

# RUSSIAN FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKAN: DOES IT THREATEN SECURITY AND STABILITY TO REGIONAL STATES?

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**Abstract:** Since 2013, Russian influence in the Western Balkan has been coming to the fore. In the same year, Russia published a strategic document, „Foreign Policy Concepts, “marking the Balkan region as strategically important. Besides traditional ties with the Orthodox population in the Western Balkans, the document marked the Balkans as a region of strategic importance to Russia in distributing gas and oil to European countries. Since then, Russia has piled up its engagement in the Western Balkan region as a spoiler. Russian engagement in the region was primarily to thwart countries from the EU and NATO accession. It leads to threatening security as well as democracy in the region. Russian oligarchs play an important role in undermining regional security. Russia had tried a coup d'état in Montenegro before its NATO accession. Further, Russia equipped Serbia and the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska (RS) with weapons, making a balance in favor of the Serbs. Also, Russian personnel in the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) play in favor of Serbia, implementing its own agenda and colluding with the West in the region.

In the economic sphere, Russian oligarchs purchased oil refineries, making the region dependent on Russian gas and oil. The staunchest Putin's allies got favorable oil and gas prices, but the question is the background of favorable prices for them. Recently, Russian media and NGOs have penetrated the Western Balkans. Russian presence was entrenched by establishing affiliations with the Cossack Army and Night Wolves in the region. They organize events and gatherings praising Putin and his politics. Also, Night Wolves drew attention in 2018 when they made a Western Balkans tour visiting important Orthodox places. In the media field, the Russian news state agency Sputnik opened its office in Serbia, disseminating news across the region. Pro-Russians media in the region share news that contributes to the sense of insecurity and negatively depicts Euro-Atlantic democratic reforms.

**Keywords:** Russian influence, Western Balkans, Geopolitics, Security threats

## Introduction

Western Balkans is not an influence region where countries export own interests to other states. Inter- and intra-state political games in the region play an important role in understanding how region works. In principle, states are parliamentary democracies by its own constitutions. Only Bosnia and Herzegovina have a different kind of parliamentarism. He is parliamentary democracy but power-sharing plays a crucial role in distribution of authority positions. Additionally, decision-making is based on ethnical principal. Serbia nominally elects the Prime Minister but President Vučić is the most influential politician in the country. On the other side, we have a young state, Kosovo, declared independence in 2008. The utmost issue is normalization of relations with Serbia where northern Kosovo mostly inhabited by Serbs loyal to Serbia and President Vučić. Montenegro is the only country in the region, covered by the research, who joined NATO. They had been the leaders in the region regarding EU accession until political turmoil. Among others, its EU path was threatened due to Constitutional Court appointment blockade.

As a relatively weak and poor region, it provides space for external actors' influence. On the one side, eastern countries like Turkey, Russia and China became more influential in the region due to inactivity of western countries and allies. Although region has not been the conflict hub the most influential western countries are present in the region, US, Germany, UK as well as EU and NATO. Also, abovementioned countries work through NATO operations in the Western Balkans.

Article brings all main Russian activities in the region opening the space for further research. So far, we had short annual reports and some news and op – ed articles concerning Russian influence in the region. This article covers main fields how Russia has been engaged in the region since 2008. In 26 years, Russia succeeded to entrench themselves and find regional proxies who align with Russian politics. Although EU stands with Ukraine since Russian aggression providing them aid to defend their territories. But two Russian proxies in the region, Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić, regularly met Russian president and Russian officials. On that account, this article is important to examine how Russia uses tools to undermine security and stability in the Western Balkans.

Russia is the country whose influence is the most striking in the region. Its presence in the Western Balkans has been evident since 2008, posing threat to security and stability engaging through several fields. Russian diplomats, who had been expelled from European countries due to intelligence activities, mostly

accredited in BiH and Serbia. They got diplomatic status and easily met officials who aligns with Russian politics. Anti-NATO coalition between Western Balkans political parties and Putin's United Russia, lays out Russian interference in internal affairs of regional states. They signed an official document binding themselves to thwart NATO membership of Western Balkan countries. On that account, Russian agents organized coup d'état in Montenegro trying to topple Milo Đukanović's regime.

