approval that came on January 25, 2019, the major hurdle to Macedonia's NATO and the EU membership was finally cleared.¹⁶ Russia, probably out of a desire not to further alienate Macedonia, declared that although it was not against the new name of the country, it opposed bending of rules to drive the country to NATO.¹⁷

Russia had a good rapport with Montenegro's DPS until the latter decided to shift towards the West and imposed sanctions on Russia in the spring of 2014 due to its Crimean policy. Russia then gravitated to the NSD/NOVA and DNP which were eager to strengthen ties with Russia and enunciated that they would lift sanctions against Moscow once they came to power in Montenegro.¹⁸ The head of the NSD/NOVA Andrija Mandić visited Russia as part of a Montenegrin delegation in February 2016 and was received by the State Duma Spokesperson Sergey Naryshkin¹⁹ who also served as main contact for Russia to develop relations with the far-left and far-right parties in Europe.²⁰ The NSD/NOVA and DNP also put signature to the declaration with United Russia for the establishment of a militarily neutral territory in the Balkans in June 2016 and commenced a campaign of referendum on Montenegro's NATO membership.

The contention between DPS and the NSD/NOVA and DNP over Montenegro's entry into NATO exploded on October 16, 2016, on the day of parliamentary elections in the country. The Montenegrin security forces arrested 20 Serbians and Montenegrins on the charges of attempting a coup

¹⁶ Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 06 February 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>, (22.05.2020).

¹⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a News Conference on the Results of Russian Diplomacy in 2018", 16 January 2019, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3476729, (22.05.2020).

¹⁸ "Montenegro Opposition Democratic Front, If Victorious in Upcoming Elections Will Support Russia and Promise to Lift Sanctions", *NRT 24*, 13 October 2016, <http://nrt24.ru/en/143837-2?language=de>, (22.05.2020).

¹⁹ "Russia Officially Supports Montenegrin Opposition", *Defend Democracy Press*, 05 February 2016, <http://www.defenddemocracy.press/1135/>, (22.05.2020).

²⁰ Naryshkin was appointed as Chief of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) a few months later in September 2016.

and assassinating the Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic.²¹ Shortly after, two Russian GRU officers were charged by the Montenegrin Special Prosecutor of backing the plot in order to impede the country's accession to NATO. Mandić and the leader of DNP Milan Knežević were also indicted for organizing the activities of plotters and assisting in the distribution of funds.²² Russia dismissed the accusations vehemently. Lavrov also did not abstain from picking on both the Montenegrin government and NATO. He inveighed against the Montenegrin leadership for sidestepping democratic procedures by refusing to carry out a referendum on NATO membership although the polls demonstrated that substantial number of Montenegrin citizens was against entry into NATO.²³ He also accused NATO of consolidating the dividing lines in Europe and loosening the architecture of European security.²⁴

Russia had as its staunchest ally the SNSD of RS and its leader Milorad Dodik in the Western Balkans. While Dodik supported the Russian foreign policy moves wholeheartedly, Russia protected Dodik when he drew strong reaction from the West owing to his nationalist and secessionist stance in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When the RS organized a referendum on September 25, 2016, in defiance of a Constitutional Court ruling to maintain January 9 as the national day, the day the Bosnian Serbs proclaimed their so-called state in 1992, Russia claimed that the plebiscite neither posed any threat to the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina nor violated the principles of Dayton Agreement.²⁵ Russia had also voted against a draft

²¹ Mark Galeotti, "Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 04 April 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm, (22.05.2020).

²² Reuf Bajrović, Vesko Garčević and Richard Kraemer, "Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 03 July 2018, p. 10, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kraemer-rfp5.pdf>, (22.05.2020).

²³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Speaks and Takes Questions During the Forum, Russia-Land of Opportunity", 15 March 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/o-situacii-vokrug-otravlenia-s.skrupala-i-ego-doceri-v-velikobritanii/-/asset_publisher/milpunj3lj96/content/id/3120578, (22.05.2020).

²⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Interviewed by Bulgarian Journal International Relations", 02 March 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/bg/-/asset_publisher/10DICiVBpk4q/content/id/3105914, (22.05.2020).

²⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Telephone Conversation with German Foreign Minister and OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Frank-Walter Steinmeier", 29 September 2016,

resolution on July 8, 2015, on commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in the United Nations Security Council on the grounds that it put the blame for the “tragedy exclusively on the Serbs, disregarding the fact that the Serbs were also victims in that tragedy”.²⁶ Dodik, on the other hand, had obstructed Bosnia-Herzegovina from joining the EU and USA’s sanctions on Russia due to its intervention in Crimea in March 2014.²⁷ Moreover, the RS led Bosnian authorities to abstain from voting for the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution “The territorial integrity of Ukraine” in the same month.²⁸ The SNSD also further closed ranks with Russia by signing the declaration with United Russia for the creation of a militarily neutral area in the Balkans in June 2016.

