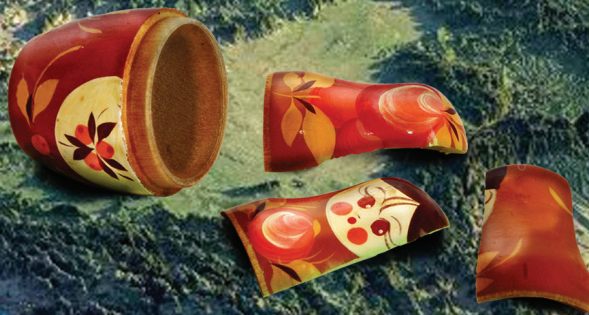


SURVIVING THE WAR: RUSSIA-WESTERN BALKAN TIES AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 pushed Europe into a new era of instability. The fundamentals of the continent's political and economic order are shifting as Russia's brutal methods of war undermine the prospects of the slightest cooperation between Moscow and European states. Decades-old trade links have been severed, transport corridors rerouted, and people to people contacts have become more scarce than ever. Europe is reshaping its security architecture around Russia as the main threat, while Moscow frames its aggression against Ukraine as an existential defensive war with a duplicitous West.

The only European region that stands out in this process of growing mutual alienation is the Western Balkans. More than a year into the war, Russia's relations with several Balkan states appear to have undergone little change. Serbia is eagerly continuing with energy deals with Gazprom, Bosnian Serb leaders frequent Moscow on official visits, and some leading Montenegrin parties are sticking to pro-Russian slogans. It would appear that time stands still in the Western Balkans, with petty local grievances overriding major global developments.

Yet the veneer of continuity conceals mounting challenges to the status quo that has served local elites so well for so long. Russia's attack on Ukraine under the pretext of protecting the self-proclaimed Donbas republics alerted Europe to the reality that even a frozen conflict may quickly spiral out of control if manipulated by a hostile external power. This gave an extra impulse to the EU's determination to put an end to the longstanding disputes in the Balkans. New sticks and carrots are in use to push local leaders toward mutual accommodation. The EU has also become more assertive in insisting that European integration is incompatible with preserving close ties to Russia.

In the Balkans, meanwhile, the war is diminishing the benefits of cooperation with Russia. With a vast part of its resources and international clout consumed by the aggression, Moscow can hardly remain as attractive a partner for the Balkan states as it was prior to 2022.

Russia's deepening economic rift with the EU countries is driving it out from the Balkan markets. Even the region's traditional dependence on Russian hydrocarbons is on its last legs, and the reluctance of several Balkan states to join anti-Russian sanctions does little to change that.

Moscow's shocking brutality in Ukraine and flagrant denial of its own aggression have put an end to its role as a co-mediator in the settlement of the Balkan conflicts. Now, even pro-Russian forces in the region refrain from pleading for the Kremlin's diplomatic assistance, striving instead to diversify their ties in favor of other international allies.

The only sphere in which Russia-Balkan cooperation continues to thrive is propaganda. Moscow needs its Balkan allies in order to claim that its isolation in Europe is far from complete and that there are places where it is still welcomed as a partner. A number of Balkan politicians, for their part, have invested too much in cultivating and manipulating pro-Russian sentiment in the region to be able to wean themselves off this PR-dependency without sustaining any losses themselves.

The propaganda cooperation is asymmetrical, with Moscow having little control over its Balkan partners and the ways they exploit Russia's image to advance their own agenda. Nevertheless, the Kremlin appears to have no issue with that, viewing other options as too risky and costly. As a result, Russia is likely to retain a semblance of presence in the Western Balkans for years to come, even if it is confined to pronouncements in the local media. The PR interdependency between the Kremlin and Balkan leaders may prove too elusive to be curbed by sanctions or other formal commitments.

Geographically, the Western Balkans are separated from Russia by a broad belt of EU states, but that seems to be no obstacle in keeping the region's economic cooperation with Russia immune to the dislocations brought by the war. At a time when the EU is undergoing the toughest energy crisis in half a century and Russian industry is struggling to survive the collapse of European imports, the economies of the Western Balkans appear to be carrying on as if little has changed.

