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Moscow's Leverage in the Balkans



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Since September, Kosovo's fragile stability that has endured since 1999, following intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has grown progressively precarious. Clashes between ethnic Serbians and Kosovo security forces saw Serbia's military placed on high alert in November. Several high-profile Serbian officials, including President Aleksandar Vučić, announced that the Serbian military could be

deployed to northern Kosovo to protect the ethnic Serbs, who make up the majority of the population in the region.

Moscow has natural incentives to provoke the crisis. An unraveling of regional security would create more obstacles for Serbia's EU aspirations, optimistically slated for 2025. The West's support for Kosovo has historically undermined Serbia's European integration effort, and 51 percent of Serbs polled by Belgrade-based pollster Demostat in June 2022 said they would vote against EU membership in a national referendum.

But by escalating tensions, Russia can also prevent further EU and NATO expansion in the region, and potentially reduce Western pressure on Russian forces in Ukraine by diverging resources from Kyiv to the Balkans.

Throughout the 1990s, NATO took a leading role in the breakup of Yugoslavia, perceived to be dominated by Serbia. While the West supported Bosnian and Croatian independence initiatives and Kosovan autonomy, Serbia was supported by Russia. These policies led to considerable tension between NATO and Russia, with the Kremlin's occupation of Kosovo's Slatina airport in 1999 leading to "one of the most tense standoffs between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War."

However, Russia was too weak to adequately support Serbia in the 1990s. And after then-Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milošević was overthrown in 2000 and Russian forces withdrew from Kosovo in 2003, Serbian political elites instead pursued cautious integration with Europe while keeping the U.S. at arm's length. At the same time, Serbia and Russia forged closer relations through growing economic ties, embracing their common Slavic Orthodox heritage, and sharing resentment toward NATO's role in their affairs.

Territories under Serbian control continued to secede in the 2000s, with Montenegro peacefully voting for independence in 2006 and Kosovo in 2008. Yet unlike other secession initiatives in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo's failed to gain universal recognition. Almost half of the UN General Assembly refused to recognize Kosovo's independence, with NATO/EU members Spain, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania among them.

Moscow was firmly against Kosovo's independence, and prior to the February 2008 declaration of independence, the Kremlin warned of geopolitical consequences if it were to move forward. Six months later, Russia invoked the "Kosovo Precedent" to invade Georgia and recognized the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as

independent. The Kremlin is now using the same paradigm to justify its support for Russian-backed separatist territories in Ukraine.

Currently bogged down in Ukraine, the Kremlin is exploring fomenting additional unrest in the Balkans by exploiting Serbian nationalist sentiment. Doing so will undoubtedly redirect some Western political, economic, and military efforts away from Ukraine.

Russia's influence over Serbia has grown in recent years, and Serbian politicians have become more assertive regarding northern Kosovo. Though overall trade between Russia and Serbia is negligible in comparison to the EU, Russia provides one-quarter of the oil imported to Serbia, while Gazprom finalized 51 percent share in Serbia's major oil and gas company, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), in 2009.

Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council has prevented greater international recognition of Kosovo, demonstrating Moscow's usefulness as a diplomatic ally. Putin has, meanwhile, become Serbians' most admired international leader, with pro-Putin and pro-Russia rallies having been held in Serbia since the invasion of Ukraine. According to recent polling, almost 70 percent of Serbians hold NATO responsible for the conflict.

Balancing Putin's popularity and Serbia's relations with Europe has been a delicate task for Serbian President Vučić. Though he condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he refused to implement sanctions against the Kremlin, prompting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to signal that Vučić had to make a choice between Europe and Russia in June.

But the Serbian leader had already signed a three-year gas deal with Russia in May, and in September agreed to "consult" with Moscow on foreign policy issues. Other ventures, such as doubling flights from Moscow to Belgrade, have demonstrated Serbia's willingness to assist Russia in undermining Western sanctions.

More concerning to Western officials is Russia's attempts over the last decade to alter the military balance between Serbia and Kosovo. A Russian humanitarian center located in the Serbian city of Niš, which is close to the Kosovo border and opened in 2012, is suspected of being a secret Russian military base "set up by the Kremlin to spy on U.S. interests in the Balkans." Additionally, Serbia has increased imports of Russian weaponry, while joint military exercises between Russia, Belarus, and Serbia (labeled "Slavic Brotherhood") have been held annually since 2015.

