(COUNTER)BALANCING THE WEST: RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS SINCE THE END OF COLD WAR

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Abstract:
Focusing on countries remnants of former Yugoslavia, this article traces sources of Russia's influence in the region, departing from the idea that these sources are of political-diplomatic, military, economic, and socio-cultural nature. Revealing the manner in which Russia uses its influence leverages in the Western Balkans, the article relies on an extensive qualitative data collected through a variety of sources including scholarly literature on the topic, statements of political leadership, interviews and informal conversations with Russian and regional decision-makers directly involved in negotiation processes, official documents, mass media reports, and social media groups and discussions. Led by the question of in what ways and to what extent has Russia influenced the post-Yugoslav region, the article sheds the light on usually overlooked aspect of Russia's influence on the relations between the republics of former Yugoslavia in the first two decades of twenty-first century. The article closes with the analysis of effects of Russia's full-fledged 2022 invasion in Ukraine on the intensity and nature of its influence in the Balkans.

Keywords: *Post-Soviet Russia, Former Yugoslavia, Influence, Foreign Policies.*

Introduction: Situating Russia's Influence in Former Yugoslav Space

At the turn of the 21st century, Europe faced two parallel and opposite processes. The first was the demise of the Socialist bloc and the Soviet Union (SU) as the bloc's leader. The second process was the

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integration of the European Economic Community into the political bloc – the European Union (EU) (Tepavcevic, 2021 a). The violent breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic Yugoslavia (SFRY), the only socialist European country that was not member of the Soviet bloc, reflected and paralleled these two processes. Yugoslavia existed between 1918 and 1992 as a federal state of six predominantly South Slavic republics. Most of the former Yugoslav republics, with the exception of Slovenia, were not ethnically homogeneous nation-states: Croatia had a large autochthonous Serb minority and less numerous Italian, Hungarian and Slovenian minorities, while Bosnia and Herzegovina had Bosnian Muslim, Serb, and Croat dominant communities. Serbia, the largest among Yugoslav republics, had two autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo, which had notably different ethnic structures from Serbia's central regions: Albanian majority in Kosovo, and various ethnic groups in Vojvodina (Kovacevic-Bielicki, 2017).[1]

The first multi-party elections held in the 1990 in the country that formerly was ruled by the single – Yugoslav Communist – party, brought to power right-wing nationalist forces that called for independence and separation as a mobilizing principle in the majority of the republics. Simultaneously, many of left-wing politicians were against the separation and dissolution. Though acting as a right-wing political force, Serbian leadership associated with the left-wing politicians, opposing the dissolution. While other republics encountered violent conflicts on their territories, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) constituting of Serbia and Montenegro, the only two republics that, until 2006, remained in the state union, also experienced significant ethnic tensions and sporadic violence in many parts of their own territories (Kovacevic-Bielicki, 2017). In 2008, Albanian majority declared Kosovo's independence from Serbia, yet, its' status as an independent state has not been fully internationally recognized and resolved by the time of writing.

Russia's influence in the post-Yugoslav space had provoked fierce scholarly discussions, consisting of two major aspects. The first aspect is

[1] The pre-war population census in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1991 estimates that the population consisted of 43.47 percent of Bosnian Muslims, 31.21 percent of Serbs, and 17.38 percent of Croats. Source: G. Bilten (1991). Ethnic composition of Bosnia-Herzegovina population. Sarajevo: Zavod za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine.

related to the foreign policies of Yugoslavia's successor countries towards Russia; the second aspect refers to Russia's foreign policy towards the Balkans since the 1990s. This article is led by the following question: in what ways and to what extent has Russia influenced the post-Yugoslav region between 1991 and 2022? By answering this question, the article also sheds some light on usually overlooked aspect of Russia's influence on the relations between the republics of former Yugoslavia in the first two decades of twenty-first century.

Therefore, this article traces sources of Russia's influence in the region over the last three decades, departing from the idea that these sources are of political, military, economic, and historical nature. Revealing interconnections between these sources, on the one hand, and, on the other, aspects of Russia's influence across former Yugoslav republics. The article relies on an extensive qualitative data collected through a variety of sources including scholarly literature on Russia's influence in the Western Balkans, Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts since 1992, statements of political leadership, interviews and informal conversations with Russian and regional decision-makers, mass media reports, and social media groups' discussions. The article proceeds as follows. The first section analyses scholarly discussions on Russia's global role in the post-Soviet period in general, and its' influence in the countries of former Yugoslavia in particular. The second section reflects on the place devoted to Russia in foreign policies in four geographically central former Yugoslav republics. The third section analyses the place of the Western Balkans in Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy tracing Russia's role in the countries resulted from Yugoslavia's disintegration through the three decades – the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. The paper closes with the analysis of effects of Russia's full-fledged 2022 invasion in Ukraine on the intensity and nature of its influence in the Western Balkans and drives some conclusions.