One of Serbia's largest companies, the oil giant NIS, is still controlled by structures belonging to Gazprom, which also remains the sole importer of gas to the country. The latest three-year contract was [signed](#) in May 2022.¹ Belgrade managed to secure relatively favorable terms at a time when Moscow was already cutting gas deliveries to a number of EU countries for their refusal to pay in Russian rubles. No similar demands were imposed on Serbia because the country had not joined anti-Russian sanctions.

Nor has the war precluded the leader of Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, from [lobbying](#) for the construction of a new gas pipeline to connect the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina to the TurkStream pipeline, which delivers Russian gas to the Balkans via the Black Sea, bypassing Ukraine.² Since December 2021, Dodik has met with Russian President Vladimir Putin three times in person to try to get the project started, while in July 2022, the government of Republika Srpska [approved](#) the construction of a gas-fired power plant by the Russia-controlled oil refinery Brod.³ All of these developments are taking place against the backdrop of collapsing energy trade between Russia and Europe marked by mutual sanctions and exploding pipelines.

In Montenegro, seaside and tourist resorts are still populated by Russians, even though the country has joined NATO and anti-Russian sanctions. The stream of visitors from Russia is further facilitated by the fact that nearby Belgrade remains the only European capital with direct flights from Moscow, St. Petersburg, and a number of other Russian cities.

This rosy picture of business as usual in defiance of the war is, however, largely misleading and hardly sustainable. Outside the energy domain, Russia has become almost irrelevant to the Balkan economies, and the refusal of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (due to the Bosnian Serbs' veto) to join anti-Russian sanctions makes little difference.

Russia's share in Serbia's foreign trade [increased](#) somewhat in 2022 from 4.7 percent to 6.1 percent, but is still dwarfed by the EU's 58.7 percent.⁴ The key drivers of the increase were booming gas prices and NIS's massive imports of Russian oil, which was being sold at substantial discounts due to Russia's growing isolation in Europe. The oil embargo the EU imposed on Russia in December 2022 and the overall less chaotic situation on the energy markets are bound to bring Russia's share a few notches down as early as this year.

The two countries have few opportunities to make up for the looming decrease in trade volumes. Although Serbia has not formally joined anti-Russian sanctions, almost all Serbian businesses have to adhere to them in practice, since the Serbian economy is deeply integrated with those of the EU states. The oil embargo is a case in point: Serbia refused to join the ban, but had to [stop](#) importing Russian oil as Serbian oil imports are routed through EU seaports.⁵ Less spectacular but similar developments have been taking place in other spheres. As part of Western financial groups, leading Serbian banks are refusing to service Russian clients, while Serbian producers are realizing that it is no longer possible to combine dealings with Russia and exports to the far more lucrative EU market.

Russian companies in Serbia also face insurmountable difficulties in conducting business in a country so closely linked to the EU in all aspects of economic life. No new projects are in sight, while existing investors are withdrawing. Two leading Russian state banks, Sberbank and VTB, [sold](#) their Serbian assets in the run-up to the war amid mounting tensions between the EU and Russia.⁶

The only significant exception is oil giant NIS, which remains under Gazprom's control. In spring 2022, the Russian and Serbian leaders micromanaged changes in the company's ownership structure to protect it from sanctions. The majority share of sanctioned Gazprom Neft was [decreased](#) to 50 percent in favor of Gazprom, which was not under sanctions.⁷ This allowed NIS to continue dealing with the EU and make a hefty profit processing discounted Russian oil and selling its derivatives at a premium.

But that success is on borrowed time. The EU embargo has already forced NIS to [switch](#) to processing Iraqi oil, which is more expensive than the discounted product exported by increasingly isolated Russia.⁸ Belgrade's plans to regain access to Russian oil by constructing an interconnector to the Druzhba pipeline from Russia to Hungary also look impractical. Half a year after the announcement, the project is still at the [preparation](#) phase, and by the time it is fully implemented, the temporary EU exemption for Russian pipeline oil may have expired.⁹ Another ticking time bomb is the prospect of Gazprom itself coming under sanctions that will force the Serbian government to either nationalize NIS or resell it to a non-Russian investor.