To entrench its position in the region, Russia uses its proxies to shake the region by borrowing money and investing projects mostly in Serbia, BiH entity Republika Srpska and Montenegro. Also, Putin utilized economic impediment to be engaged in the region. His oligarchs purchased oil and electricity companies and made the region dependent on Russian fuel. Some of purchased companies are located in BiH, Montenegro as well as Serbia.

Unavoidable part of Russian influence is non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, education centers, culture and religion. They are organizations who supports Putin and vice versa. Night Wolves organized parade in the region and threatened states' security and stability by its own activities. Kosovar PM, Albin Kurti, claimed that Wolves were filmed in the northern part of country on the barricade built by local Serbs population. Russian Serbian Humanitarian Center, located in Niš, established to train activists how to work in emergency. US concerns over the Center came true when Russians required diplomatic status to the Center's staff.

## Russian Engagement in the Western Balkans

Nikolai A. and Vladimir N. Nartov described, in their geopolitical textbook "Geopolitika", why Russia has been engaged in Balkans. According to them, West wants to interfere in domestic issues and impose solutions in domestic affairs of Slavic people including Serbia and Bulgaria. Moscow would determine the fate of Slavic people making decisions in the UNSC. For Moscow, the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo is guests. But on the other side Serbia is the region's masters. Nartov argued that Albania would annex Kosovo and Albanians would tear away ethnical territories from Macedonia (Felberbauer, Jureković, & Labarre, 2008). The Western Balkans is the closest part of Russia to Europe due to cultural, religious and political affiliations. Also, region is used to suppress Turkish and European interests (Karić & Mulalić, 2014).

## Economic Influence

The Russian economy plays a significant role in the Western Balkans. Energy is a leading asset which holds Russian economy in the region. Russian oligarchs and businessman have purchased oil and energy companies occupying Western Balkan market. On the contrary, trade volume between states is at low level.

Western Balkans states exported to Russia between 2.8% and 4.2% to Russia but imported between 3.3% to 5.7% for the period 2017-2021. In the energy sector, Kosovo and Montenegro are independent from Russian gas because they do not need it. On the other side, BiH imported 98.7% but Serbia imported 24.5% Russian gas by 2021. (Vulović, 2023)

In January 2008, Serbia joined South Stream Gas Pipeline project which puts her in key transit junction to Europe. In February 2008. Chairman of Gazprom Management Committee Alexei Miller and Srbija gas Director Saša Ilić signed an agreement for the construction of pipeline across the territory of Serbia. In the same year, Gazprom Neft signed an agreement with Serbia in 2008 to take over stake of 51% in Serbian state-owned oil company Naftna industrija Srbije (NIS). Pro-European critics in Belgrade said they would have to pay back political debt in exchange for Russian's support over Kosovo. Two days before the Parliamentary election in 2008, Serbian cabinet unanimously concluded an agreement (Felberbauer, Jureković, & Labarre, 2008). On account of Russia's support on Kosovo, Serbian parliament ratified an energy agreement with Russia. It runs for 30 years and will be automatically renewed (Stiftung, 2018). Gazprom bought refineries in Pančevo and Novi Sad as well as the only gas deposit that Serbia has located in Banski Dvor (Marković, 2017). During a visit in 2019, Putin pledged 1.4 billion US dollars to bring Russian gas to Serbia, which is the important transit route for Russian gas transition to southern Europe over Turk Stream pipeline (Metodieva, 2019). In the mid of Russian aggression on Ukraine, Serbia purchased gas from Russia for 31 US dollars per kilowatt hour from Russia. On the market spot gas costs 99 US dollars (Vulović, 2023). But Russia did not stop in Serbia.

KAP, Montenegrin state-owned electricity company, under Deripaska ownership was significant for Montenegrin economy. It made up more than 50% country's export, contributed to approximately 15% country's GDP, employing 2.3% of all workers in country. Noteworthy, Russia's loans helped budgets in the region.