Russia's Influence in Europe – Scholarly Discussions

Scholarly literature on Russia's influence abroad evolves across four major themes. The broadest theme is Russia's international image, or the way in which Russia is perceived globally. As the largest and central republic of the former world's second military superpower, the

SU, its' legal successor in international organizations, territorially the world's largest country, for most of the thirty years after the Soviet demise, Russia has largely been perceived as imperial expansionist (Tepavcevic, 2013). Simultaneously, Russia emerged as a key global economic player as the largest exporter of oil and gas (Stent, 2008), combined with assertive foreign policy rhetoric of its political leadership contributed to these perceptions.

However, a closer view suggests that Russia means different things in different periods, and in different contexts during the same period (Neumann, 1998). First, Russia's historical legacy in post-Soviet neighboring countries as well as in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) from Soviet times, and its political system, have left many countries hostile to Russia (Neumann, 1998; Abdelal, 2005; Orban, 2008). In contrast to CEE, Yugoslavia's successor states did not join military and political blocs in Europe during the Cold War. Therefore, they did not share these negative experiences and, consequently, the same fears as their CEE neighbors, though they have similar goals of joining the EU (Tepavcevic, 2015; Reljic, 2009). Therefore, this strand of literature suggests the proposition that Russia's influence in Europe and particularly in the Western Balkans is a consequence of Russia's historical legacy among the population of these countries. These works display Russia mostly as a military power.

Following the argument of historical legacy, many authors focused on foreign and economic policies of other countries as agents in international relations. For instance, Abdelal (2005) suggested that economic policies in other post-Soviet republics were formulated and implemented in accordance to their national identities, while these identities were formulated in relation to Russia. As a result, for instance in Lithuania, Russia's image as the significant 'other' was, in the eyes of the decision makers in economic policy, a decisive factor in their choice of a liberal path in Lithuanian economic policy and foreign policy orientation. At the same time, among the Belarussian political elite, Russia's image as the country's only supplier of energy had exactly the opposite effect in shaping the republic's post-Soviet economic and foreign policies (Abdelal, 2005). This discussion provides the general proposition that Russia is very influential in economic and foreign policy

decision-making in other post-socialist countries. Therefore, this strand focuses on Russia as a state, owning significant resources to influence politics and foreign policies of neighboring countries.

The third broad theme in scholarly literature has concerned Russia's economic influence through outward investments of Russian companies. In this context, Kuznetsov (2007) pointed out that Russian investments were not welcomed in developed countries, while developing countries usually tended to attract the investments of Russian companies. Building upon such argument, Tepavcevic (2018) demonstrated that the reaction of local authorities and business communities to investment by Russian state-owned energy companies and banks particularly in Hungary and Serbia were mostly shaped by the level of a host country's international position and economic development, rather than by Russia's foreign policy interests and goals. In this context, attempts to attract Russian companies' investments seemed particularly striking in Serbia, and in the Serb political entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, officially known as Republika Srpska (Tepavcevic, 2015 and 2018). Therefore, these works postulate that the economic interests of the aforementioned countries and political entities shaped their foreign policies towards Russia.

The last proposition develops the theme of the influence of Russian companies' investment abroad, including Yugoslavia's successor states, as an aspect of Russian interests. This proposition is also the most influential. The authors representing this strand of discussion portray post-Soviet Russia's economic influence as a continuation of pursuing state interest by 'softer' means, thus, approaching Russian state-owned energy companies as new agents of Russia's political influence (Orban, 2008; Nygren, 2007). As such, Tsygankov (2006) suggested that the post-Soviet Russia largely inherited foreign policy aspirations of the SU. According to him, the post-Soviet government exchanged its foreign policy strategy for soft power, or, in other words, it applies coercion "by banks" rather than coercion "by tanks". Therefore, this strand also emphasizes the role of Russian companies as actors shaping Russia's influence in Europe. In sum, the literature offers four propositions as demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Propositions about Russia's influence (Source: author's view based on literature review)

Proposition	Interest in focus	Sphere of Influence
Geopolitical: Russia as a political factor is influential in economic and foreign policy decision-making in other post-socialist European countries	Political interests of Russia and other countries	Economic and foreign policy – influencing either cooperation or disengagement with Russia, or Russia with other countries
Economic needs of other countries: the economic needs of countries shaped their policies regarding cooperation with Russia.	Other countries' economic interests in relation to Russia	Economy
Historical: Russia's influence in Europe and particularly in the Western Balkans is a consequence of the historical experiences of Russia with the population of these countries.	Other countries' security interests in relation to Russia	Geopolitics
Geoeconomic: Russian – mostly state-owned energy – companies represent agents of Russia's foreign policy influence.	Russia's interests in relation to other countries	Geoeconomics

The next section reflects on post-Yugoslav republics' foreign policy interests in relation to Russia.

Russia in Foreign Policies of the Former Yugoslav States

Foreign policies of the Western Balkan states, as initially conceptualized former Yugoslavia minus Slovenia and plus Albania, "do not reflect their strategic national interests. (…) all Western Balkan countries could be defined as small states, despite the fact that within the region some of them are considered as being comparatively large and strong" (Rasidagic, 2013). This notion of relatively large and strong primarily refers to Serbia, which, even after Kosovo's factual secession, remains the largest in the region in terms of territory and population.