The Serbian government realizes how dismal its prospects of energy cooperation with Russia are and is preparing to embrace alternative suppliers. The country's new energy minister Dubravka Djedovic, a former regional director with the European Investment Bank, is known as a strong proponent of diversifying Serbia's energy partnerships. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is also enthusiastic about negotiating gas deliveries from [Azerbaijan](#)¹⁰ and through the [LNG](#)¹¹ terminal in Greece's Alexandroupolis, which is due to be operational by the end of the year. This is to be facilitated by a new Serbia-Bulgaria gas interconnector that is already being built and is [scheduled](#) to be finished in December 2023.¹² Given that Serbia imports relatively small amounts of gas (around [2 bcm](#) annually),¹³ Russian deliveries may end up being replaced entirely within a couple of years.

Russia's economic ties with Bosnia-Herzegovina were less affected by the new EU sanctions and embargo simply because they had become negligible long before the war. Russia's key asset in Republika Srpska—the Brod oil refinery controlled by Zarubezhneft structures—stopped processing oil after a [fire](#)¹⁴ on its premises in 2018 and never restarted, so neither the EU embargo on Russian oil in December 2022 nor that on Russian oil products in February 2023 affected the refinery's limited activities.

Dodik keeps aggressively promoting [plans](#)¹⁵ to reinvigorate energy cooperation with Russia by jointly constructing a gas interconnector to the TurkStream pipeline and as many as five gas-fired power plants in various parts of Republika Srpska. But the risks of any project with Russian involvement being sanctioned are now so high that even he himself is unlikely to count on the plan's implementation. Rather, Dodik intends it to be [vetoed](#) by the leaders of Bosnia's other ethnic communities in order to be able to claim that his ties with Moscow would have secured the country's energy requirements, but his good intentions were blocked by hostile Bosnian Muslims.¹⁶

In a similar vein, Dodik's adamant refusal to allow Bosnia-Herzegovina to join anti-Russian sanctions has little to do with economic rationale. Rather, it is intended to fuel the country's inter-ethnic acrimony upon which he feeds. Besides, posing as a key promoter of the country's ties with Moscow allows Dodik to capitalize on the closely intertwined anti-NATO and pro-Russian sentiment of Bosnian Serbs.

Outside of local propaganda bickering, Russia's economic involvement in Bosnia-Herzegovina has almost vanished. Its share in the country's foreign trade was a meager [1.6 percent](#), even with the skyrocketing gas prices of 2022.¹⁷ Its accumulated direct investments have been on the decrease for a few years, [falling](#) to another low of \$227 million at the end of 2021 as Russia gradually scales down the operations of its loss-making oil refineries Brod and Modrica.¹⁸

The ostensible boom of Russian tourism in Montenegro is also misleading. It's true that in 2022, Russians [accounted](#) for almost 2 million overnight stays in Montenegrin accommodation, making them the largest group of foreign tourists after Serbs.¹⁹ It also constitutes a sharp [increase](#) of 71 percent from 2021.²⁰ But this influx has little to do with tourism, and even less to do with the Kremlin's economic or political influence in Montenegro.

The vast majority of Russians who entered Montenegro and neighboring Serbia in 2022 were fleeing Russia's war against Ukraine and the ensuing military mobilization. They took advantage of the two countries' lack of visa requirements for Russian nationals and the historical affinity of the Montenegrin, Serbian, and Russian nations. Eventually, many of these immigrants will either return to Russia or move on to more economically attractive destinations. Others will stay, but they are highly unlikely to become a conduit for the Kremlin's influence, given that it was Putin's aggressive policies that made them abandon their homes in the first place.

Other than that, Russian-Montenegrin trade is practically nonexistent (Russia's share in the country's trade turnover is a miniscule [0.2 percent](#)),²¹ while joint economic projects with Russia have been a non-issue for almost a decade since Montenegro stated its intention of joining NATO and openly supported Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Quite simply, there was little left for the EU's tough 2022 sanctions to affect.

Discredited Mediator

The war has spurred the decline of Russia-Balkans economic cooperation: a process that had already been underway for quite a few years prior to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. The similar acceleration of pre-existing trends characterizes the war's impact on Russia's role in unresolved Balkan conflicts.