In 2014, when BiH struggled for IMF loan, authority of Republika Srpska (RS), BiH's entity, negotiated 270 million euros to budget. Due to disagreement with Russia, Dodik did not negotiate more money as he promised. According to other version, Russia pledged to loan 625 million US dollars but delivery track is

not clearly evident. On the other side investments came to RS. Oligarch Rashid Sardarov pledged to invest 800 million euros in RS and scheduled to open thermal power plants in 2017 what is indefinitely delayed. Besides, thermal power projects, Russian company Zarubezhneft took over refineries in Modriča and Brod. Noteworthy, company has invested more around 60 million US dollars in refineries since 2016 (Bechev, 2019). After a fire in refinery Brod, oil processing stopped in 2018 and never restarted.

Kosovo is the only state in the Western Balkans with no significant Russian economic investment. In 2017, Russia donated to the North of Kosovo train painted in Serbian colors and orthodox symbols. Also, it carried a slogan Kosovo is Serbia in 20 languages.

## Russian Culture and Religion in the Western Balkans

The most prominent oligarch who uses soft power through Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is Konstantin Malofeev. His St. Basil Great Charitable Foundation is the largest Orthodoxy charity in Russia with budget over 40 million dollars. Organization financed “ritual of Holy Fire” from the Church of Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to Serbia for Orthodox Waster in 2015. Flame also traveled to Croatia, Montenegro and RS while ceremony was broadcasting in Russian and Serbian (Stronski & Himes, 2019).

Since 2008, Russia has intensified relations with Serbia as Russia reconstructed Serbian churches in Kosovo. Four years later, Russia provided 2 million dollars for four UNESCO Orthodox buildings in northern Kosovo. Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has been involved in return of Serbs in northern Kosovo building houses to accommodate 1500 Serbs. Expressing gratitude to his engagement, Iversk chapel contains the name of Vladimir Putin (Rrustemi, de Wijk, Dunlop, Perovska, & Palushi, 2019). Beside state, Russian companies made donations. Gazprom donated 5 million US dollars to Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) showing Russian growing presence in the region based on cultural-religious ties (Metodieva, 2019). In 2018, Russia has built a Russian Orthodox religious and cultural center in the heart of Banja Luka, BiH’s entity RS. Cultural and religious ties between Orthodox people in Balkan is tied up with biker group, Night Wolves.

The Night Wolves is an organization which connects Slavic and Orthodox people and explores Russian and Orthodox history across the Western Balkan. His president is Alexander Zaldostanov born in Ukraine. They are known to its allegiance to Russian President Putin. Organization is blacklisted by the US because

their members served in armed conflict in Ukraine. Group patrolled the streets of Sevastopol but some members have joined pro-Russian militant group in eastern Ukraine. They have organized tours around the region.

In 2018, Wolves organized “Russian Balkan” tour in Serbia and BiH. Its president was banned from entering BiH and did not take part in the rout. But other members visited Orthodox churches monasteries, cultural and historical sites in Serbia and RS. After the tour, representatives of Russian Moto Federation and Night Wolves hold a conference in Serbia.

Yevgeny Strogov, a representative of Russian Moto Federation, emphasized importance of tour saying that bringing Russian and Serbian people together is the main aim of such activities. He said that “Russian influence is most visible in Bela Crkva (Bela Church) and Pancevo. Russian cadet corps were placed in Bela Crkva (Bela Church), and there was Vrangelov hospital in Pancevo, at the site of today’s General Hospital.” He announced they worked on a route Kosovo Polje and Kulikovo Polje calling Russian and Serbian priests to join them. Saša Savić, a president of Serbian Night Wolves, was disappointed that relevant institutions in BiH banned him from entering country. He said that Surgeon, nickname of Zalostadinov, only gathers Slavic people around driving and love, spreading peace and harmony. Cultural Center in Niš and Russian Embassy in Serbia received Icon of Archangel Michel by Night Wolves for their cooperation on this project (I., 2018).

## Media, Education and Centers

Russian soft power is exerted through media, education and centers. All of them portray Russia in positive way and confidential partner to the region. They are most active in Serbia and BiH’s entity RS.