At a smaller extent, this relative regional strength refers to Croatia. Rasidagic (2013) also suggests that [T]he potential for formulation and implementation of foreign policy in all of these states is very low, due to a number of reasons (…) small territories and population, weak economies, unfinished democracy building processes, and a generally unsettled situation, typical of transitional societies. All these aspects make states in the region, to a large extent, dependent on the interests of bigger powers, as well as susceptible to policies of the international organizations ... . Western Balkan states, therefore, to varying extents, identify their foreign policies with the policies of different external actors (Rasidagic, 2013).

Indeed, a number of factors influenced Yugoslavia's successor countries to ally with a particular big power, though these alliances were diverse on various levels and topics. Nevertheless, one feature common to all these countries is that European integration has remained a top foreign policy priority. This priority was founded primarily on the geographical proximity principle, which also generated economic dominance of the EU in the Western Balkans region. In 2023, these countries reached different stages of integration: for instance, Croatia has reached full EU membership since 2013, Montenegro became an EU candidate in 2010, Serbia received EU candidate status in 2012, and Bosnia and Herzegovina received EU candidate status only in 2022. In this line of thought, I consider illustrative Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the largest country of Yugoslavia's successors, whose website states that European integration and membership in the European Union represent the national interest and strategic commitment of the Republic of Serbia, and the European Union values are the same ones which the Republic of Serbia supports and strives to refine (...) The European Union is also the most important trade and investment partner of the Republic of Serbia, and a very important factor in the economic stability of the country (Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

At the same time, in Serbia's foreign policy, the bilateral relations with Russia, sorted in alphabetical order, seem to occupy an important place. Bilateral relations between the Republic of Serbia and the Russian Federation are based on a strategic partnership based on a deep mutual feeling of friendship, centuries-old history of relations and the tradition

of linguistic, spiritual and cultural closeness of the fraternal peoples of the two countries. The dynamics of contacts at the highest level between officials of the two countries is intense (Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

As this statement on Serbia's MFA website suggests, the EU integration involves pragmatic aspects of the relations, namely national interests and strategic priorities – which confirms the economic proposition. Simultaneously, the relations with Russia seem to be primarily grounded on historical, cultural and even emotional – namely the "feeling of friendship" – factors, directly confirming the proposition of Russia's historical legacy in relations with Serbia.

For Croatia, which has been an EU member state for a decade, the EU integration processes have remained top foreign policy goals. As the following statement from Croatia's Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs (MEVP abbreviation in Croatian) website suggests,

Celebrating the 10th anniversary, we are pleased to highlight that Croatia has fulfilled two strategic goals – joining the eurozone and the Schengen Area, making it one of only 15 countries that are simultaneously member states of NATO, EU, eurozone and the Schengen Area (Croatia's Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, 2023).

While, similar to Serbia's MFA website, the bilateral relations section on Croatia's MEVP website is sorted in alphabetical order, in contrast to Serbia's MFA website, these relations are specified in tables demonstrating titles and types of bilateral agreements, the dates of their implementations and terminations. The same principle holds for Croatia's relations with Russia, and they do not contain any interpretations. Nevertheless, in particular issues, Croatia's foreign policy towards Russia traditionally follows mainstream EU stance. This is particularly striking concerning the EU stance towards Russia's 2022 full-fledged invasion in Ukraine. As stated in the Croatia's MEVP website: "The values on which the EU rests – unity and solidarity, which Croatia strongly advocates, are particularly important amidst the aggression on Ukraine, when security and energy stability of the entire European continent are topical issues" (Croatia's Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, 2023). Therefore, Croatia's foreign policy towards Russia is part of the broader EU policy and it does not reflect any specific interests in bilateral

relations, extending the economic proposition towards a broader political one in relation to the EU membership.

Similar to Serbia and Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina's foreign policy was primarily focused on the preservation of independence and peace, and the EU integration. Simultaneously, in some contrast to both Serbia and Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina's foreign policy regional and bilateral priorities since 2003 were formulated in the section titled "Basic directions and activities of BiH foreign policy" as follows: Promotion of cooperation with neighboring countries – Republic Croatia (RC) and Serbia and Montenegro, on the basis of common interest and principles of equality, mutual respect and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity (…) Bosnia and Herzegovina will develop bilateral relations in particular with the member countries of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board, with the USA, Russian Federation, Great Britain, France, China and other member countries of the UN Security Council, member countries of the European Union, countries in the region, member countries of the Organization of Islamic Conference and with other countries (Chairman of BH Presidency Paravac, 2003).

However, the newest official document – 2018-2023 Foreign Policy Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina – notes radical changes in the international arena, including: effects of the Arab Spring, Brexit, Croatia's joining the EU, Montenegro's joining NATO, and "cooling the relations with Russia" (Bosnia and Herzegovina Government, 2018 - 2023). In such context, Bosnia and Herzegovina's foreign policy priorities remain the integration in the EU, security in cooperation with NATO, and cooperation with the neighboring countries.

