Chapter 8
Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans
Noela Mahmutaj

8.1 Introduction

Russia has played, and continues to play, a key role in the stability and development of the Balkan region as it is an important international actor and with a voice in this part of the globe. It should also be noted that the Balkans and Russia have historical, cultural, and religious ties, which enable Moscow to be more active in the region. The Kremlin eagerly plays on such shared cultural ties and to support Russian commercial efforts to deepen economic and trade relations in key strategic sectors such as energy, banking, and real estate to create Balkan political and economic dependence. Russian influence operations boost ties between people with the aim of creating Russia-friendly constituencies and levers of influence that could allow Moscow to hinder further Balkan integration into Western economic, political, or security structures (Stronski & Himes, 2019).

In the 1990s, the Western Balkans region suffered from significant conflicts, and it has come a long way in the democratization process since, though negative political and economic consequences continue to be present, even today. During the 90s, the region experienced major changes and challenges as a result of integrated government reforms in the Western Balkans, reforms which have played an important role in the further development of the region. Shifting from a communist regime to a new system of governance has historically required sufficient time for states to adapt and progress. This explains why the Balkans continue to have sensitive and delicate problems with roots in the past, including ethnic conflicts, the issue of the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, the lack of cooperation between countries in the region (i.e. in the political, economic, and socio-cultural spheres), a lack of trust in states, etc.

Such problems hamper cooperation between countries in the field of politics, but also in economy, trade, tourism, security, stability, and regional development.
In addition to these problems, the Balkan states continue to have internal problems stemming from poor governance of political elites and recurring cyclical crises such as high-level corruption, organized crime, money laundering, and other phenomena which from time to time provoke instability as well as crises of various formats in the region. All of these issues open the door to the possibility of increased influence from other actors in the region.

8.2 Russia and Other Actors in the Western Balkans

After the fall of the communist regime, the countries of the Balkan Peninsula made consistent efforts to integrate and strengthen their position in the Euro-Atlantic structures of NATO and the European Union.

Due to its geographical position and its resources, the Balkan region had found itself at the centre of attention of many international actors, especially the Great Powers (such as the US, EU, China, and Russia) which play an important role in establishing the balance of power under the general equilibrium principle in modern international relations. Today, the balance of power is the main instrument for ensuring international security and stability. It is important to highlight that, for the Great Powers, geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic interests will always be among their interests (Petrillo, 2013), and that this is acceptable for small states in terms of gaining mutual benefit (including for the Balkan countries). Thus given its geographical location, the region is important to the Great Powers, who view the economic and political prospects and future of the Western Balkan countries as key priorities.

Geopolitics and the history of the Balkans are historically intertwined due to the deep legacy of rivalry and recurrent warfare on the Balkan Peninsula. The subject and these states are also closely related to each other as, not only has the history of the Balkans influenced the development of studies in geopolitics, but geopolitics itself has sometimes found, in the Balkans, the best ground to see how theory turns into practice. The great European powers, the US, and especially Russia have all shown interest in the Balkans.

After the fall of the communist regime and the Yugoslav wars during the 1990s, the region was at the forefront of debates on critical issues such as transatlantic relations, EU security and defence policy, and even NATO and EU enlargement, which continue to this day. The Western Balkans is an integral part of Russia’s strategy to establish itself as a first-class player in European security issues, a match for other major powers such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. To have a foothold in the Balkans means to have a say in those strategic issues, which have direct consequences for Russia. Moscow’s interest is thus driven by geopolitics, alongside other concerns such as economic interests and historical ties to the Slavic and orthodox nations. Moscow sees the Balkans as an important periphery to Europe, where the Kremlin can maximize its influence vis-à-vis the West (Bechev, 2019).
Therefore, the geopolitical tendencies of powerful states, reflected in their strategies, aim to maintain and strengthen their position as a major power, but also as a blue sea power, as it is important to note that the power of the sea (Sea Power) is a necessary condition for the approximation of the status of a “world power.” We can emphasize here the fact that Russia, due to its geographical position by the sea, has been privileged to remain an important global actor. This fact is clearly expressed by English geographer and academic Halford Mackinder, who was one of the founding fathers of geopolitics and geostrategy in the twentieth century. In his main work “The geographical pivot of history,” Mackinder wrote that, in the world, Russia occupies the central strategic position held by Germany in Europe (Mackinder, 2004).

The Balkan countries, being geographically located in Europe, are closely linked politically and economically to the European Union, one of the strategic partners of the region. Therefore, everything that happens in the political and economic sectors of the Balkan states, in reality, is directly related to what happens at the headquarters of the European Union itself.