Serbia and Russia signed an agreement in 2012 establishing Russian Serbian Humanitarian Center (RSHC). As it stated, RSHC is a non-profit organization registered in accordance with Serbian law. Competences of RSHC are:

- participation in the emergency prevention and elimination measures;
- humanitarian assistance to people affected by emergencies;
- implementation of joint projects and programs in the territory of the Republic of Serbia and other countries of the Balkan region;
- training and professional development of specialists in the field of emergency prevention and response;

- testing and demonstration of modern fire and rescue equipment and technologies;
- other tasks that are not contrary to the goals of the Center. (Center, 2021)

US concerns over this center were Russian intentions about status of Center's staff. Question was what would happen if Russia requests special diplomatic status or immunity. US predictions came true when Russia had applied for diplomatic status of Center's staff. According to Demostat, Serbian government should change the status of Center as a first step to abolishing it. So far, it has not happened (FoNet, 2022).

Russia's engagement through media has been evident. Tsargrad TV and conservative think-tank Katehon are owned by Malofeev. These organizations "supported family values campaigns, promoted pan-Slavic views, pushed a variety of conspiracy theories against Western-friendly politicians in the region, and published articles justifying Russia's 'civilizational role' in the Balkans." (Russel & Branislav, 2022).

In RS, the public news agency SRNA and the public broadcaster RTRS share pro-Russian propaganda from controlled media RIA Novosti and Sputnik. This practice was dominant during election campaign in 2022, especially after Putin met with the former member of BiH Tripartite Presidency Dodik (Georgiev, Petrova, & Tsabala, 2023). Since the Ukrainian invasion, they have disseminated Russia propaganda and established own reporting structure from Russian controlled territories in Ukraine. In that time, Sputnik's content doubled in the region. Ukrainian invasion was not the only reason for increasing pro-Russian propaganda. When Montenegro joined NATO, compared with 2015, Sputnik's content increased almost fivefold. (Metodieva, 2019) Online portal includes into dissemination of propaganda. In BiH nezavisne.com shares pro-Russian propaganda while in Montenegro, in4s.net and mondo.me follow suit. Also, Western Balkans media outlets referred to Russian state-controlled media sources like Russia Today (RT), Russian News Agency (TASS), RIA Novosti and Sputnik. In the first half of 2022, pro-Kremlin propaganda was almost absent in Kosovo (Georgiev, Petrova, & Tsabala, 2023). Serbian media also shares pro-Russian propaganda referring to abovementioned Russian state-controlled media.

Sputnik's content is shared by Blic, Kurir, Vecernje Novosti and Blic. Portals with pro-Russian propaganda include Srbinfo, Faktor, and Kremlin.rs, Gazeta, Fakti, and Glas Moskve. Serbian tabloids also promoted Russian interests as well as newspapers Politika, Geopolitika and Nedjeljnik. Additionally, Russian foundations increased their activities in the region while a school opened in Montenegro.

First Russian school in Montenegro, “Dukley Academy-Center of Continued Education”, founded in 2016 obtaining a state Russian diploma (Šabanović, et al, 2020). Russian foundations gather academics, journalists, analysts and intellectuals who share anti-western propaganda and create projects with them. Some of foundations are Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, the Center of National Glory, and the Russian Institute of Strategic Research with its only branch in Belgrade (Metodieva, 2019).

## Political Engagement

Russia established political relations with those parties who has opposed NATO expansion to the Western Balkans. Its ally from Montenegro Democratic Socialist Party (DPS), led by Milo Đukanović, shifted policy toward West. After Montenegro had joined to NATO, relations between parties deteriorated. But stable and confidential partners are Serbia and entity RS led by Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik respectively.

Current relationship with Serbia dated back in the late ‘90s when Russia did not support NATO bombings against than Yugoslavia. On the account of veto that Russia wields in the UNSC, Serbian officials, either pro-European or Eurosceptic, have kept close relations with Russia.

During the official visit of Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Sergei Lavrov to Belgrade in 2016, his counterpart Ivica Dačić stated that Russia plays important role in protection of territorial integrity regarding their stance on Kosovo’s independent (Zorić, 2017). In international politics, Russia backed Serbia especially when it comes to Kosovo.

Russia condemned Kosovo’s independence, and Russian permanent representative in the UN, Dmitri Rogozin told the press that European politicians may be bribed by Albanian drug dealers to recognize Kosovo. Also, Russian FM Lavrov called for a resumption talks between Belgrade and Prishtina. China joined Russia blocking Kosovo’s recognition in UN and Moscow signaled to nullify Kosovo’s independent in the UNSC (Felberbauer, Jureković, & Labarre, 2008). Russian officials, especially president Putin, are welcomed in Belgrade.