Despite being a small country of only 500.000 permanent inhabitants, Montenegro is worthy to be analyzed as one of two longest-standing Yugoslavia's republics. Being in federation with Serbia until 2006, Montenegro followed the FRY foreign policy interests and goals by signing Free Trade Agreement with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2001. Since the peaceful 'divorce' with Serbia in 2006, Montenegro pro-actively pursued EU integration, firstly, by unilaterally introducing Euro as a national currency in 2002, without a previous agreement with the EU in this respect, while the EU expressed its reticence regarding this

decision. Secondly, Montenegro joined NATO in 2017: for the majority of newer EU member states, the NATO membership closely preceded acceptance to the EU full membership. In terms of foreign policy priorities, Montenegrin Government website devoted to foreign policy affairs stated the following: Our goal is further improvement of bilateral relations with countries of the Region (…) upgrading the bilateral relations with EU countries (…) dialogue on high level, intensive cooperation in various fields, including also cooperation in respect to further affirmation of Montenegrin integration in EU, and active cooperation within NATO alliance. (…) We are focused on further implementing of determined foreign policy in bilateral relations with countries of North and South America (Montenegro's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Notably, the text did not mention Russia separately: instead, there is mention of Eurasia as a region. Therefore, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with their EU integration agendas and the priority pivoted in the Western Balkan region, seem to have followed balanced foreign policy towards Russia, Croatia, and more recently, Montenegro have oriented their foreign policies on the EU, and, in the case of Montenegro, toward Americas.

In sum, the analysis in this section has revealed four images of Russia in the region. The first is Russia as friend noted in Serbia's official foreign policy. The second image portrays Russia as a distant security threat. It is reflected in Croatia's protocoled and highly technical report on the relations with Russia equal as with other countries outside the EU. The third image is Russia as one of the many countries in Eurasia, reflected in the "silence" about Russia in the present foreign policy of Montenegro. The fourth image is Russia as an important distant power that is presented in the Foreign Policy Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such approaches suggest a certain insignificance of Russia in Croatia and Montenegro as compared to the EU, a certain influence of Russia in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially significant in Serbian Republic, also in comparison to the EU, US, but also China and Islamic states, and significant influence of Russia in Serbia as against the EU. This proposition about Russia's influence focused on these four Yugoslavia's successor states is examined in the next section.

The Western Balkans in Russia's Foreign Policy: Tracing Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans in 1991-2022

Russia's Role in Wars of Yugoslavia's Dissolution: The first of Russia's post-Soviet Foreign Policy Concept (The Concept) was issued in late 1992, under President Boris Yeltsin and the notably liberal Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Andrey Kozyrev, and it does not mention Yugoslavia and its successor states separately, but only in a broad context of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. The Concept, however, thoroughly discusses the vision of post-Soviet Russia's relations with the post-Soviet republics, the United States of America (USA), Western Europe, and countries of Central-Eastern Europe. The later were seen as a region of turbulence and in search for identity, and former members of the Soviet bloc. It also underlined post-Soviet Russia's democratic statehood and its pivotal role in international cooperation and peace (Ministry of Foreign Affair of the Russian Federation, 1992). This suggests that the Western Balkans had a very peripheral meaning for Russia's foreign policy in the early 1990s, and such a position was conditioned by Russia's government attempts to establish new relations as a state, independent from the SU, rejecting both political and geoeconomic propositions.

Following Russia's foreign policy oriented towards integration in the West during Yeltsin's first presidential term, similarly to the majority of its Western partners, by the summer 1992, Russian leadership recognized the independence of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina from Yugoslavia. Additionally, due to domestic economic and political weakness, Russia's leadership tried to avoid strains with the West; thus, in several instances, it supported US-led actions against Serbs. First, in 1992, it supported the initiative of the UN Security Council to use military force in Bosnia and Herzegovina to guarantee the delivery of humanitarian aid; and secondly, during the 48th General Assembly session of the UN, it voted to expel Federal Republic Yugoslavia (the union of Serbia and Montenegro) from the UN. In this alignment with the mainstream international opinion on the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution, shaped by Russia's economic dependence on Western financial aid, Russia's leadership was not able to provide support to the Serbs. Therefore, despite the pressure of increasing nationalist mood

among the Russian society, Russian foreign policy in the Western Balkans had no influence under Yeltsin's leadership (Tepavcevic, 2013). The fact that NATO air strike on Serbs' artillery positions near Bosnian town of Gorazde in 1994 were conducted without even consulting Moscow best illustrated Russia's relative insignificance in these conflicts.

However, these strikes marked a certain turning point in Russia's stance towards the sides in Yugoslav wars: Russian leadership protested against NATO's action, blaming not only the Serbs' leadership in escalation of the conflict, but also Bosniaks and Croats. As a result, as Donaldson and Nogee (2005) pointed out, "[T]he locus of diplomatic efforts became a group of five nations – Russia, the United States, France, Great Britain and Germany – known as the "contact group". Their goal was to devise a political solution to the Bosnian civil war". These efforts in December 1995 resulted in the Dayton Peace Accords, defining the internal organization of Bosnia and Herzegovina in two major entities – The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (inhabited mostly by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats), and Srpska Republic (mainly inhabited by Serbs).