Moscow's brutal tactics in Ukraine have dispelled any remaining doubts in the West as to whether Russia can be a partner in the settlement of the Balkan conflicts: it cannot. The Kremlin is a dangerous spoiler that is ready to employ destabilizing tactics to keep the disputes in the Western Balkans unresolved for as long as possible and keep the West consumed by Balkan problems.

No less alarming is the fact that the Balkan nations do not see Russian aggression as a reason to overcome their squabbles and unite in the face of crisis. On the contrary, many in the region are fixated on the similarities between the Russia-Ukraine hostilities and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, picking a side accordingly. Disquieted Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians [accuse](#) Serbs of conspiring to emulate Russia's assault on its neighbors, while Serbs tend to exonerate Moscow's misdeeds.²² Opinion polls show that in Serbia, around [70 percent of people](#) blame the West and Ukraine for the outbreak of the war,²³ while in Republika Srpska, [over 50 percent](#) admit to supporting the Russian invasion.²⁴

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the West has recently redoubled its mediation efforts in the region and already achieved tangible progress. Serbia and Kosovo agreed to implement the EU plan to normalize their relations, Bosnia-Herzegovina saw its national government formed with untypical promptness after the October 2022 elections, and Montenegro is gradually emerging from many months of a political impasse.

Moscow is visibly disturbed by these developments and has sharpened its criticism of Western mediation efforts. The Russian ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina has [threatened](#) that the country may meet the same fate as Ukraine if it decides to join NATO.²⁵ In the meantime, the Russian ambassador to Serbia has [stated](#) that Moscow is ready to offer Belgrade military assistance in the Kosovo dispute, should Serbs ask for it.²⁶

Still, Russia's bellicose rhetoric can hardly conceal the fact that the Russian army's dismal performance in Ukraine has exposed the sheer emptiness of such threats. Russian diplomats may [inspect](#) Serbian troops amid much pomp and ceremony²⁷ or [theorize](#) about the possibility of establishing a Russian military base in Serbia if Belgrade wishes it,²⁸ but it is crystal clear that Moscow is too short of resources to be able to effectively project military force in the Western Balkans. At a time when Russia is struggling to meet its existing security commitments in [Transnistria](#),²⁹ [Syria](#),³⁰ the South [Caucasus](#),³¹ and [Central Asia](#),³² it is impossible to treat seriously Moscow's threats to intervene militarily in the Western Balkans, which are far from its borders and surrounded by NATO states.

This reality is well understood even by those Balkan leaders who like to boost their popularity by posing as Russian allies.³³ Despite regular prodding from Moscow, the Serbian leadership has shown no intention of inviting Russia to be another mediator in the talks with Kosovo, let alone asking the Kremlin for military assistance. Since the start of the war, Dodik's drive for secession has slacked noticeably in comparison to 2021 as he looks for more generous allies than Moscow. Pro-Russian parties in Montenegro have also shifted their emphasis away from anti-NATO and pro-Kremlin slogans to the issues of identity and corruption.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed that the Kremlin is prone to poor judgment and may jump into a reckless venture, even if local demand for its intervention is scarce. In their nonchalant flirting with Moscow, some Balkan politicians show little regard for this risk and the fact that the war has concentrated all foreign policy decisions in Russia in the hands of one person: Putin, further increasing the possibility of misjudgment, given how detached from reality he has become.

Still, the Kremlin can hardly ignore the numerous constraints imposed on the Russian military and security apparatus by its prolonged and highly intensive war against Ukraine. Nor has Putin ever revealed any particular emotional attachment to Balkan affairs. It's true that he regularly invokes the "Kosovo precedent" in his public pronouncements: for example, when justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine at a meeting with UN Secretary General António Guterres in April 2022. But he does so only when speaking about post-Soviet affairs, and puts the emphasis on the word "precedent," not on Kosovo, revealing that his real priorities lie closer to Russia's borders than the Western Balkans.