Russia managed to be on good terms both with the ruling SNS and the smaller pro-Russian parties such as DSS, Dveri, SNP and SRS in Serbia. The SNS, despite having adopted reformist and pro-EU policies in the wake of commencement of the accession negotiations with the EU in January 2014, still tried hard to sustain a working relationship with Russia. Friendly ties with Moscow became much more critical for Belgrade in the winter of 2018 when protests against the Serbian President Aleksandr Vucic and the government have mounted up following remarkable decline in media freedom and increasing pressure on non-governmental organizations in the country. Accordingly, in March 2019 the SNS hammered out a joint statement with United Russia to improve strategic partnership between the two countries.

The DSS, Dveri, SRS, along with SNP, which was also part of the government, opposed integration to the EU, rejected any kind of cooperation with NATO and supported a closer political, economic and security alliance with Russia. Representatives from all of these parties visited Crimea and

http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/telefonnye-razgovory-ministra/-/asset_publisher/KLX3tiYzsCLY/content/id/2478984, (22.05.2020).

²⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Ministry Statement on UN Security Council Voting on the British Draft Resolution on the Srebrenica Massacre in July 1995”, 08 July 2015, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/1549415, (22.05.2020).

²⁷ “Serbs Won’t Let Bosnia Join Sanctions against Russia”, *b92*, 26 March 2014, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=26&nav_id=89781, (22.05.2020).

²⁸ United Nations, “Resolutions Adopted by the General Assembly at its 68th Session”, 27 March 2014, <http://research.un.org/en/docs/ga/quick/regular/68>, (22.05.2020).

endorsed that the Peninsula belonged to Russia.²⁹ DSS, Dveri and SNP also put signature to the cooperation declaration with United Russia in June 2016 which called for the formation of a militarily neutral zone in the Balkans. The Serbian government, in an attempt not to lag behind the opposition, backed up the Russian position regarding the Crimean matter by abstaining from voting UNGA resolution “The territorial integrity of Ukraine”. The then Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic also announced that Serbia would not impose sanctions on Russia as it would have grave and very harmful consequences for Serbian interests.³⁰

Russia’s endeavour to increase the number of allies in the Western Balkans in the wake of the fall-out with the USA and EU over the Crimean matter produced meagre results. The governments of North Macedonia and Montenegro grew away from Moscow at least in the political sphere and speeded up efforts to become part of the EU. The Serbian government needed to walk on thin ice while balancing its ultimate goal of EU membership with pro-Russian views of some segments of its population. Only the RS moved closer to Russia as its separatist line in Bosnia-Herzegovina did not find much reception in the West.

2. Russia’s Economic Incursion in the Western Balkans

Russia tried to boost bilateral trade with Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia and made also use of other economic instruments such as investments and loans to leave its imprint on the region. Yet, Moscow fell behind of the EU largely in this struggle as the Union became the major trade partner, investor as well as financial assistance provider of these countries. Furthermore, Russia also had to compete with other aspiring actors such as China, Turkey and the Gulf countries which showed economic interest in the Western Balkans.

²⁹ “Serbia Should Seek Closer Ties with Russia, Find Alternative to EU”, *Sputnik*, 30 October 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201510301029335204-serbian-politician-ties-with-russia/>, (22.05.2020), “Serbian Politician Visits Crimea, Says ‘Peninsula Belongs to Russia’”, *I12.international*, 17 March 2017, <https://i12.international/politics/serbian-politician-visits-crimea-says-peninsula-belongs-to-russia-15127.html>, (22.05.2020), and Maja Zivanovic, “Ukraine Tells Serbia to Respect its Sovereignty”, *Balkan Insight*, 08 November 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/11/08/ukraine-ask-serbia-to-respect-its-sovereignty-and-integrity-11-07-2017/>, (22.05.2020).

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, “Nikolic, Patrushev Discuss Regional Security, Cooperation”, 27 October 2016, <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/daily-survey-rss/15861-daily-survey-27102016>, (22.05.2020).

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Russia's trade with its strategic partner Serbia amounted to 2.6 billion euros in 2018 that corresponded to 6.9 percent of Serbia's total trade volume.³¹ Although bilateral trade between the two countries recorded nearly two percent increase in 2018³², it paled in comparison to Serbia's 24.1 billion-euro trade with the EU which constituted 64.6 percent of the country's total trade. The EU also took the lead in terms of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flowing to the country. 11.3 billion euro-worth FDI poured into Serbia from the EU between 2010-2017 mostly, to banking and telecommunications sectors³³ whereas Russian investments in the Serbian economy stood at 3.5 billion euros³⁴ and were concentrated on energy and banking sectors.