In addition, during the 1990s, Russian political leadership and armed forces were also involved in the conflict between Kosovo's Albanians and Serbs over attempts of the former to secede Kosovo from Serbia, and efforts of the latter to prevent this secession. While in this conflict, Kosovo's Serbs enjoyed the full support of the Serbian police and army, the US and the Western European powers attempted to defend the Kosovo's Albanians as they initially represented the weaker side of the conflict. In the spring of 1999, these attempts to defend Kosovo's Albanians turned into the three months long NATO's air attacks on Serbia and Montenegro (Tepavcevic, 2022b). For these attacks, as Yesson (2000) pointed out, Russian leaders accused NATO states of violating norms of sovereignty and undermining the UN Charter. In addition, the fact that these attacks were conducted without Russia's agreement signaled the need for a change in Russia's foreign policy. This was among the reasons for Yeltsin's decision to resign and to propose Vladimir Putin as his successor.

Post-Yugoslav-Wars Recovery: Russia's Foreign Policy Concept issued in 2000, under the first presidency of Vladimir Putin, and during

MFA leadership of Igor Ivanov, prioritized relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), then with Western Europe – most notably with Germany. It also explicitly mentioned not only the Balkans as a region in the post-socialist Europe as the third priority for Russia, but also FRY, and its territorial integrity as meaningfully concerning Russia's interests in the Balkans. FRY also became the only country outside the CIS signing Free Trade Agreement with Russia. These two factors – territorial integrity of FRY and Free Trade Agreement – demonstrated a much higher significance of the post-Yugoslav space in Putin-led Russia's foreign policy. Such change in the position in The Concept towards the Balkans was conditioned by the violent conflicts of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the position adopted by Russia in this respect, which was opposed to the one taken by the USA and the Western European countries, as discussed in the following sections. Simultaneously, both political and geoeconomic propositions regarding Russia's interests of influence in the Balkans find some confirmation particularly concerning Serbia and Montenegro, as successors of SFRY. Apart from The Concept, this period was also the one in which Russia issued other significant national security related documents, such as the Military Doctrine and the National Security Concept.

Russian foreign policy during Putin's first and second presidential terms (2000-2008) in general and towards the Western Balkans in particular appeared more pragmatic than the one during Yeltsin's rule. First, in 2001, Russia and FRY signed the aforementioned Free Trade Agreement, which allowed Yugoslav companies to trade with Russia on equal conditions as the CIS countries. According to the Trade Chamber of the Srpska Republic, this Agreement also facilitated exports of some products from the Srpska Republic to Russia, where Serbian companies served as mediators. According to the representatives of former Yugoslav business community in Russia, some Croatian private companies also used Serbian companies as mediators to trade their products in Russia in more favorable conditions (personal communication with companies' official representatives, June 2005). These developments made Serbia to function as a hub for exports to Russia for the whole region (Tepavcevic, 2022b). According to representatives of Bosnian Embassy in Russia, to improve direct economic relations, in 2004,

Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina established an intergovernmental commission for trade and economic cooperation (personal communication, July 2012).

Second, Russian companies have expanded in the countries set apart from former Yugoslavia and the Balkans in general since mid-2000s. According to the representative of the Bosnian Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA), seven companies with Russian capital over 50,000 euros invested in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1994-2010 (online interview, November 2012). For instance, by 2011, Russia was the fifth largest investor in Bosnia and Herzegovina after Austria, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, and in 2011, it improved up to the fourth position mostly because the oil company Zarubezhneft's acquisition of the Optima Group in Serbs' Republic conducted in the end of 2007 (Tepavcevic, 2015). As a representative of the Trade Chamber of Srpska Republic suggested, Russian investors in Optima Group were preferable to the Western European ones.

There was one attempt by the British company 'Vitol' to privatize the Refinery, but the attempt was fraud as the investor did not want to purchase on minimal acceptable for Serbs' Republic price. As a result, the former Refinery's CEO, who lobbied for the deal, was arrested. (…) It is much better for us in long perspective that Refinery Brod was sold to Russian company than to the British one, as Russia has more oil than the UK, thus oil supplies are guaranteed (personal interview, December 2012).

Direction of Russian foreign direct investments (FDI) in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed that the energy sector was the receiver of the largest amounts of FDI from Russia (Tepavcevic, 2013). Other FDI from Russia in the Western Balkans that followed in the same period included Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska's company RusAl purchase of the biggest metal plant – Kombinat Aluminijuma Podgorica (KAP) in Montenegro, and Lukoil's purchase of Serbian oil company Beopetrol in 2005. Depending on their socioeconomic impact, they either increased or diminished Russia's political influence in the energy sector: while RusAl's investment in KAP proved unprofitable for the Montenegro's economy, Lukoil made its business with Beopetrol lucrative for both the company and Serbia in general. Additionally, Russian citizens conducted a number of smaller private investments in

tourism and real estate sector in Montenegro and Croatia. While generating profits at the local level, these investments were insignificant in their amounts, and proved politically insignificant.