In the past, there were several influential members of the Russian ruling elite for whom the Balkans were a subject close to their hearts. Putin's associate Vladimir Yakunin took lofty rhetoric about Russia's Orthodox brotherhood with Balkan nations seriously, and strived to expand Russian influence in the region through investment in infrastructure. During his tenure at the head of Russian Railways (2005–2015), he [oversaw](#) the issuing of an \$800 million loan to Serbia to modernize its railways.³⁴

The influential general of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Leonid Reshetnikov and ultraconservative oligarch Konstantin Malofeev were also keen on issues of Orthodox and Slavic unity. Inspired by Moscow's success in triggering a pro-Russian separatist rebellion in Ukraine's Donbas in 2014, Malofeev and Reshetnikov [spearheaded](#) Russia's activities in the Western Balkans.³⁵ For the next couple of years, they cultivated ties with Dodik and Serbian ultra-right groups, and were accused of masterminding a failed coup d'état in Montenegro in 2016. But Yakunin and Reshetnikov are now long retired, while Malofeev has lost much of his erstwhile influence and is [preoccupied](#) with Ukraine and Russian domestic politics.³⁶

Currently, Balkan affairs are chiefly handled by Alexander Babakov, deputy speaker of the State Duma; and Russia's ambassador to Serbia, Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko, the senior authority on the region in the Russian Foreign Ministry. Both have deep knowledge of and extensive connections in the Western Balkans, but they lack clout in Moscow to lobby certain policies toward the region or to bring Balkan issues to Putin's attention.

This has led to a kind of stalemate in which influential Russian dignitaries consider Balkan issues too insignificant to take an interest in, while those directly responsible for the region lack the powers to prompt decisions or even to consult the top leadership about a preferable strategy. As a result, Russia's official reaction to the shifting realities of the Balkan conflicts' resolution is determined more by bureaucrats' wish to play safe and avoid the Kremlin's displeasure than by their understanding of Russian national interests.

For example, Russia's statements on the new impulse in the Serbia-Kosovo talks contain a number of incompatible points. Moscow has argued on the one hand for the acceptance of any resolution accepted by Belgrade, but on the other, [states](#) that any settlement of the conflict must involve Russia as a mediator.³⁷ Moscow's representatives avoid specifying how Russia will react if Serbia accepts a settlement that does not involve Russia. The reason for their evasiveness is simple: they do not know themselves, but they want to hedge their bets and formulate Russia's stance in a way that will not put them at odds with the Kremlin, no matter what line the latter eventually chooses to follow.

Moscow's stance on the Bosnian settlement is guided by a similar logic. Russian diplomats mince no words when criticizing the office of the High Representative and Western mediation efforts, or when they threaten Bosnia-Herzegovina with all kinds of disasters if the country joins NATO. This subject is risk-free for them, as the Kremlin will never berate them for speaking too harshly with the West.

At the same time, Moscow [offers](#) surprisingly little resistance when it comes to the annual vote in the UN Security Council on extending the EUFOR security mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina.³⁸ Here the risks for Russia's representatives are much higher, because the Kremlin has not bothered to indicate its opinion on the issue. Thus, diplomats prefer to lay low and prolong the status quo out of fear that taking the initiative may provoke a strong response from the West and land them in trouble.

By invading Ukraine, Russia has not only overstretched its limited resources and degraded the foreign policy decision-making process. It has also dealt a severe blow to the main trump card it held in the settlement of the Balkan conflicts: its veto power in the UN Security Council. Thanks to Moscow's cooperation with the West in the 1990s, Russia was firmly embedded in the mediation of post-Yugoslav disputes through corresponding UN resolutions.³⁹ All Balkan actors had to look to Moscow, realizing that no final settlement was possible without Russia's readiness to at least tolerate it.

Formally, nothing has changed in this respect, and Moscow still has a veto in the UN Security Council. But the value of that veto has plummeted. Few would treat seriously the veto of a country that is committing war crimes, targeting civilian infrastructure in bombing raids, and blatantly denies attacking Ukraine in a manifestation of total disregard for reality.⁴⁰

The practical consequences of Russia's self-inflicted marginalization within the UN Security Council are yet to materialize in full, but they are already being felt in the Western Balkans. Even pro-Russian actors who still prefer to present Moscow as their powerful friend have resigned themselves to the reality that the settlement of the Balkan conflicts is guided not by the UN but by Euro-Atlantic structures, and it is there that they need to look for allies. This is prompting Dodik and Vučić to curry favor with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.⁴¹ On the global scale, his veto power at the EU may seem insignificant in comparison to the Kremlin's in the UN, but it is better suited for the needs of Balkan politicians.