Lukoil, Russia's oil giant acquired a 79.5 percent stake in Serbia's number two fuel retailer Beopetrol in 2003.³⁵ Gazprom's oil subsidiary Gazprom Neft bought 51 percent of the shares in Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS) oil and gas company in 2008 for 400 million euros although the market value of the company was estimated to oscillate around 600 million euros to 800 million euros.³⁶ Serbia, which was more than 90 percent dependent on Russian natural gas desired to be part of the Russian-led gas pipeline projects in Southeastern Europe at least to generate transit fees. Belgrade's hopes in this direction were dashed when the planned South Stream gas pipeline scheme was shelved due to Bulgarian withdrawal from

³¹ European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, "European Union, Trade in Goods with Serbia", 06 March 2019, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_serbia_en.pdf, (05.06.2019).

³² The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Comment by the Information and Press Department Regarding Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Talks with Serbian First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic", 16 April 2019, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/komentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/3617079, (22.05.2020).

³³ The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, "Benefits from Serbia-EU Trade", 08 June 2019, <https://europa.rs/serbia-and-the-eu/trade/benefits-from-serbia-eu-trade/?lang=en>, (22.05.2020).

³⁴ President of Russia, "Meeting with President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic", 02 October 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58675>, (22.05.2020).

³⁵ Sergey Sutyurin, Olga Trofimenko, Irina Vorobieva, Peter Zashev, Alexander Abramkov and Bojan Pantic, "Russian Investments in the Balkans: Expectations and Realities-The Special Case of Lukoil", *Journal of East-West Business*, 2018, p. 12.

³⁶ Filip Vojvodovic-Medic, "How to Downsize Russia in the Balkans", *GMF*, 21 February 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2018/02/21/how-downsize-russia-balkans>, (22.05.2020).

the project over the EU's objections. Serbia then became part of the TurkStream gas pipeline project which replaced the South Stream and started gas deliveries to Bulgaria in January 2020.

Moskovska Banka which became part of the Russian VTB Group in 2011 opened its first branch in Belgrade as a greenfield investment in 2008. The Bank was renamed to VTB Banka Beograd in 2013 and ranked 23rd in terms of assets among the 30 banks operating in Serbia by the end of December 2016.³⁷ Sberbank acquired the shares of Austrian Volksbank International in 2012 which had significant retail and commercial banking operations in Balkan and Central and Eastern European states, including Serbia. Sberbank stuck to the lending policy of its predecessor however, and did not issue much credit to the large private companies in Serbia as they were vulnerable to political penetration.³⁸

Russia played second string to the EU in terms of loans extended to Serbia as well. While the EU provided more than 4.3 billion euro-worth loans and 3.6 billion euro-worth grants to Serbia in various fields such as agriculture, environment, infrastructure, public administration, rule of law and social development³⁹, Russia's loans granted to Serbia amounted to 1.2 billion euros and they were mostly lent as infrastructural aid and direct budgetary support.⁴⁰

Russia's trade with Montenegro ran around 215 million euros in the last decade.⁴¹ Moscow did not find itself a place among Podgorica's major trade partners in 2018. The EU, with 1.4 billion euro-worth trade with Montenegro topped the list, followed by Serbia (583 million euros) and

³⁷ "Russians Consider Selling VTB Banka Beograd", *Central European Financial Observer.eu*, 31 March 2017, <https://financialobserver.eu/recent-news/russians-consider-selling-vtb-banka-beograd/>, (05.06.2019).

³⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans: Corruption and State Capture Risks*, Sofia 2018, p. 39.

³⁹ The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, "EU Assistance to Serbia", 08 June 2019, <https://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/?lang=en>, (22.05.2020).

⁴⁰ European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies Policy Department, *Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America*, 21 November 2017, p. 22, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603854/EXPO_STU\(2017\)603854_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603854/EXPO_STU(2017)603854_EN.pdf) (22.05.2020).

⁴¹ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Montenegro*, Sofia 2018, p. 6.

China (272 million euros).⁴² Russia performed better in FDI. The total value of FDI flowing into Montenegro from Russia since the country's independence in 2006 had been nearly 31 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) whereas the EU's contribution to total FDI in Montenegro had been 32 percent of the GDP.⁴³ The rest of the FDI was realized by China, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Azerbaijan and Norway.⁴⁴

Russia mostly invested in industry, tourism, real estate and energy fields in Montenegro. One of Russia's wealthy businessmen, Oleg Deripaska acquired a controlling stake in Kombinat Aluminijuma Podgorica (KAP), the aluminium smelter company in 2005 which accounted for 15 percent of Montenegro's GDP and 51 percent of its exports through Cypriot Central European Aluminium Company (CEAC).⁴⁵ However, the KAP went bankrupt in 2013 after it could not pay its debts to the state company, Electrical Enterprise of Montenegro (ECPG) because of the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 that triggered a drastic decrease in aluminium prices.