We can highlight that the cooperation between these actors depends on the internal processes taking place in the country, but also on the interests that the parties have in relation to one another.

In order to interact and share common interests, countries (especially the Great Powers) present a series of specific or strategic initiatives to other countries, which can choose to accept or refuse these. Powerful states, through this process, in addition to exerting political control, exert ideological control. In addition, there are powerful states that might, under certain circumstances, become destabilizing factors (Cooper, 2011).

It is important to understand that the position and history of the Balkans affords other states’ rights on strategic issues that are also directly related to them. For Russia, in addition to the geopolitical factor, an important factor (to some extent a secondary factor) is economic interests, as well as its historical ties with Orthodox countries (Bechev, 2019). This has been clearly demonstrated by numerous studies. Russian historian Elena Guskova, who has devoted her research to the history of Slavic states in the Balkans, believes that the Russian leadership sees its place in the region in strengthening Russia’s economic presence (Guskova, 2019).

Russia, as a key actor, plays an important role in cooperation between the countries of the region. The Russian market is of great importance for all countries in the region, and its potential can aid countries to cooperate and further progress in various fields, such as economy, energy, and infrastructure. In fact, this kind of perspective is clearly demonstrated in the section dedicated to relations with the Balkans in the Foreign Policy Concept approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin in 2013. Specifically, paragraph 66 in this Kremlin document states, “Russia aims to develop comprehensive, pragmatic, and equal cooperation with the countries of South-Eastern Europe. The Balkan region is of great strategic importance to Russia, including as a major transportation and infrastructure hub through which oil and gas are distributed to European countries (Foreign policy concept of the RF, 2013). This clearly states the strategic interest of the Moscow government in the Balkan
region. The Concept is a systematic description of the basic principles, priorities, objectives, and goals of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

Meanwhile, Russia’s new foreign policy—in contrast to Soviet policy—is based not on global ideology but on domestic needs. Accordingly, Russia gives priority to geo-economics over geopolitics and defends the interests of the new Russian business elite over abstract theoretical notions with little impact on life at home, such as fighting the first stage of NATO enlargement (Simes, 1999), or the EU enlargement, even as Moscow opposes these in principle. The start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 was exactly one of the main reasons for Moscow’s opposition to NATO and the EU enlargement. It is clear from official Kremlin statements that NATO and the EU enlargement is not welcomed by Moscow and is perceived by it as a threat to Russian national security. Normally, Putin’s policy has been harshly criticized by many countries in the world regarding the current events in Ukraine, but in fact, we can understand that Russia wants NATO to return to its pre-1997 borders (i.e. by removing military infrastructure from member countries that joined the alliance in 1997). We can also add that today it is difficult to give a concrete forecast or conclusion as to what will be the policies that will be pursued in the development of relations between Russia and NATO and EU countries during this period or after the end of the war as the war in Ukraine is still ongoing, with no clear way out, but it is important to reach a negotiated and long-term solution between the states.

Author Leon Aron in his article “The Putin Doctrine - Russia’s Quest to Rebuild the Soviet State” explains that Kremlin foreign policy rests on three geostrategic imperatives: that Russia must remain a nuclear superpower, that Russia must remain a great power in all facets of international activity, and that it must remain the hegemon—the political, military, and economic leader—of its region (Aron, 2013). In practice, the loss of geopolitical space is not a characteristic or feature of the great powers, as they always aim and seek to maintain their influence and authority in strategic regions (as in the Balkans).

Accordingly, Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, in their article “Russia’s Game in the Balkans,” argue that, for Russia, the Balkans have important historical, cultural, and religious ties—common ties that are actively spread, and sometimes exaggerated by, the efforts of Russian public diplomacy and media narratives (Stronski & Himes, 2019). The geostrategic location of the region between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, as well as its proximity to the Middle East, is also important to Moscow. The Black Sea provides Russia with access to warm water ports, the search for which has been a historical instigator of Russian diplomatic and military activity in Southeast Europe (Stronski & Himes, 2019).

Albanian historian Paskal Milo says that Kremlin foreign policy has historically been present in the Balkans, and it was and is in Slavic countries, especially in Serbia. In these countries, Russia is present with significant economic investments, and with traditional cultural and political influence. Russia also maintains more complex and closer relations with Serbia, which do not exclude the aspect of military cooperation and a clearly structured alliance. Moreover, Serbia has always been, and continues to be, at the centre of Russian influence in the Balkans. Russia, through Serbia, seeks
to maintain power in the Balkans and to spread it as much as possible throughout the region (Mahmutaj, 2020).