In 2019, Putin visited Belgrade and attended re-opening Saint Sava cathedral. He was warmly welcomed by the crowd who came to see president, even from BiH entity RS. During his visit, two countries have signed 21 economic and political agreements by their own signatures (Secrieru, Saari, & Bechev, 2021).

Political relations are not constrained to Serbia. Pro-Russian Western Balkans political parties signed a “military neutrality” declaration with the United Russia. Parties signed declaration against NATO expansion, aligning with Russia. Following parties signed declaration: The Serbian People’s Party (in coalition with Vučić), the Democratic Party of Serbia, Dodik’s Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People’s Party (both from Montenegro), and the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia. (Bechev, 2019) Also, Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) signed agreement with the same party in 2018. Four years later, United States (US) claimed that Democratic Front (DG), Montenegrin political party, and Milorad Dodik, then member of BiH Tripartite Presidency, received secret funds from Russia. Both parties have a good relation with President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. Russian proxy and partner in BiH Milorad Dodik is blacklisted by the US.

Russia has been backing Dodik since his first election win. Russian and RS officials have met in the election year. Before the 2018 election FM Lavrov visited BiH and received the Award of Republika Srpska. 2016 referendum was also supported by Russia but next one in 2018 did not hold. Dodik called for RS to recognize Crimea annexation and welcomed Night Wolves in RS. Further, Konstantin Malofeev has significant political and economic role in the WB. He organized controversial visit of Cossacks to Banja Luka in 2014 to support Dodik’s electoral campaign. A year later, Dodik awarded Malofeev along with Putin’s adviser Igor Shtegolev and Leonid Reshetnikov the Order of Njegoš (Metodieva, 2019).

Russian influence is not only evident in RS. Politicians from RS, elected in state’s Parliament and members of Council of Ministry, carried out pro-Russian politics. In April 2022, Serb ministers in the Council of Ministry of BiH blocked a decision to apply sanctions on Russia. It was not in line with the EU foreign policy, BiH pledged to follow. Instead of making distance from Putin after Ukrainian invasion, on the January 13, 2023, Dodik awarded him for support to Dayton Agreement implementation.

Putin and Russia, under his leadership, has not proven their commitment to Dayton implementation. In 2021, Russia vetoed appointment the High Representative Christian Schmidt during the UNSC session. In the same way, they obstructed Steering Board of Peace and Implementation Council (PIC) work and tried to abolish the office of High Representative (OHR) to reduce Western influence in Bosnia. Russia also opposes verdicts and indictments against Serb officials who committed war crimes including GENOCIDE.

Aside from Dayton obstruction through PIC, Russia interfered in internal issues. On September 29, 2023 National Assembly of RS adopted a Law on foreign agents. It implies opening special register for NGOs who are financed by foreign donators. Law is prepared in cooperation with Russian advisors (Stiftung, 2018).

Although, Montenegrin oriented to Western, they had remained good relations with Russia until 2016. Paul Manafort, political consultant, said Oleg Deripaska contacted him to help in referendum campaign. Montenegrin used Deripaska contacts to lobby in supporting country's independence. In 2011, ruling party signed an agreement with the United Russia. In 2017, Democratic Party of Socialist (DPS) Member of Parliament (MP) was arrested in Russia as a response to EU sanctions that Montenegro joined after 2014 Crimea annexation (Šabanović, et al, 2020).

## Security Issues

In 2013, Serbia signed Strategic Partnership with Russia what includes cooperation and coordination in military, intelligence and international bodies. It was followed by Serbian joining to Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), alliance led by Russia, as observer state. Serbia participates in "Slavic Brotherhood" military exercise. Participants of exercise are Russia, Belarus and Serbia. Exercise has been held once a year since 2015. These exercises also held in Serbia in 2016 and 2019. In 2022, Serbia and Russia agreed that the Russian Defense Ministry opened the office in Serbia. Such act would run counter Serbian neutrality which they claimed since 2007.