Russia directed its investments to the tourism and real estate sectors after the failure of the KAP deal and achieved better results. The number of the Russian tourists visiting Montenegro for their summer vacations stepped up strikingly following the clinching of a visa-exemption agreement between the two countries in 2008. The number of Russian citizens that set foot in Montenegro went up to 350,000s from 61,000s in a decade and they made up 25 percent of the total tourist population of the country.⁴⁶ Moreover, many Russian firms purchased the communist-era hotels in attractive locations in the wake of the privatization process after independence and transformed them into luxurious hotels and summer

⁴² European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, "European Union, Trade in Goods with Montenegro", 06 March 2019, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_montenegro_en.pdf, (09.06.2019).

⁴³ EU Data, "Montenegro on Its European Path", May 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/near_factograph_montenegro.pdf, (09.06.2019).

⁴⁴ "Montenegro to Join EU by 2025", *Arton Capital*, 31 October 2018, <https://www.artoncapital.com/industry-news/montenegro-news/montenegro-to-join-eu-by-2025/>, (09.06.2019) and "Montenegro: Foreign Investment", <https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/montenegro/investing>, (09.06.2019).

⁴⁵ Dimitar Bechev, "The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, April 2018, p. 6, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/BechevFinal2018.pdf>, (09.06.2019).

⁴⁶ Bechev, *ibid.*, p. 6 and p. 12.

resorts to appeal to affluent Russian and European vacationers.⁴⁷ Russian citizens also bought land along with residential and commercial properties on the sea coast especially in the towns of Budva and Herceg Novi. The number was estimated to stand at 70,000 properties in 2014.⁴⁸

Russia did not have significant investments in the energy sector of the Montenegrin economy as the energy needs of the country were satisfied by local hydropower plants and imported fuel.⁴⁹ Lukoil invested in one of the largest energy companies in Montenegro, Roksped that engaged in petroleum trade and became the second largest retail supplier in the country. Novatek, another Russian energy company formed a joint venture with Italy's ENI in 2006 and received a 30-year subsea oil and gas exploration concession in the Adriatic Sea.⁵⁰

Russia, different from Serbia did not offer any financial aid to Montenegro in the form of loans for infrastructural development.⁵¹ The EU has up to date provided the largest amount of financial assistance to Montenegro. The figure ran around 1.5 billion euros which was distributed in the form of pre-accession funds, European Investment Bank loans, Western Balkans Investment Framework grants and inclusive quality education and employment support.⁵²

Russia became the fifth largest trade partner of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2018, with trade turnover between the two countries reaching to 513 million euros.⁵³ Besides, the RS carried out 75 percent of its overall foreign

⁴⁷ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Roman Mamchits, "Russian Investors to Lose Montenegro", *Invest Foresight*, 25 April 2018, <https://investforesight.com/russian-investors-to-lose-montenegro/>, (09.06.2019).

⁵⁰ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Montenegro*, p. 11.

⁵¹ Marta Szpala, "Montenegro Seeks Alternatives to Cooperation with Russia", *Central European Financial Observer.eu*, 08 November 2017, <https://financialobserver.eu/cse-and-cis/montenegro/montenegro-seeks-alternatives-to-cooperation-with-russia/>, (10.06.2019).

⁵² EU Data, "Montenegro on Its European Path", *ibid.*

⁵³ European Commission Directorate-General for Trade, "European Union, Trade in Goods with Bosnia-Herzegovina", 06 March 2019, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_bosnia-herzegovina_en.pdf, (10.06.2019).

trade with Moscow.⁵⁴ Yet, Russia still lagged far behind the EU (10 billion euros) and was also overwhelmed by Serbia (1.7 billion euros), China (703 million euros) and Turkey (609 million euros). Russia's FDI performance in Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrated similar trends with its trade figures. Between May 1994 and December 2017, Russia carried out 347 million euro-valued FDI in the country, ranking behind Austria (1.3 billion euros), Croatia (1.2 billion euros), Serbia (1 billion euros), Slovenia (528 million euros) and the Netherlands (360 million euros).⁵⁵ While the EU's investments in the country were focused on manufacturing, financial services and telecommunications fields, Russian companies mostly preferred investing in energy and banking sectors.