Propaganda Above All

The numerous constraints imposed on Russia by its invasion of Ukraine make Moscow increasingly dependent on its local partners. With its leverage in Balkan affairs diminishing rapidly, Russia sees no better option than to grant its full support to ostensibly pro-Russian politicians, tolerating the fact that their agenda at times deviates from that of the Kremlin.

Not a single critical word has been uttered of Vučić in Moscow since the start of the war, despite the fact that he has taken quite a few anti-Russian steps recently. The Kremlin raised no objection to Serbia [ceasing](#) all security cooperation with Russia, including token arms deliveries and joint military exercises.⁴² It also ignored Belgrade [voting](#) in support of several UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁴³ Vučić's veiled but increasingly frequent criticism of Russian policies does not seem to bother Moscow. Nor does his agreement to start normalizing relations with Kosovo or his speculation that Serbia may eventually [nationalize](#) NIS and join anti-Russian sanctions if Western pressure becomes unbearable.⁴⁴

Even the [revelation](#) that Serbia is indirectly selling arms to Ukraine was met in Moscow with surprising restraint.⁴⁵ The scandal certainly irked many in the Russian ruling elite, not least Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, who is known for her dislike of Vučić: she [urged](#) Belgrade to provide an official explanation.⁴⁶ But no public comments critical of the Serbian leadership ensued.

On the contrary, the Russian Foreign Ministry's [functionaries](#),⁴⁷ Duma deputy speaker [Babakov](#),⁴⁸ and Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov are full of [praise](#) for Vučić for his unfailing friendship with Russia, while any Serbian policies that are not to Moscow's liking are explained away as the result of unprecedented pressure from the West.⁴⁹

Moscow's tolerance stems from its understanding that Russia's popularity in the Balkans is sustained largely by local allies and their media capabilities. Russia's own propaganda assets in the region—the news websites Sputnik Srbija and newly established RT Balkan—enjoy only limited readership. The bulk of the promotion of pro-Russian narratives is done by Serbian pro-government media, which have stuck to the Kremlin-friendly editorial line even in the face of the ongoing war. Widely consumed not only in Serbia itself, but also by Serbian communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo, this locally run media empire is the chief reason for Russia's visibility in the region, and the Kremlin prefers not to jeopardize the existing state of affairs.

Moscow's shaky control over its own image in the Balkans gives local politicians almost a free hand in manipulating the issue of relations with Russia for their own propaganda purposes, both in terms of domestic politics and in their dealings with the West. The benefits of such manipulations are substantial, as Russia still looms disproportionately large in both spheres.

Vučić is especially skillful at this, and is able to present Russia as either his dear friend or a dangerous foe, depending on the preferences of the target audience. In Serbia, government-controlled media promote a pro-Russian narrative in order to allow Vučić to capitalize on anti-Western sentiment in Serbian society. The 66 percent of Serbs who still [viewed](#) Russia as a friend of Serbia as late as the autumn of 2022 constitute a lucrative prize in domestic politics.⁵⁰ In the West, however, the Serbian leader takes the opposite line, posing as a fundamentally pro-Western politician who has to moderate his policies due to pressure from Russia and its Serbian supporters.

For the latter purposes, for example, he [dwelt](#) in detail upon the news that the Russian mercenary group Wagner was opening a local center to recruit Serbs for the war against Ukraine.⁵¹ The reports were soon proven to be false, but offered Vučić another opportunity to demonstrate to the West Russia's insidious influence in Serbia, and his own determination to clamp down on it.

In a similar vein, Serbian government-controlled media blew out of proportion recent nationalist protests against negotiations with Kosovo, [portraying](#) minor brawls among a few dozen radicals as an attempted pro-Russian coup d'état.⁵² The very next day, the Serbian government moved to reassure the domestic public, [saying](#) that the situation was under control and Russia had not been involved in the protests.⁵³ But those assurances for the Serbian audience came only after the news about pro-Russian riots had been picked up by international media, fueling the narrative that Vučić is under immense Russian and domestic pressure over his talks with Prishtina.