In 2016, Serbia signed an agreement with Russia to modernize its own military. It includes "upgrading and replacing its Yugoslav-era military stocks with used MiG-29 fighter jets, T-72 tanks, and combat patrol vehicles donated by Russia or Belarus" (18; 123). Two years later, it seems that abovementioned agreement starts to implement. In that way, "Russia donated to Serbia six used MiG-29 fighter jets and promised to deliver 30 T-72 tanks and 30 armored personnel carriers." (Metodieva, 2019).

BiH's entity, Republika Srpska (RS), has opened a training center for police under the program led by Russian special forces. In 2016, RS and Russia signed an agreement entailed cooperation in intelligence collection, counterterrorism and cybercrime. Agreement enables sending police to each other's country for training. Bosnian officials from Sarajevo claimed that RS tries to procure Russian anti-aircraft Iгла I-V missiles which can be mounted on helicopters (Rrustemi, de Wijk, Dunlop, Perovska, & Palushi, 2019).

In May 2019, Kosovo police launched operation in Serb majority town of Mitrovica. Suspects supposed to be detained, those who have been involved in organized crime: smuggling, misused of official positions and other crimes of similar severity. Raid has been executed in the accordance of rule of law. On the other side, the Head of the Serbian Government Office in Kosovo Marko Đurić, currently Serbian ambassador in the US, stated that raid has been executed against Serbs spreading fear among citizens. During the operation, a member of the United Nation Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, was detained. Mihail Aleksandrovich Krasnochekov was released after UNMK and Russian FM had demanded that.

Cyberattacks in South East Europe focused on Montenegro against government institutions in 2016 and 2017 when Montenegro should join NATO. Those attacks traced to APT28, known as Fancy Bear, tied to Russian military intelligence by the US claims. Russia also attempted coup d'état in 2016.

Bratislav Đikić, a former Serbian gendarmerie commander, was one of the key figures who should occupy Parliament with 20 individuals dressed in stolen police uniform. Meanwhile, DF would declare victory and call supporters for protest. Group of disguised police officers should fire on protestors when protestors storm the Parliament building. DF, in this situation, would call for protest in the country and claim “victorious” party was prevented from seizing power. Nevertheless, PM Đukanović should be assassinated. Aleksandar Sinđelić, co-founder of Serbian flank of Night Wolves – Serbian Wolves, was served as liaison with the GRU and recruited 300-500 volunteers for plot. He also distributed hundreds of thousand euros for coup-related activities. Bratislav Đikić, received 15000 euros for his role in coup. After arrest, they admitted their role in plot and provide key information and links between local conspirators, Russian agents and political actors in Montenegro. Russian interference was evident in coup. According to Montenegrin authorities, GRU agents, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov, were interlocutors to plotters in Montenegro. To finalize plot, in 2016 they met with Sinđelić in Moscow and provided 200000 euros for attendant costs. Photo, shot in Belgrade a year after coup attempt, proved close relations between Sinđelić and Shishmakov (Bajrović, Garčević, & Kraemer, 2018).

Russian agents also pose a security threat and are active members of UN bodies. Some of them have been working in BiH and Kosovo missions.

At least three Russian-expelled diplomats accredited in the Embassy in Belgrade after Ukrainian had launched. Another one diplomat, left mission in Helsinki after Finland had announced expulsion of Russian diplomats due to invasion of Ukraine (Živanović, Gočanin, Aljas, Krutov, & Dobrynin, 2023).

Andrej Nikolaevič, staff of UN mission in Kosovo, declared “persona non grata” by Kosovo’s government. He was the second UN staff declared this status after Mihail Krasnoščekova. Later he was accused to lift barricade in Zubin Potok what is “infringement of Constitutional order in Kosovo, universal values, peace and stability.” There have been other members of Russian GRU took UNMIK positions up. Their aim was to provoke inter-ethnic unrests due to delay of negotiation process on Kosovo status and represent settlements with Serb majority and Orthodox churches as threatened. Igor Kulga, Olga Mokrova, Aleksander Kasatkin (Istraga, 2022).