Russia's state oil company Zarubezhneft acquired the ownership of RS's two oil refineries, Rafinerija Nafta Brod and the Modrica oil refinery following a privatization tender in 2007. Zarubezhneft also took hold of 80 percent of shares in Nestro Petrol, a wholesale and retail fuel supplier company, which became the largest gas station chain in Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁵⁶ In December 2017 Russia's Gazprom LNG also signed an agreement with the Serbian GAS RES to establish a joint venture for the construction of a LNG plant near the city of Zvornik in RS.⁵⁷

The first Russian bank that set foot in Bosnia-Herzegovina became the IEFK Bank in 2007 which was renamed as the MF Banka Banja Luka in 2010 after its acquisition by MCC Mikrofin Banja Luka. The Bank had a 1.2 percent market share and mostly served small and medium enterprises and micro businesses in the country.⁵⁸ Sberbank entered the Bosnian market

⁵⁴ President of Russia, "Meeting with President of Republika Srpska Entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik", 30 September 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58662>, (10.06.2019).

⁵⁵ Foreign Investment Promotion Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "FDI Position and Performance", <http://www.fipa.gov.ba/informacije/statistike/investicije/default.aspx?id=180&langTag=en-US>, (10.06.2019).

⁵⁶ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sofia 2018, p. 9.

⁵⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at the Joint News Conference following Talks with President of Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) Milorad Dodik", 21 September 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3348662, (10.06.2019).

⁵⁸ European Fund for Southeast Europe, "EFSE Strengthens Partnership with MF Banka to Support Small Businesses in BiH", 24 October 2016, <https://www.efse.lu/news->

after its capture of the shares of Austrian Volksbank International in 2012. The Bank was mostly focused on corporate finance and energy projects in the country and became the sixth largest financial corporation in Bosnia-Herzegovina by assets.⁵⁹

Bosnia-Herzegovina has continued to receive significant amounts of foreign aid from the EU in the post-war period. The Union has allocated more than three billion euro-worth financial assistance to the country in the form of pre-accession funds, European Investment Bank loans, Western Balkans Investment Framework grants, disaster relief fund and refugee support in the last 20 years.⁶⁰ Russia's financial assistance to Bosnia-Herzegovina on the other hand, was extended to the RS, mostly in the form of emergency assistance and direct budgetary support.⁶¹

Russia's trade with Macedonia remained at marginal level (117 million euro in 2017)⁶² despite the increase in Macedonia's agricultural exports to Russia following the Russian embargo on the EU farm products after the Crimean crisis. The EU however, had a 70.5 percent share in Macedonia's trade in 2017, followed by Serbia (5.9 percent share), China (3.8 percent share), Turkey (3.2 percent share) and South Africa (2 percent share).⁶³ The Union held its ground as the main investor in the country as well. 46.5 percent of the total FDI that flew into Macedonia in 2017⁶⁴

events/news/detail/efse-strengthens-partnership-with-mf-banka-to-support-small-businesses-in-bih/, (10.06.2019).

⁵⁹ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ EU Data, "Bosnia and Herzegovina on Its European Path", 16 May 2018, <https://europa.ba/?p=56734>, (11.06.2019).

⁶¹ RWR Advisory Group, "Strategic Analysis: Russian Business Activity in Bosnia-Herzegovina", <https://www.rwradvisory.com/russian-activity-in-bosnia-herzegovina-abstract/>, (10.06.2019).

⁶² "Russia's Trade with Macedonia", *Russian Foreign Trade*, 14 February 2018, <http://en.russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2018-02/russian-trade-with-macedonia-in-2017/>, (11.06.2019).

⁶³ European Parliament, "FYR Macedonia: Economic Indicators and Trade with EU", 02 May 2018, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/620197/EPRS_ATA\(2018\)620197_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/620197/EPRS_ATA(2018)620197_EN.pdf), (11.06.2019).

⁶⁴ EU Data, "North Macedonia on Its European Path", May 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/near_factograph_north_macedonia.pdf, (11.06.2019).

originated from the EU countries whereas Russia's contribution to the FDI output in the country was 1 percent.⁶⁵

The Russian investments in Macedonia were mostly concentrated on energy and pharmaceutical sectors. Although the country was dependent on coal and oil as the major energy resources, it has commenced to utilize natural gas in order to reduce high levels of air pollution. Russia and Macedonia signed an agreement in 2013 for the construction of a gas pipeline to transfer Russian gas to Macedonia. The Russian company Sroytransgaz began construction of the Klecovce-Negotino pipeline in 2015 and completed it in 2016.⁶⁶ Thus, Macedonia started to receive Russian gas through the Serbian gas system. Lukoil, similar to Montenegro, expanded its market presence in Macedonia and become the second largest retail supplier of fuels.⁶⁷ Russian firms also ran some energy businesses in Macedonia through third countries. The Russian Solway which was registered in Switzerland operated a lead, zinc and copper mine while the TKG through an offshore company in Cyprus operated the joint venture TE-TO combined cycle heat and power plant.⁶⁸ Russia's pharma investment in Macedonia came off in 2012 when Prodis, the subsidiary of Russian Protek Group kicked off its operation in Skopje.⁶⁹

The EU, similar to the cases of Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina became the major financial donor of Macedonia. The Union provided more than two billion euro aid to the country in the form of pre-accession funds, European Investment Bank loans and Western Balkans Investment Framework grants.⁷⁰ Russia, however, did not extend any financial support to the country.