To be sure, the risk of provocations perpetrated by radical pro-Russian Serbs should not be disregarded entirely. Many of them have long-established ties to Russia, and right now, Moscow has no scruples about doing anything to distract the West from assisting Ukraine. But the nonchalance with which the Serbian authorities treat the activities of such radicals betrays Vučić's confidence that he can manipulate them much more efficiently than the Kremlin can.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Dodik's relations with the West are too tense to allow him to emulate Vučić's sophisticated manipulations, but his crude exaggeration of his affinity to the Kremlin is also efficient. His frequent visits to Russia and personal meetings with Putin are devoid of substance, but create the image of a global statesman whose international connections would have brought prosperity to his land had they not been thwarted by the Bosnian Muslims with whom he has the misfortune to share the country.

This framing sustains inter-ethnic hatred among Bosnian communities and helps Dodik to mobilize Bosnian Serbs in support of their veteran leader. It also allows him to tap into the deep-rooted anti-NATO sentiment of many Bosnian Serbs, which dates back to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. According to a 2017 [study](#) by the International Republican Institute, as many as 89 percent of Bosnian Serbs had a positive opinion of Russia's role in the country.⁵⁴ More recent polls [demonstrated](#) that half a year into the war, 52 percent of those polled in Republika Srpska admitted to supporting Russia's actions.⁵⁵

Dodik's practical steps, however, betray that he is far from content with his relations with Russia. There is no evidence that, besides regular photo-ops with Putin, Moscow offered him any financial or organizational assistance in the election that he narrowly won last fall. Russia's thundering but hollow rhetorical interventions are of less and less use to Dodik in his resistance to mounting Western pressure for reforms, prompting the leader of the Bosnian Serbs to look for alternative international partners. Orban's Hungary has already largely [replaced](#) the Kremlin as the source of Dodik's financial support and his key ally in international fora.⁵⁶

Montenegro's relations with Russia are practically non-existent after all the downgrades they have suffered in recent years. Moscow lost most of its interest in the country back in 2017, when Montenegro's accession to NATO became a foregone conclusion. In 2020, when ostensibly pro-Russian Montenegrin parties that had spent decades in opposition entered the ruling coalition for the first time, that [raised](#) some hopes for rapprochement in Moscow, but they proved short-lived.⁵⁷ The Kremlin was so disappointed by the new government's continuation of the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy that it even [rejected](#) Montenegro's offer to restore direct flights after the pandemic.⁵⁸

The two countries have introduced numerous sanctions against each other, their embassies are almost empty after repeated expulsions of diplomats, and Russia has [stopped](#) providing consular services to Russian nationals in Montenegro, discouraging them from visiting the country.⁵⁹ Still, none of that precludes efforts to frame Montenegrin domestic politics in geopolitical optics.

The latest presidential elections were no exception to the country's decades-old tradition of presenting leading candidates as either pro-Western or pro-Russian/pro-Serbian. There were numerous [attempts](#) to complicate the debate over reform and corruption with calls for Montenegrin voters to make a geopolitical choice.⁶⁰ Fortunately, such a framing proved less appealing than in past elections. New faces managed to make it to the forefront of the country's political life, which for decades had been monopolized by the duo of the ostensibly pro-Western incumbent Milo Đukanović and his ostensibly pro-Russian eternal rival Andrija Mandić.

The abundance of gossip about putative Russian intrigues in the Balkans flatters Moscow, even if it publicly claims the opposite. Such exaggerations allow Russia to pose as a world power with interests (and agents) in various parts of the globe, including Europe. Thanks to Balkan politicians, Moscow can at no cost produce the impression of a potent force that remains of great importance for NATO member Montenegro, defies Western leverage and stalls reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and might even be capable of overthrowing a Balkan government if it so desired.

Moscow especially prizes this opportunity now, when the war has almost eliminated opportunities to meddle in other parts of Europe. For some Russian state structures, token cooperation with the Balkans has become a way to pretend that their activities are on a truly global scale.