Russia's Policy towards the Former Yugoslav States during Medvedev's Presidency: The next version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept was approved in 2008 under the presidency of Dmitri Medvedev and MFA Sergey Lavrov, who was the first post-Soviet Russia's MFA member of a political party, particularly the hard-liner conservative United Russia. While this version of The Concept demonstrates explicitly the multi-vector nature of Russia's foreign policy, discussing mostly the emerging world order, the role of international organizations in that process, and various aspects of security, it refers to the Western Balkans only as a part of Central and Eastern and South and Eastern Europe. Such prioritization demonstrated that the developments in the Balkans, unlike the attempts to oppose NATO in the post-Soviet space, were not in the focus of Russia's foreign policy. On the contrary, the modernization of Russian economy and asserting a revisionist stance for Russia and its role in the multipolar world were among The Concept's top priorities. Another important note in this version of The Concept was "the perspective of loss of the monopoly by traditional West's control over globalization process" (Metcel, 2023). While this version confirms the political proposition concerning Russia's foreign policy interests in general, it does not include the Balkans as any significant region of influence.

The most significant investment by Russian companies in the Balkans in that period, and so far, has been the acquisition of 51% of the shares in the Serbian petrol industry company NIS by Gazprom's daughter company, Gazpromneft in 2008. The start of negotiations regarding this acquisition practically coincided with Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February that year. Russia used its right to veto in the United Nations Security Council to oppose to Kosovo's decision (Tepavcevic, 2018). The fact that Serbia's government sold its largest company to Russian Gazpromneft without tender and at an unreasonably low price was interpreted as a gesture of appreciation for Russia's support for Serbia over the Kosovo issue (Reljic, 2009). In addition to tying up their foreign policies to significant investments, in

2010, Serbia declared its military neutrality. In this way, Serbia remained the only country in the region not seeking NATO membership (Tepavcevic, 2022b). Yet, it did not turn into legislation, as Serbia remains member of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" initiative (Ejdus, 2014). Additionally, Gazpromneft's investment in Serbia also provided Gazprom with an opportunity to control approximately one quarter of Serbia's state budget, making it along with the building of the South Stream gas pipeline – Russia's major political leverage in the Balkans (Reljic, 2009; Tepavcevic, 2018). Simultaneously, this Russian company's investment softened the unavoidable negative impacts of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 on Serbia's economy (Tepavcevic, 2022b). All these involvements of Russia in the former Yugoslav republics became possible, firstly, because the former Yugoslav business community in Russia attracted investments from Russia to post-Yugoslav republics, and; secondly, because of the virtual absence of the competition in acquisitions and relatively low acquisition costs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro (Tepavcevic, 2022b).

These activities of the Russian companies in the Western Balkans were paralleled with turmoil across the former Soviet territories: Russia's armed forces conducted a five-day long military action preventing Georgia's government attempt to regain control over its breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The results of this operation were two-fold. First, it led to long-term presence of the Russian troops on 20% of the internationally recognized territory of Georgia. Second, it left many Georgians internally displaced, and consequently, the majority of Georgians with bitter attitudes towards Russia.

Annexation of Crimea and Russia's relations with the Western Balkans

The next version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept was approved in 2013, after Vladimir Putin's return to Kremlin as a president. Following similar postulates as the two previous versions, 2013 Concept highlighted the weakening of the influence of the most economically advanced countries because of the global economic crisis. Vaguely referring to the Western Balkans as the region where international organizations failed to prevent wars, this version of The Concept was the

first to recognize the emergence of Asian-Pacific region as a center of power and development. In addition, exactly this version of The Concept sought mentioning the inclusion of Ukraine into the CIS integration processes. Therefore, this version of The Concept reflects certain expansionist aspirations for the first time in Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy, confirming the political proposition concerning particularly post-Soviet space.

This version of The Concept was reflecting business interests of Russia's political elites and their partners in Ukraine mostly represented by then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and his Party of Regions, an influential political force of businesspersons from then Russia-leaning Eastern Ukraine. In February 2014, followed by Yanukovich's rejection to sign an Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine and consequential Euromaidan protests, Yanukovich's government was ousted in the aftermath of Euromaidan protests in Ukraine (Tepavcevic, 2024). Soon after, in the end of February 2014, Russian military occupied Autonomous Republic of Crimea, and in March 2014, Russia's government annexed the peninsula from Ukraine, severely violating international law. Russia's actions did not represent an immediate "a stratagem of geopolitical expansion", nor did they pose immediate implications for the global balance of power (Saluchev, 2014). However, Crimea's annexation nurtured the violent conflict in Eastern Ukraine, which resulted in 54.000 deaths between April 2014 and January 2022 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2022). Indeed, although it did not cause violent conflict inside Crimea, Russia's actions in the peninsula shaped the nature of Russia's influence in the post-Yugoslav republics. As Bechev (2023) correctly noted, the Russian approach has been unashamedly opportunistic, often at Serbia's expense. Moscow has selectively invoked a Kosovo precedent to justify its own actions, recognizing as independent states Georgia's breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in August 2008 and the so-called people's republics in Ukraine's Donbas region in February 2022.

However, it visibly sharpened the ideological dispute between far-right nationalists and liberals in Serbia: the former supported the annexation relating it to the hope to return Kosovo under Serbia's control with the help of Russia. On the contrary, center-right and liberal political forces in Serbia perceived Russia's annexation of Crimea as another

violation of international law, which decreased Russia's influence in the UN over Kosovo's status, and consequently, Serbia's positions on the issue.