⁶⁵ Katarina Anđelković, "Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans", *European Western Balkans*, 08 March 2018, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/03/08/assessing-russias-economic-footprint-western-balkans/>, (11.06.2019).

⁶⁶ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans*, p. 28.

⁶⁷ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Macedonia*, Sofia 2018, p. 3 and p. 10.

⁶⁹ Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, "Plant Prodis of Russian Pharmaceutical Holding Protek Group Opens", 31 October 2012, <https://vlada.mk/node/4855?ln=en-gb>, (11.06.2019).

⁷⁰ EU Data, "North Macedonia on Its European Path", *ibid.*

Russia's attempts to boost its economic presence in the Western Balkans have been partially successful. Investments realized by the Russian companies in energy, banking, real estate and tourism sectors of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia loomed large in the economies of these countries' and urged them to preserve some kind of a workable association with Moscow. Yet, Russia's bilateral trade statistics with these countries lagged far behind the EU and the country also had to compete with other ambitious powers such as China and Turkey in the region. Furthermore, Russia proved to be no match for the EU in terms of the amount and diversity of the financial aid extended to these Western Balkan countries.

3. Russia's Endeavour to Build up Security Cooperation in the Western Balkans

Russia's collaboration with the Western Balkan states in the security sphere remained limited to strengthening military ties with Serbia and the RS. Moscow extended arms, military equipment and training to militarily neutral Serbia and the anti-NATO RS. Montenegro, which became part of the NATO in June 2017 and North Macedonia that was invited to begin accession talks with the Alliance in July 2018 and participated to the organization as a full member in March 2020, however, eschewed from establishing military association with Russia.

Russian-Serbian security relationship gained momentum in April 2013 when Serbia acquired observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization.⁷¹ Shortly after, in November 2013, the two countries signed a defense agreement which encompassed cooperation in education of Serbian officers in Russia as well as joint participation in military exercises.⁷² Accordingly, since 2015, Serbian soldiers have been taking part in Slavic Brotherhood drills along with their Belarusian and Russian counterparts. Furthermore, Russia and

⁷¹ "Afghan and Serbian Parliaments Acquire Observer Status at CSTO PA", *Radio Belarus*, 12 April 2013, <http://radiobelarus.by/en/content/afghan-and-serbian-parliaments-acquire-observer-status-csto-pa>, (24.06.2019).

⁷² Ministry of Defence Republic of Serbia, "Agreement on Defence Signed between Serbia and the Russian Federation", 13 November 2013, <http://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/5824/potpisan-sporazum-o-saradnji-srbije-i-ruske-federacije-u-oblasti-odbrane-5824>, (24.06.2019).

Serbia also carry out the Brotherhood of Aviators exercise on a yearly basis.⁷³

The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center at Nis that was inaugurated in April 2012 became another contact point of security cooperation between Russia and Serbia. The Center, according to formal declarations, aimed to help prevention and elimination of natural disasters and technological accidents in Serbia and the neighbouring countries.⁷⁴ Fire fighting, demining and combating floods could be named as the main activities of the center. Although Lavrov underlined that the Center had put out fires, demined more than four million square metres of land⁷⁵ and helped Serbia to deal with the flood which hit the country in 2014⁷⁶, some US and European security officials claimed that the Center might be used as an intelligence gathering station by Russia taking into account the closeness of the facility to the U.S. base of Bondsteel in Kosovo, if Serbia granted diplomatic immunity to its Russian personnel as per the Russian request.⁷⁷

Russia's supply of armament and military equipment to the Serbian army became another significant aspect of defense cooperation between the two countries. In December 2016 Russia declared its donation of six MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter jets, 30 T-72 tanks and 30 BRDM-2 reconnaissance vehicles to Serbia.⁷⁸ Belgrade has also been for some time discussing the

⁷³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Serbian First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic", 17 April 2019, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3618519, (24.06.2019).

⁷⁴ Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, "About Us", <http://en.ihc.rs/about> (24.06.2019).

⁷⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Sputnik News Agency", 13 December 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2561259, (24.06.2019).

⁷⁶ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Serbian Information Agency BETA", 19 February 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3084489, (24.06.2019).

⁷⁷ Michael Birnbaum, "Russia's Low-cost Influence Strategy Finds Success in Serbia", *The Washington Post*, 03 October 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russias-low-cost-influence-strategy-finds-success-in-serbia--with-the-help-of-fighter-jets-media-conspiracies-and-a-biker-gang/2018/10/03/49dbf48e-8f47-11e8-ae59-01880eac5f1d_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ddfc4e893bd3, (24.06.2019).