The RT propaganda holding had to reconcile itself to [establishing](#) a website in Serbian after failed attempts to get a foothold in the French and German media markets.⁶¹ The St. Petersburg International Economic Forum had to [offer](#) a red carpet welcome to Dodik last summer, as he was the only European guest of any significance who had bothered to visit the supposedly international event amid the war.⁶²

In February this year, Russian parliamentary deputies [applauded](#) their regional counterparts from Republika Srpska who had “dared” to come to Moscow.⁶³ The reception was disproportionately lavish for representatives of an autonomy with a population of just over a million, but apparently even Serbia’s MPs now consider Moscow too toxic for official visits.

These token gestures of affinity may achieve a propaganda effect, but they can hardly stymie the decline of real Russia-Balkan cooperation. These efforts lack a coherent strategy and adequate resources to back them. Their aim is not to expand Russian influence in the Balkans, but to sugar-coat the Russian structures in charge to secure the continuation of state financing. To put it simply, the motives are bureaucratic, not strategic. Such efforts are even less capable of forestalling Moscow’s growing reliance on local actors in the Balkans. A short glance at the editorial policy of the newly founded RT Balkan is enough to see that its team fears Vučić’s ire far more than the Kremlin’s.

Style Over Substance

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has dealt a severe blow to Moscow's influence all over the globe, and the Western Balkans are no exception. Its economic cooperation with the region is in steep decline, despite the refusal of several Balkan leaders to join anti-Russian sanctions. Moscow has been jettisoned from the settlement of Balkan conflicts after its atrocities in Ukraine ruined its authority as a mediator and devalued its veto power in the UN Security Council. Russian influence in the Balkans is increasingly confined to the headlines of propagandist media: both Russian and Balkan.

Still, this oversaturation of Russia-Balkan relations with propaganda does not necessarily herald their complete demise. On the contrary, in some respects, it makes them more resilient and flexible. When relations are based solely on empty rhetoric, it is difficult to undermine them with sanctions or new security arrangements. With nothing of substance to lose, both sides can adjust their pronouncements swiftly and easily to the changing realities. Just look at how the Serbian leadership votes in condemnation of Russia in the UN one day, and praises Russia as a great friend the next: neither step has had any impact on Moscow's attitude toward Belgrade.

Russia will remain relevant in Balkan affairs as long as its key goals overlap with those of influential local politicians. Neither the Kremlin nor Vučić wants Serbia to recognize Kosovo and join anti-Russian sanctions. But it is Vučić who is responsible for most of the resistance, as both steps will undermine his domestic popularity and grip on the country, while Moscow offers him only sporadic rhetorical support. In fact, Moscow does not even mind Vučić's anti-Russian posturing in the international media if it helps him to deflect Western pressure to normalize relations with Kosovo and join anti-Russian sanctions.

It is veteran leaders of the Bosnian ethnic communities—with Dodik at the forefront—who do not want to see Bosnia-Herzegovina reformed, and pander to inter-ethnic hatred to remain in power for decades. Russia plays second fiddle in their maneuvering, and would never be able to achieve anything on its own in a country where it has so little leverage, especially in comparison with the West.

Similarly, it is the leaders of the Montenegrin pro-Russian opposition who for decades helped the country's long-time leader Đukanović to keep the domestic debate focused on issues of geopolitics, ignoring overdue reforms, because they were content with their privileged status of eternal opposition.

Leading pro-Russian politicians in the Balkans know full well that the benefits of economic cooperation with Russia are shrinking and that their ties to the Kremlin can no longer be leveraged in the settlement of regional conflicts. They are seeking new international allies and are ready to make piecemeal concessions to placate the West. Nevertheless, they are unlikely to abandon pro-Russian rhetoric easily.

Most of them have spent decades cultivating Russia's popularity in the region and capitalizing on it by posing as close friends of Moscow. Pro-Russian sentiment has become an integral part of the worldview of their core voting base, closely intertwined with resentment, a sense of socio-economic injustice, and a grudge against the West. Removing the pro-Russian element may jeopardize the whole edifice of their public support, while sticking to Moscow-friendly pronouncements costs little, as the Kremlin no longer requires words to be backed up with actions.

Without the assistance of local actors, Russian influence in the Western Balkans would disappear overnight. But the opposite is also true. As long as local politicians can capitalize on invoking Moscow's long shadow, Russia will remain a salient part of the Balkan landscape.

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