Historically, Russia has had particularly warm relations with the Balkans. The great mediaeval Slavic empires of Serbia and Bulgaria had enormous influence in shaping Russian culture by transmitting much of the civilization of the Greco-Roman World in a Slavonic idiom into Russia, particularly from the 13th to the fifteenth centuries (Gvosdev & Marash, 2013) and those that followed.

Some Albanian researchers, however, have harshly criticize Russian policy regarding the Balkans, calling it unfair and un-strategic. Former Albanian diplomat and researcher in international relations, Shaban Murati, says that Russian diplomacy is in a rush and does not have the time and patience to hide its ambitions in the region (Murati, Russian influence in Albania, 2016) so much so that it has tied Serbia too strongly to its interests, and that Belgrade has no choice but to obey Moscow (Murati, Lavrov’s threat against Vuçi is not only at the state level, but also personally, 2020). The rush of Russian foreign policy to secure its influence in the Balkans can be seen in its energy project, where the Balkan region plays the role of the final stage of Russian oil and gas distributions (Blank, 2013), and policy, based on the idea that the battle for oil and gas will be one of the key battles of the future between Great Powers. “Today’s Russia, which is rising aggressively in the international arena and aspires to become a world superpower, claims to occupy the same place in world affairs as the Soviet Union in the past” (Murati, Lavrov’s threat against Vuçi is not only at the state level, but also personally, 2020).

In his book “Balkan Russia,” Murati argues that Russia’s actions in the Balkans are focused on targeting former Soviet and Slavic states with a view to reactivating a common Slavic umbrella (joint military manoeuvres with Serbia, creation of the Panslav Forum in Slovenia), as well as on targeting the axis of Balkan Orthodox States as instruments to spread Russia’s influence in the Balkans (Murati, Balkan Russia, 2014).

The same opinion is shared by the Albanian diplomat, Lisen Bashkurti, in his article “Russia’s direct and indirect influence in the Balkans,” in which he writes that it is now an indisputable fact that the Russian presence and influence in the Balkans is evident and on the rise. This is not surprising, as Russia has been looking out of the Balkans for more than two centuries in order to use this area of Southeast Europe for its geopolitical and strategic interests (Bashkurti, 2020).

At the same time, Russia is not always interested in changing its laws to more closely harmonize with EU standards (Gvosdev & Marash, 2013). In this case, we can add that Russian policy sees the Balkans as a vulnerable periphery of Europe where Russia can build a foothold, recruit supporters, and ultimately maximize its leverage vis-à-vis the West (Bechev, 2019).

In summary, the various geopolitical or even geo-economic movements in the Balkan Peninsula from the Kremlin, as is clearly seen in the Concept of Russian Foreign Policy and stated by various scholars, is not something unknown or new, nor should it be considered something surprising, as it is simply the extension of Russia’s interests, as for the other Great Powers.
8.3 The Russian Presence on the Balkan Peninsula

Russia has historically played, and will continue to play, a key role in the Western Balkan region. Russia’s presence continues to be significant in historical and cultural terms, but above all, it manifests itself in the areas of security, economy, trade, and energy, which are important for the region and vice versa. It is also important to note that some of the factors mentioned above indicate that the Russian presence in the Western Balkan countries will always be visible. Although Moscow’s presence in fields such as trade, economy, and energy is not as pronounced as that of the European Union, it has been able, through its strategic policies, gain the perception that it is a strategic and serious partner for the countries of the Western Balkans, as well as more willing than Brussels to take care of issues of importance in the region.

Indeed, a concrete and clear example is the new gas project in Serbia, the agreement for which was signed in 2017 between Russia’s largest company, Gazprom, and that of Serbia, Yugorosgaz (Serbia, Gazprom ramping up gas supplies to, 2017). According to data on the company’s official website, in 2018, Gazprom sent 2.2 billion cubic metres of gas to Serbia (Oil and gas exploration, production, processing, and storage in Serbia, 2018). Certainly, through these ambitious and promising future projects, Russian Gazprom has gained more ground in recent years. This has normally enabled Moscow to act wisely, aiming to secure its sphere of economic, but also political, influence through bilateral pipeline agreements. Here, we can also add that the Russian government is further strengthening its dominance in the Balkans by having Serbia as a “key” to its strategies in the implementation of projects that are important even for the development of the Balkan region.

