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Russia, South East Europe and the “geopolitics of opportunism”

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As Winston Churchill said in 1939 the action of Russia “is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma” which is what one can say about Russia’s current involvement in South East Europe. There are many guesses but no one can claim with certainty what Russia’s intentions are and whether there is a grand strategy in the region. Opinions are divided between those who support the “geopolitics of fear” versus the “geopolitics of indifference” theses.

The geopolitics of fear

According to the first logic, very much influenced by the new cold war mentality, Russia sees military threats from the West as dominant, and the region of South East Europe as the soft underbelly of Europe. For Russia the region is a fitting arena for confrontation with the West, being the most vulnerable part of Europe. In security terms, the region is surrounded by a triangle of instability from Ukraine, the Middle East and North Africa, and is a recipient of numerous imported crises from abroad. In economic terms, the region is the most underdeveloped region of Europe, including the poorest country of the EU (Bulgaria), the weakest Eurozone economy (Greece) and the economically fragile and dependent Western Balkan states.



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Belgrade skyline. Serbia, the most traditional ally of Russia in the Western Balkans, is seen by the West as Russia's Trojan horse.

In political terms, the rise of nationalism, illiberalism and Euroscepticism in many countries of South East Europe is a sign of Europe's declining normative leverage and soft power influence. For its part, the EU has been struggling to define an effective strategy of accession in the Western Balkans in a climate of enlargement fatigue and against a backdrop of internal EU crises – the Eurozone, populism and migration. This lack of orientation is reflected in the Balkans' democratic backsliding, and the EU's ineffective conditionality for reform.

Such conditions provide the perfect opportunity for Russia to destabilise and disrupt Europe through its weak periphery in the following ways. Russia's security priorities lie in gathering as much support as possible for its policy in Ukraine and at hindering the strengthening of NATO. With some Western Balkan countries being still outside NATO, Russia aims at the obstruction of NATO enlargement.

It is an undisputable fact that Russia was clearly annoyed by Montenegro's decision to join NATO, and was at odds with Prime Minister Milo Djukanović's ruling party for taking such a course of action. What made it even more irritating for Russia was that Montenegro joined EU sanctions against Russia and voted the UN General Assembly resolution on Crimea. The Montenegrin allegations that on the October 16, 2016 election day, they prevented a Kremlin-based coup aided by pro-Russian Serbs, is indicative of a climate of suspicion and animosity between two former friends.^[1]

What makes South East European countries susceptible for possible Russian influence is the fact that all of them are dependent on Russian energy

For its part, Serbia, the most traditional ally of Russia in the Western Balkans, is seen by the West as Russia's Trojan horse, enjoying close relations with Russia at the military level, including the selling of military equipment from Russia to Serbia and the conduct of joint military activities. Russia has established links with the pro-Russian political forces in the region and in 2016 pro-Russian and anti-NATO parties across the Balkans, from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Bulgaria, signed a declaration calling for "a militarily neutral territory in the Balkans" while attending the 15th congress of Russia's ruling United Russia party in Moscow.

What makes South East European countries open to possible Russian influence is the fact that all of them are dependent on Russian energy and have not found alternative sources for the provision of their gas needs. Economic links with Russia are also important in the fields of tourism, infrastructure and trade and some of the Balkan economies have been affected by trade sanctions towards Russia.

According to the advocates of the geopolitics of fear thesis, Russia is actively involved in regional conflicts, by blocking the UN recognition of Kosovo, openly supporting Bosnian Serb claims for independence and assisting in the deterioration of Serbia-Kosovo relations and the obstruction of the normalisation agreement.

Adding to the above arguments, Russia, as a historical player in the region, has an automatic leverage over cultural, identity and political issues. Russia has a default "soft power" and historical familiarity with the region, which allows it to interfere and affect the policy decisions aiming at gaining friendly positions within Europe and stirring the anti-Western feelings. Its historical role resonates with some of the elites and the citizens who reminisce about Russian solidarity during the Ottoman times, the long lasting religious orthodox links, and a common Slav identity. Russian language is spoken widely in Bulgaria, there is a big diasporic community in Greece which originates from historical Russian and Soviet lands, and there are brotherly ties with Serbia and Montenegro.

Within this volatile and receptive environment, the geopolitics of fear thesis sees Russia as a competitor to the West, seeking to infiltrate and divide the region in order to undermine its commitment to the European Union and disrupt Western influence.

The geopolitics of indifference

According to the opposite view, Russia is not particularly interested in the region of South East Europe, and the main foreign policy priorities lie with its own immediate neighbourhood, the war in Syria, NATO enhancement in Central Europe and the Baltic states, and relations with the other big global players.