Migration Crisis

Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2016 version was developed and approved in the international context in which Russia's annexation of Crimea had already happened as well as Western sanctions were implemented, but they were limited to Russian companies and individuals, who directly participated in the annexation. In contrast to all previous versions, this version of The Concept demonstrated an open declaration of Russia as one of the regional centers of power in a multipolar world, and opposition to the US domination in the global politics, which was provoked by the geopolitical expansion of the US, EU, and NATO. In addition, The Concept of 2016 noted the resolution of the conflicts in Syria and in Ukraine as top regional priorities. This prioritization demonstrates the major shift in Russia's foreign policy regional interests away from Europe towards Asia, and open readiness to counterweight the Western institutions' influences even by military means, confirming the proposition concerning Russia's assertiveness in pursuing geopolitical interests.

These events overlapped with European migration crisis, which led to Brexit, and consequential post-Brexit fatigue within the EU. According to Lažetić (2018), for Serbian nationalists, this migration crisis reinforced victimhood narratives about Serb refugees from Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, who had been "expelled from their homes by ethnic enemies" and consequential resentment against NATO due to bombing Serbia in 1999, and against the West for supporting Kosovo's Albanians. In turn, during the migration crisis that refocused the Serbian far-right nationalists from Serbia's neighbors as ethnic enemies to the refugees from the Middle East and Asia, which was seen partially as the result of Russian nationalists ideological influence (Krasteva, 2021). While such shift brought Serbian nationalists closer to the European far right, it also made Serbia, as Lažetić (2018) pointed out, into a "conference room' where Russian and European far right activists connect and strategize together." For instance, Lažetić (2018) stated that "Russian far-right

ideologue Alexander Dugin, author of the Fourth Political Theory is often seen in Serbia with Jim Dowson, founder of Britain First, and the former British National Party leader Nick Griffin, who have been "exiled" from Europe."

Russia's Influence in the former Yugoslavia during COVID-19 Pandemic

Due to simultaneous lockdowns in nearly all parts of the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global crisis, during which the specificity of the virus and the absence of the relevant vaccine made these lockdowns lasting. It took months to vaccines developed in China, where the virus was recognized, to be certified in Europe. Almost parallel to their Chinese colleagues, Russian specialists developed anti-COVID vaccines. However, due to the company producer's refusals and delays in providing standard requirements for the drug approval process (Reuters, 2021), Russian anti-COVID vaccines have never passed the World Health Organization's (WHO) certification. Nevertheless, Russian Sputnik-V was the first to supply the Western Balkans, and the Russian political leadership applied its strategy of political influence through energy supplies on the vaccine supplies.

Russia's "vaccine diplomacy" in the Balkans had double effect. First, Russia provided Serbia with Sputnik-V early in the 2021, when most of the EU member states lacked supplies of any anti-COVID-19 vaccines. Second, consequently, the availability of anti-COVID-19 vaccines in Serbia prompted vaccine tourism from all countries of the region to Serbia for receiving otherwise unavailable anti-COVID vaccine (MUNI, 2023). In short-run this increased Serbia's positive image in the region, where in the mainstream political discourses it has usually been portrayed negatively because of its, as previously discussed, relative power stance vis-à-vis most countries in the region (Tepavcevic, 2022b).

Effects of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on Its' Influence in the post-Yugoslav space

The beginning of 2022 was also marked in the former Yugoslav countries by several striking events. First, as one of the rare remaining European capitals where Russian citizens can travel without visas,

Belgrade hosted the informal meeting of the Russian political opposition. This informal meeting would probably remain unnoted if the Interior Minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin had not initiated to report to the Kremlin about the details of this meeting. Such demonstration of loyalty revealed the high level of Putin's regime influence in Serbia prior to February 24, 2022.

Second, parallel to this Vulin's unilateral move, the long-standing political leader of Serbs' Republic, Milorad Dodik announced his intention to declare this entity independent from the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His assertiveness was underpinned by long-standing political rhetoric and Zarubezhneft's investment-prompted economic support by Russia, and with some right-wing political forces within the EU, particularly in Hungary and Croatia. This renewed the old image of post-Yugoslav region as the one with the high potential for the violent conflicts. Overall, in the beginning of February 2022, the integration of the rest of the post-Yugoslav Balkans into the EU seemed as far as ever before.

However, Russia's full-fledged war on Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022 radically changed the prospects of Russia's influence in the Balkans. For the EU, the beginning of a full-scaled operation in Ukraine turned into the most pessimistic scenario concerning migration and energy crises. Simultaneously, for the former Yugoslav non-EU states, where the tensions, as discussed above, have persisted with changeable intensity over the last three decades, Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine meant much more than migration and energy crises. The statements of political leaderships of these countries revealed fears and desperation. The Prime Minister of Croatia, Andrej Plenkovic called the invasion "the catastrophe for the whole Europe" (IndexHR, 2022). On February 24th 2022, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic spent the whole day, unsuccessfully trying to formulate a clear position about the attack. He made an official statement in the evening, saying that it is the biggest tragedy for Serbia to see two fraternal Slavic countries in war with each other (Tepavcevic, 2022b). Similarly, the EU officials noted that Serbia's closeness to Russia may hinder Serbia's further EU integration (Politico, 2023). Their understanding of the sharp twist in the role that Russia has played for these countries since Yugoslavia's breakup was behind these statements,

and consequences became visible soon after the beginning of the invasion. These reactions demonstrate the correctness of Rasidagic and Selo-Sabic (2013) argument that "Small states have a few policy options to choose from in foreign affairs realm. One of them is building a strategic partnership with a big power. There is nothing unethical or unusual in such asymmetric power-relationship."