Meanwhile, there is no doubt that Belgrade, under this Russian presence and influence, has recently emphasized its foreign policy based on two key vectors, which we can call “Euro-Russian Serbia”. The clarification of this two-vector Euro-Russian policy by Serbia can be clearly seen from the visits of senior leaders of the Serbian and Russian governments, where such visits at a high state-level consolidate the cooperation between Belgrade and Moscow, as well as cooperation in the political, diplomatic, economic, commercial, cultural, and spiritual fields. Meanwhile, regarding Belgrade’s policy towards Brussels, we see that Serbia has hesitated to take any step that would harm its EU accession prospects or openly distance itself from the EU’s general foreign policy.

In addition, the Russian presence and influence in the Balkans are greatly favoured by the hybrid transition environment of the countries of this Peninsula. In fact, in the Balkans, we have several types of states in terms of the formation of institutional functioning, stability, and democracy. For example, we have new states, including Kosovo1 which gained independence on 17 February 2008 and is recognized by

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1 This is the date of the declaration of independence by the Republic of Kosovo, whose sovereignty is not recognized by Russia. Moscow, not recognizing the independence of Kosovo, stated that this crisis should be resolved through dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, under UN Security Council Resolution 1244. Thus, resolving the Kosovo issue is one of the key factors in changing the vector of cooperation between the Balkan countries (which, unfortunately, still impedes the
117 countries (International recognitions of the Republic of Kosovo, 2021) (International recognitions of the Republic of Kosovo, 2018), facing challenges of state formation and functioning; we have weak states, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, facing difficulties in terms of existence and functioning as a whole (Kivimäki et al., 2012), and finally, we have countries in political, legal, economic, and administrative transition, including Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia.

Despite the number of states, the characteristics of the Western Balkan region in its transition phase make the systems of these countries relatively hybrid. This means that in the Western Balkan countries, in addition to the Western elements of liberal democracy, relapse into the old systems of Eastern origin, so that these systems continue to coexist. These two elements exist and rival each other in political settings, legal systems, institutions, and economic settings. As these elements have a significant impact on the Balkan states, we can define them as problematic elements that affect or attract the presence of other actors, a presence that opens the door and increases the opportunities for these actors to expand their influence in the region.

8.4 The OSCE and the European Union’s Special Missions

Opposition to Russia’s policies has been shown openly in major organizations in terms of cooperation, security, and democracy. This has particularly been the case in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) where members continue to harshly criticize Moscow’s behaviour. Addressing recent events (such as the events in Georgia, the conflict in Ukraine, the events in Nagorno-Karabakh, the “Skripal case” or “Chemical attack on Great Britain” in 2018, the Navalny case) has become one of the main priorities of these organizations as they play an important role in resolving conflicts, as well as in preserving the fundamental rights of individuals.

It is important to note here that relations between the OSCE and Russia have also affected relations between the countries of the Balkan region and Russia, as the countries of the Western Balkans (except Serbia) have followed the policy of OSCE countries. For example, the conflict in Ukraine has made the countries of the Western Balkans also respond to Moscow for the invasion of Ukraine by imposing severe sanctions on Russia. Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia ban Russian overflight of their airspace and access to their airports, prohibit transactions with Russia’s Central Bank, and suspend the broadcasting of Russian state-owned media (Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia to ‘Enemy’ List, 2022). In fact, today the OSCE has grown in profile, but its mission has become increasingly challenging and complex. Given that the OSCE is the forum favoured by Russia to deal with European issues, this has also hampered the fulfilment of its role in preventing conflict.

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progress of the region). Therefore, Kosovo as an independent state is a factor of stability in the region and beyond.
The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has found, and continues to find, violations by Russia; this is specifically stated in the OSCE reports on Ukraine. According to daily, weekly, and local reports from the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (Daily and spot reports from the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, 2014–2022 HYPERLINK "sps:refid::bib6|bib6"), there are continuing violations of the ceasefire established between Kyiv and Moscow via the mediation of France and Germany, which have undertaken a peace process called the Minsk protocol. The Minsk protocol was drawn up by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine in 2014, which consisted of representatives from the OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia (Press statement by the Trilateral Contact Group, 2014).

In fact, the uneasy relationship between the OSCE and Russia comes as a result of the foreign policy that Russia has pursued towards the OSCE, which has been frequently criticized and continues to be criticized by the Kremlin. Specifically, Russia has criticized the OSCE for being irrelevant or imbalanced (Morozov, 2005) in terms of bias and partiality or current policy, and the OSCE needs reforms based on realities (Lavrov, 2005).