Russia does not have any credible leverage in the region in that it cannot offer a real alternative to the EU, and despite the recent enlargement setbacks and the struggling Europeanisation of the Balkans, the region is firmly anchored in the West. It is indicative that despite the numerous crises and rising nationalisms, all the mainstream Balkan elites share a

consensus as to the primary role of the EU. The EU is the most comprehensive vision for the future in socio-economic, political and identity terms and the security of the region lies with membership in NATO. Even Russia's closest ally Serbia and its President, former nationalist, Aleksandar Vučić, is particularly cautious to keep a balance in his foreign policy vis-à-vis Europe and Russia, while at the same time endorsing a clear course of EU accession as the foremost priority of the country.



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Putin signs the South Stream pipeline. What makes South East European countries open to possible Russian influence is the fact that all of them are dependent on Russian energy.

In the economic field, investment from Russia is not vastly significant, given that the EU is still the prime trade destination for all the South East European states, and Russia lags behind the EU in terms of FDI and financial assistance. The example of Greece in 2015 made evident Russia's limited commitment and lack of interest in helping Greece financially, when the SYRIZA government was desperately seeking Russia's assistance, in its struggle to negotiate with the EU creditors.

The EU, despite its internal problems, continues to be the undisputed economic actor in the Western Balkans

It should be added that following a period of increasing Russian economic and energy engagement in the Balkans, its economic influence was gradually affected by its own economic crisis due to EU sanctions, dropping gas prices and the falling ruble, all of which have reduced the volume of trade and diminished the inflow of Russian investment. Finally, from a regional point of view, there was disappointment with the way Russia abandoned the South Stream project and turned towards Turkey as the new hub for the Russian pipelines.

Russia's leverage and influence in South East Europe according to the geopolitics of indifference is inconsequential and too *ad hoc* to have any kind of real impact on the countries in the region. For them, the EU continues to be the only game in town and in the current period of crises, South East European countries are even more dependent on assistance from the EU. As it stands, the Union, despite its internal problems, continues to be the undisputed economic actor in the region, and the dominant trading bloc, deliverer of foreign direct investment and financial assistance, as well as provider of reform guidance.

The geopolitics of opportunism

The truth probably lies somewhere in between, and in our case of the Russian-South East European relationship between the geopolitics of fear and the geopolitics of indifference, there are the geopolitics of opportunism, based on short-term cost-benefit calculations and bilateralism, with no long-term vision.



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Train tracks in Zagreb. "For China the Balkans has a significance as part of the Silk and Belt Road and as entry point in Europe."

To understand the nature of Russia's engagement with the Balkans, one needs to compare its actions with China's long-term geo-economic vision of investments in infrastructure, energy and communication and the significance of the region as part of the Silk and Belt Road and as entry point in Europe.^[2] Russia has no such investment vision and shifts positions according to circumstances. The ease with which Russia befriended Turkey, after a period of poisonous disputes caused by the downing of the Russian airplane by Turkey, is characteristic of Moscow's fast changing mood and its emphasis on wooing allies to its anti-Western platform, in this case by encouraging Turkey's increasing alienation from the West. The abrupt change of the gas pipeline project from the Southern to the Turkish Stream is indicative of a volatile and opportunistic approach.

Russia keeps the Western Balkans “on the slow burner”

Having said that, there is regional reciprocity and Russia’s approach towards the region is the mirror image of the Balkan states’ approach towards Russia. There are sectors within many Balkan states that espouse a pro-Russian perspective as a counterbalance to an increasing Western hegemony, and often the political classes in the region are using their relationship with Russia to extract concessions from the EU. With the exception of Albania and Kosovo, which are pro-US and pro-NATO in their totality, the other countries in South East Europe are more diverse in their external allegiances, using the “Russian card” as a negotiating tactic in dealing with the West. In addition, for some of the local leaders, the illiberal Putin model of authority has some resonance and has visibly affected the style of government they have adopted in their own countries.

All in all, the region in its diversity exhibits a more lenient way of communicating with, and relating to Russia, often not in sync with the rest of the European Union. There is far from a consensus regionally and within states as to how they should be approaching Russia and how far they should play the Russian card in their engagement with Europe. Russia, in an opportunistic non-committal way, uses this variance of views in order to promote and amplify friendly voices, obstruct NATO’s military expansion and keep at least some general support for its policy on Ukraine. It is, in other words, keeping South East Europe on the “slow burner”, using its soft power and keeping a low maintenance engagement with economic and political elites, civil society, the Church and the media.

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Noten

[1] See Nevenka Tromp, 'Montenegro and NATO membership (<https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/montenegro-and-nato-membership-achievement-and-risk>)', *Internationale Spectator*, May 2017.

[2] For China’s engagement with the Western Balkans, see the article of Michal Makocki in this Dossier.

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