⁷⁸ Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia's Influence in Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2017, p. 189.

purchase of Buk – M1 and Buk – M2 air defense systems and Tunguska anti-aircraft missiles from Moscow.⁷⁹ Despite the burgeoning security cooperation with Russia, Serbia did not abstain from strengthening its military bonds with the NATO and the EU. Serbia joined the NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 2006 and signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO in 2015 which permitted the Alliance to receive the right to use the Serbian infrastructure. Furthermore, between the years 2012 and 2017, while Serbia carried out 98 military exercises with the NATO, it held only 12 similar drills with Russia.⁸⁰ The country expedited its security collaboration with the EU as well. In September 2017 Serbia became part of the EU's Balkan Battlegroup⁸¹ at the military police and staff officer levels which was founded to provide quick military responses to the crisis situations especially in the Balkan region.⁸² Serbia has also been participating to the EU's peacekeeping missions in Mali and Somalia and its training mission in Central African Republic.⁸³

Bosnia-Herzegovina, similar to Serbia hammered out a PfP programme with the NATO in 2006. The country hammered out an IPAP in 2008 and was invited to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2010 on the condition that all the immovable defense property would be registered to the state.⁸⁴ Although 32 of total 57 military sites have been registered, not a single defense property on the territory of the RS has been registered up to now.⁸⁵ This situation emanated from the unwelcoming approach of the RS

⁷⁹ "Serbian President Lauds Military-Technical Cooperation with Russia", *TASS*, 17 January 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1040501>, (24.06.2019).

⁸⁰ Slavisha Batko Milacic, "Vladimir Putin in Serbia – Brotherhood and Geopolitics", *International Affairs*, Volume 25, January 2019, <http://en.interaffairs.ru/experts/804-vladimir-putin-in-serbia-brotherhood-and-geopolitics.html>, (24.06.2019).

⁸¹ The Balkan Battlegroup which was originally named as HELBROC was led by Greece and encompassed also Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania and Ukraine.

⁸² "Serbia Became a Part of the EU Battle Group: What is HELBROC", *Telegraf*, 28 September 2017, <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/2899520-serbia-became-a-part-of-the-eu-battle-group-what-is-helbroc>, (24.06.2019).

⁸³ European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies Policy Department, *Serbia's Cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America*, p. 38.

⁸⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina", 06 December 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49127.htm, (24.06.2019).

⁸⁵ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Defence and Security Committee (DSC): Subcommittee on Future Security and Defence Capabilities (DSCFC) Mission Report, 01 March 2019, p. 3, <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2019-03/2018%20->

leadership to Bosnia-Herzegovina's NATO membership. Dodik stated many times that the RS would not allow Bosnia-Herzegovina to be part of the NATO as it supported maintaining neutrality.⁸⁶ Moreover, the parliament of the RS passed a resolution in October 2017 which declared the neutrality of the entity in relation to military alliances.⁸⁷ This negative attitude of the RS with regard to the NATO paved the way for closer security cooperation with Russia. The parties have been collaborating on matters such as intelligence gathering, counter-terrorism and combating cybercrimes since 2016.⁸⁸ Russian intelligence officers have also been training the RS's special police forces both in Banja Luka and Moscow. Russia provided arms and military equipment to the RS as well. In February 2018, a shipment of 2,500 Russian-made automatic rifles arrived at Banja Luka through Serbia.⁸⁹ There existed also reports which stated that the RS was about to buy Russian-manufactured anti-aircraft Iгла 1-V missiles to mount on helicopters.⁹⁰

Russia's overture to Montenegro in the fall of 2013 for the temporary mooring of Russian warships at the ports of Bar and Kotor that might presage a future Russian demand of a naval base in the country was discountenanced by the Montenegrin government which was not enthusiastic about any kind cooperation with Russia in the defense field.⁹¹ The acceleration of Montenegro's membership process to the NATO was another disappointment for Russia. Although Russia starting with 2014, described the possible accession of Montenegro to NATO as irresponsible

%20MISSION%20REPORT%20DSC%20BIH%20AND%20SERBIA%20-
%20254%20DSCFC%2018%20E.pdf, (24.06.2019).

⁸⁶ "Republika Srpska President Says He Will Not Allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to Join NATO", *TASS*, 09 October 2018, <https://tass.com/world/1025062>, (24.06.2019).

⁸⁷ Mladen Lakić, "Bosnia Should Recognise Crimea as Russian, Says Dodik", *Balkan Insight*, 09 October 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/09/crimes-is-part-of-russia-dodik-says-10-09-2018/>, (24.06.2019).

⁸⁸ Vera Mironova and Boydan Zawadewicz, "Putin Is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force", *Foreign Policy*, 08 August 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/>, (24.06.2019).