During the 2018 elections in Russia, there was a generally positive report from the ODIHR stating that the elections were transparent, but were tightly controlled. The Director of the OSCE ODIHR, Michael Georg Link, during a press conference in Moscow, said that cooperation with Russian officials has been transparent, professional, and credible, but that the lack of competition in the electoral race was one of the shortcomings of the whole electoral process. Other shortcomings he mentioned were related to the definition of freedom of speech (Russian presidential election well administered, but characterized by restrictions on fundamental freedoms, lack of genuine competition, international observers say, 2018).

The attitude of the Russian Federation towards the OSCE has undergone a major and significant change in recent years as Russian foreign policy itself has changed in relation to other actors and vice versa. This kind of policy change comes as a result of international developments and the reality facing actors. The current events in Ukraine explain the changing development of relations between the states (including here the relations between the OSCE and Russia).

However, it is important to note, today, strengthening cooperation between Russia and other forces is necessary, as they are key actors and play an important role in the field of security and democracy in the international arena, where they will undoubtedly affect not only the progress of relations with each other but also in the further perspectives of the regions.

At present, relations between Moscow and Brussels are in open confrontation, as Russia and the European Union define their positions in specific problematic situations based on often profoundly opposing views (e.g. in the case of Kosovo or the crisis in Ukraine) in terms of the problems of global politics, the content, the driving forces, priorities, and the desired model of the future world order.

Here, we must emphasize another important moment regarding the recent influence of Russia in the Balkans, which has also “awakened” the EU interest by making its policy towards the region more active. As a concrete example of the “Brussels awakening,” we can bring the Kremlin’s offer that the countries of the Western
Balkans become part of the Eurasian Economic Union,\footnote{The Eurasian Economic Union is an international organization for regional economic integration for countries located in northern Asia and southern Europe. It is led by Russia and ensures the free movement of goods, services, and capital and labour. It also pursues a coordinated, harmonized policy within the sectors defined by the Treaty and international agreements within the Union.} which came at a particularly inopportune moment for the countries of the Western Balkans, as they had just received negative responses to the opening of negotiations in the EU. This offer from the Kremlin prompted Brussels to take further steps for the countries of the region by promising again to open negotiations as soon as possible.

The European Union has provided various programs for the development of the region and the countries of the Western Balkans, providing funding and support. In fact, economically, the EU is the largest trading partner for the Western Balkan countries, the main source of foreign direct investment, and the main destination for external labour migration. Many European countries have a significant Western Balkan diaspora. Although the slowdown in European Union enlargement has raised uncertainty among Balkan countries about the credibility of the European Union, it continues to be the most important economic actor in the region.

Based on European Commission statistics, it is clear that there is EU cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans region, including Serbia which (although it has openly expressed cooperation with Russia) continues to lead first among the countries of the region. The growth of Serbia’s exports between 2010 and 2020 in absolute terms was the largest of the six partners in the Western Balkans, as was its average annual growth rate (6.5%) (Western Balkans-EU—international trade in goods statistics, 2021) making Serbia the largest trade partner of the EU in the Western Balkans.

\section{Conclusion}

In conclusion, we can say that Russian foreign policy plays a very important role in maintaining stability and peace in the Balkan region. Resolving problems or obstacles between states is currently an important step for the region’s progress, and Moscow, as the leading global actor in that international arena, plays a role in establishing the balance of forces. Therefore, cooperation between the Russian Federation and the countries of the Balkan region allows us to assert that Moscow plays a key role in the region’s stability and development. Moscow’s presence has always been visible and like other states, Russia has its own interests (Simes, 1999) in the region.

Russia understands that, as it is no longer the superpower of Soviet times, it must play a major role in international affairs in a multipolar world. How Russia will react to international affairs, or to its commitments, is an enigmatic factor for the future. This is also explained by recent events between Ukraine and Russia from February 2022. The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly brought a new transition for the Kremlin.
itself, but also an attempt to create a new world order, which could also change the foreign policy perception of key international actors.

It is also important to note that the relations between states in the international arena will be influenced by the realities they will face in the future. This means that, with the development of technology and globalization, the relationships between states will likely change. The influence of external actors in the Balkan region will be determined on the basis of international developments. More important will be the contribution of these actors to the stability and development of the region, as well as the alignment of their foreign policy with that of the region. This means that Russia will probably need a new policy towards the Balkans, one more focused on a combination of “hard” and “soft powers” i.e. “smart power.”

References


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