Over seven million people from Ukraine (UNHCR, 2022) and between three and five million from Russia left their homes (ERR, 2022), the former running from the bombs, the latter running from increased danger from political and ideological prosecutions, economic uncertainty, and more recently – from mobilization. About 150.000 of Russian de-facto refugees in Serbia since 2022 (Euronews, 2024) has not fit into the dominant mostly far-right-related narrative of Russia as a defender. Quite the contrary, majority of Russian refugees in Serbia have been fierce opponents of Putin's regime as their relocation also witnesses.

It was quite easy decision to come to Serbia: visa is not required to enter, the language is similar to Russian, so it is easy to learn, and the climate is pleasant. (…) Though many people came here from Russia as employees relocators, in fact they run from the Putin's repressions and mobilization. I am factually Russian refugee in Serbia as many others, and I learn the language and I try to assimilate to stay here. I do not see any perspectives in Russia in any near future (online communication, March 2023).

In addition to multinational companies' employers' relocation, many small and medium businesses from Russia moved to Serbia. By June 2023 up to 4.500 firms were registered in Serbia by the Russian citizens, while – for the comparison – for the same period in Hungary only 30 firms were established by the Russian citizens, despite some investments favorable state programs (Szabo, 2023). Therefore, after thirty years of being the major host country for the refugees from the region, in the early 2020s, Serbia appears again as the major receiving country in the Balkans, this time (though paradoxically) for the refugees from Russia, whose number is estimated to about 200.000 (Politika.rs, 2023) – the size of population of Serbia's third largest city, Novi Sad. This influx of Russians with the political views fiercely opposing the Putin's regime could in some mid-term influence Serbia's foreign policy at least towards Putin's regime, but also and towards further EU integration.

Finally, the newest version of The Concept was approved at the time of writing of this article, in May 2023. The document reflects on the revolutionary changes humanity is currently encountering alluding to the war in Ukraine, which, as The Concept claims, will result in "a more equitable multipolar world order". These changes are described as being inevitable and only opposed by Western countries, which would try to prevent these shifts of power. The document's main thematic focus is on a deepening "crisis of economic globalization", which envisions intensification of "the fragmentation of the global economy". The Concept suggests that Russia's foreign policy regional focus shifts towards Asia and announces the aspiration to control the 'near abroad', i.e. the post-Soviet space, leaving the Balkans practically outside its' zone of interest.

Table 2. Major postulates of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept since 1991 (Source: author's view based on literature review)

Russia's Foreign Policy Concept about the Balkans	**Year of Issuing Foreign Policy Concept**
The Balkans are not mentioned in the Concept separately; post-socialist Europe is noted as the region of transformation and search of identity	First post-Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy Concept -1992
Third regional priority and mention of FRY and its' territorial integrity as significant factor in the Balkans	Second post-Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy Concept – 2000
Third regional priority, but only in the context of Central and South Eastern Europe	Third Russia's Foreign Policy Concept – 2008
Vague shift of interest towards Asia-Pacific region, and remaining interest in the CIS	Fourth Russia's Foreign Policy Concept – 2013
Open opposition to the West as the major center of global power, and regional prioritization of CIS and Asia	Fifth Russia's Foreign Policy Concept – 2016
Shift towards Asia and open aspiration to control the post-Soviet space	Sixth Russia's Foreign Policy Concept – 2023

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis has demonstrated that all propositions from scholarly discussions about Russia's influence in the post-socialist Europe were applicable to the republics of former Yugoslavia, though they varied across Yugoslavia's successor states and periods. By overall playing the role of counter-balancer of the Western influence (Tepavcevic, 2022b), Russia's influence in the post-Yugoslav Balkans allows to paraphrase Neumann (1998) argument that Russia means different power in different periods, and in different contexts during the same period.

Indeed, as the analysis above suggests, Russia's influence in the post-Yugoslav Balkans over the last three decades gradually shifted between two opposites. Starting from the weak power contributing to ending the conflicts of Yugoslavia's dissolution and peace resolutions in the 1990s, Russia's influence in former Yugoslavia throughout 2000s and 2010s represented an international factor of economic stabilization. Russia's influence in post-Yugoslav Balkans since 2014 has been a one of a distant international power contributing to the potential destabilization of the region. At the same time, Russia's full-scaled invasion of Ukraine decreased Russia's political influence in the Western Balkans. Finally, the invasion accelerated the long-stalled region's EU integration: in December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was finally granted the EU candidate status for which it waited since 2016. Simultaneously, despite being still unrecognized as an independent state by some of most significant EU member states, Kosovo applied for the EU candidate status just days after. Last but equally important, further acceleration of the region's EU integration will be the key prevent new escalations of previous conflicts in the region and to confirm the EU status both as a major power and a stabilizer. If this highly demanding task proves successful, further liberalization in the post-Soviet countries will appear as the spillover effect.

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