⁸⁹ Nicholas Waller, "Russian-made Arms Shipment to Bosnian Serbs Sends Out Alarms", *New Europe*, 16 February 2018, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/russian-made-arms-shipment-bosnian-serbs-sends-alarms/>, (24.06.2019).

⁹⁰ Reuf Bajrovic, Richard Kraemer and Emir Suljagic, "Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent It", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2018, p. 6, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/updated-bosnia-2018.pdf>, (24.06.2019).

⁹¹ Reuf Bajrovic, Vesko Garcevic and Richard Kraemer, "Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro", p. 7.

and provocative, it failed to prevent its realization.⁹² North Macedonia's impending accession to the NATO after the coming into force of the name-change agreement in January 2019 drew again reaction from Russia despite the absence of any substantial military bond between the two countries. Russian President Vladimir Putin for instance, accused Washington and its allies of inciting destabilization in the Balkans which according to his contention would increase mistrust and tension in Europe.⁹³

Russia's endeavour to enhance cooperation with the Western Balkan states in the defense realm yielded meagre payoffs. Russia could not hinder the expansion of NATO to encompass Montenegro and North Macedonia. Furthermore, although Moscow retains significant military ties with Serbia via weapon and military equipment transfers and military exercises, Belgrade is in a growing security association with both the EU and NATO. Russia's views concerning the expansion of NATO in the Western Balkans coincide mostly with the RS with which it sustains considerable military ties through armament exchanges and training.

Conclusion

The wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo as well as the crisis in Macedonia had come at a time while Russia was trying to pull itself together in the midst of political overhaul, economic travail, weakening military power and declining morale. Russia preferred dancing to the tune of the EU and the USA during these conflicts although the divergence of opinion between Moscow and the Western capitals had been manifest especially during the Kosovo War. Concomitant to the rising confidence of the country in the wake of the soaring energy prices in mid-2000s along with the stabilization of the political system with the inauguration of Putin as the new President brought out a renewed Russian interest in the Western Balkans. Still, Russian activities in the region during this period were mostly focused on reviving the economic ties with the Western Balkan states via hammering

⁹² "Why Is Russia Opposed to Montenegro Joining NATO?", *Russia Beyond*, 15 December 2015, https://www.rbth.com/international/2015/12/15/why-is-russia-opposed-to-montenegro-joining-nato_551179, (24.06.2019).

⁹³ Helena Smith, "Putin Says US Wants to 'Assert Dominance' in Balkans as Macedonia Changes Name", *The Guardian*, 16 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/16/putin-says-us-wants-to-assert-dominance-in-balkans-as-macedonia-changes-name>, (24.06.2019).

out energy deals without much talk of political alliance and security collaboration.

Russia's pursuit of a more assertive and compelling foreign policy line in the Western Balkans to lure Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia into its fold came into open as a result of the Crimean crisis which widened the gap between Russia and the West to a great extent. Subscribed to a neorealist world view that postulated an international system governed by anarchy and designated survival as the ultimate goal of a state which could be achieved only through reliance on its own capacity and resources, Russia aimed to maintain its position as a great power amid competition with other influential actors such as the US, China, the EU and Japan. Therefore, Moscow perceived NATO's enlargement policy and the EU's Eastern Partnership scheme as direct threats to its well-being and national interests as these two initiatives would help the EU and NATO to expand their geopolitical outreach to the detriment of Russia. Furthermore, they might also alienate some of the former Soviet states from Moscow which were still deemed crucial for Russian security. Russia attempted to balance the moves of the EU and NATO in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus by taunting them with its onslaughts in the Western Balkan states that were exposed to its interference. Accordingly, Moscow stepped up its efforts towards backing up like-minded leaders and political factions, laying its capital in key sectors such as energy, banking and tourism and strengthening military collaboration via provision of military paraphernalia and training in these countries.

Russia's foreign policy line with regard to the Western Balkans produced moderate results. Russia sustains close political relations with Serbia and the RS. However, North Macedonia considerably grew apart from Russia after the change of government. Moreover, Russia's sharp criticism of Montenegro's leadership in the course of NATO accession process estranged the country from Russia to a large extent. On the economic front, Russia is not a match for the EU in terms of trade volume or the amount and diversity of the financial aid allocated to the Western Balkan states. The EU capital surpassed the Russian businesses in each sector save energy in the economies of these countries' as well. On the military sphere, membership to NATO prevailed over any kind of security partnership with Russia for Montenegro and Macedonia while Serbia, the strategic partner of Russia in the Balkan region, retains military ties not only with Russia but also with the EU and NATO. Only the RS, notorious with its secessionist

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tendencies and disagreements with the central government of Bosnia-Herzegovina relies largely on Russian weapons and equipment. All in all, it can be said that integration to the Euro-Atlantic structures continues to prioritize over any kind of tactical alignment with Russia for nearly all of the Western Balkan countries.

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