Russian-backed non-state actors have in turn become increasingly present in Serbia. In 2009, Russian private military and security companies, as well as organizations composed of Russian military veterans, began conducting, in coordination with Serbian counterparts, military youth camps in Zlatibor, Serbia. These were seen as attempts to

develop the next generation of fighters and were eventually shut down by the local police in 2018.

Russia's Night Wolves biker gang, which has played a pivotal role in the 2014 seizure of Crimea and the unrest that has followed in Ukraine since, also opened a Serbian chapter and conducted road trips in the region for years. And in December, a cultural center was opened by the Russian private military company Wagner—which is similarly fighting in Ukraine—in Serbia, “to strengthen and develop friendly relations between Russia and Serbia with the help of ‘soft power.’”

Using these forces to threaten a low-level insurgency in Kosovo would cause enormous alarm in NATO and the EU. But Russia's efforts to fan the flames of Serbian nationalism will also be directed toward Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country's Serb-dominated territory, Republika Srpska, accepted power-sharing stipulations as part of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, and Russian forces similarly withdrew from the country in 2003.

Nonetheless, Milorad Dodik, president of Republika Srpska (who was also the president from 2010-2018), has increasingly allied himself with the Kremlin and has taken greater steps toward declaring his region's independence from the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina over the last decade. Republika Srpska security forces are now well-equipped with Russian weaponry, while Moscow has given subtle approval to supporting and developing Republika Srpska paramilitary groups. A Bosnian-Serb militia group called Serbian Honor is believed to have received training at the humanitarian center in Niš and the Night Wolves have also repeatedly held rallies in the territory.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Dodik has expressed his support for Russia, raising alarm over his ability to instigate unrest in Bosnia and Herzegovina with limited Russian state and non-state support. In response, the EU's peacekeeping mission in the country, EUFOR or Operation Althea, almost doubled its presence from 600 to 1,100 since the invasion in February.

Yet this still pales compared to the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), which has roughly 3,700 troops in a country with a smaller population and less territory than Bosnia and Herzegovina, and is further aided by the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX). Pushing Republika Srpska's independence initiative to a point where Russia can officially recognize and support it may in turn rapidly overwhelm the smaller international force there. It would also provoke calls for independence among Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethnic Croatian minority, whose leaders have close relations with Moscow.

Disagreements in the Western alliance over the collective approach to the Balkans have been revealed in recent months. While the UK and the U.S. placed sanctions on “various Bosnian politicians who are threatening the country’s territorial integrity,” the EU chose not to, notably due to opposition by Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary. And while Croatia was accepted into the Schengen area in December, Romania, and Bulgaria, already EU members since 2007, were denied entry by Austria, while the Netherlands similarly opposed Bulgaria being part of the Schengen area.

Effectively managing potential violence in the former Yugoslavia while continuing the integration efforts of other Balkan EU/NATO members would prove to be a difficult procedure for the Western alliance. Billions of dollars in aid and assistance have already been provided to Ukraine in 2022. Confronting additional instability in the Balkans would also highlight the flaws of NATO policy in the region since the 1990s and the lack of a viable, long-term solution to confront the issues plaguing the Balkans.

Yet regional integration efforts have picked up in recent months. In July, the EU restarted membership talks of bringing Albania and North Macedonia into the organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina was officially accepted as a candidate on December 15, and Kosovo applied for EU membership on December 14. NATO membership for both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina remains largely on hold, however, and is currently out of the question for Serbia, which considers NATO its “enemy.”

Considerable work will be required to integrate these divided states into the Western alliance, and recent attempts to speed up this process have been largely unsuccessful. The scheme by former President Donald Trump’s administration to change the Serbia-Kosovo border amounted to little, while the proposed Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo has been criticized for outlining the creation of another Republika Srpska.

The role of Russian intelligence and Serbian nationalists in the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, which sought to derail the country’s NATO accession, reveals the lengths to which Moscow will go to achieve its aims. Western officials must, therefore, remain wary of Russia’s potential in the region. Escalating unresolved Balkan conflicts is now a major part of the Kremlin’s attempts to stall Western integration in Europe and take pressure off its war with Ukraine.

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