In April 2021, Croatia expelled 18 Russian diplomats including Aleksej Ivanenko. After expulsion from Croatia, he got promotion and became First Secretary in Embassy in Belgrade. Before he became diplomat, Ivanenko had been working in Unit 71330 or Centar 16 which is under Federal security service (FSB). It was not final list of expelled Russian diplomats. Expelled diplomat from Poland, Mikhail Generalov, became advisory in Russian Embassy in Belgrade. Leaked information showed he has residence in Vilnyusskaya Ulitsa, built for foreign intelligence service members. Pyotr Dolgoshein worked as Second Secretary in Russian Embassy in Helsinki. After Russia had started invasion of Ukraine, he got a role in Embassy in Belgrade. It is not clear that he was among diplomats who were expelled from Finland (Živanović, Gočanin, Aljas, Krutov, & Dobrynin, 2023).

Serbia is not the only shelter for Russian expelled diplomats. Some of them are accredited in BiH. A year after Ilija Serov had expelled from North Macedonia, he was accredited at Russian Mission in BiH. He attended concert on celebration of “Victory Day Against Fascism” In Sarajevo Hall. Anton Sokolov, expelled diplomat from Croatia, became the First Secretary of Russian Embassy in Sarajevo. Before his arrival in Zagreb, he served as the Second Secretary in Russian Embassy in Sarajevo. Sokolov met with the Director of Service for Foreigner’s Affairs, Žarko Laketa. They discussed challenges Service faced with and projects and results of Service. Sokolov thanked for meeting and information exchange emphasized importance of “keeping professional networks and relations between Service and Embassy.” (Bilajac & Kuloglija-Zolj, 2023).

## Conclusion

Russian influence in the Western Balkan is malign due to its policies and activities conducted in the region. Sending spies as an Embassy staff, favoring domestic regional spoilers, interference in domestic issues like coup attempt in Montenegro proved our claim. Some Russian diplomats from European countries

expelled owing to intelligence spy. Although they pose a threat as a potential spy in region, such diplomats are welcomed in Serbia and BiH. They regularly met Russian proxy officials organizing violent protest. On the account of Montenegrin membership in NATO, Russian orchestrated coup attempt trying to topple Milo Đukanović's regime. Plot was obstructed and organizers and logistic arrested. Current Chairman of Montenegrin Parliament, Andrija Mandić, arrested waiting for verdict. Another direct Russian interference and threats is cooperation with anti-NATO forces. United Russia, Putin's party, signed an agreement on the anti-NATO basis with following parties in the Western Balkan: the Serbian People's Party (in coalition with Vučić), the Democratic Party of Serbia, Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), the New Serbian Democracy and the Democratic People's Party (both from Montenegro), and the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia. It was another signal that Russia may produce instability and threaten regional security in following years. Leaders of abovementioned parties are hardliners, particularly Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić, who unequivocally support Russian endeavors in the region.

Besides striking signals of Russian malign influence in the region, there are soft means, like economy, media and education, and culture and religion, entrenching Russian influence in the Western Balkan. In economy sphere, Russian oligarchs, linked with Putin, purchased oil and electricity companies. Russia got 51% stake in state company NIS becoming the major owner. Pro-European critiques in Belgrade said that Serbia had to pay back in exchange for political support concerning Kosovo's independent. On the other side, by Russian purchase some workplace saved. Russia expected that these regimes will play its own game. Dodik and Vučić follow suit but Đukanović reoriented Montenegrin policy toward NATO and faced coup attempt.

Russian entrenchment in the region was strengthened by donations to and reconstructions of religious buildings. Russia reconstruction of religion buildings in Kosovo proved that it follows Serbian politics claiming Kosovo is Serbia. Noteworthy, Russia donated 20 trains to North Kosovo, where Serbs population lives in majority, painting slogans that Kosovo belongs to Serbia. It was distinct harm of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kosovo.

Night Wolve's 'Balkan Tour' in 2018 draw attention due to enter banning in BiH to Saša Savić, a president of Night Wolves in Serbia. It said that he posed a threat to country and his presence and activities would jeopardize security and stability in BiH. Night Wolves did not stop and enter those parts of the region where Serbs rule.

By its presence in the region, Russia threatens regional stability and security. Russian state or non-state activities are the same because NGOs, engaged in the region, are linked to Russian president carrying out his policy. If countries from the Western Balkan want to join EU, they have to distance itself from Russia thwarting Russian influence and interference in their respective countries.

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