

RUSSIA AND WESTERN BALKANS 1999—2019. THE RISE OF POPULISM AND HYBRID WARFARE¹

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A b s t r a c t

Russia's relations with the EU and NATO, and the candidate states, were based on the idea of undermining liberal democracy by supporting populist leaders and movements, in order to and renew Russia's political and strategic influence in Eastern and Central Europe. The Second Cold War between Russia and the West was announced already during the 1999 NATO intervention in Serbia and Montenegro. Russia has failed to stop NATO and EU enlargement, and decided to carry out hybrid actions using corruption of the Western political and business establishment, and campaigns of deception and lies in the media and social networks. The weaknesses in EU foreign and security policy, after 2008, and obviously since 2012, enabled Russia to establish three points of strategic pressure in response to EU and NATO enlargement in Eastern and South-eastern Europe: Baltic, Ukraine and Western Balkans. Simultaneously, Russia affected gradual rejection of the EU values and standards within the Visegrád Group states. Every major populist leader and movement in EU member states enjoyed official Russia's support. Successful EU integration of Eastern European states 2004—2007 was followed by political, financial and strategic crises (2008 financial crisis, 2014 Ukraine, 2015 migrant crisis, 2016 Brexit). While EU was giving weak and hesitant answers, WB states were becoming objects of malign influences of Russia, China and Turkey. In general perspective, none of the EU strategic objectives have been achieved: Russia has not become a democratic state, WB were not fully integrated in the EU. Russia has also managed to secure secure economic and political strongholds in Hungary and Croatia, and produce political confusion in Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania, especially manipulating the Kosovo crisis. Kosovo was another EU failure of a poor leadership and weak political authority. Here are particularly underlined patterns of disinformation campaigns ran by Russian state agency Sputnik.

Key words: *Russia, hybrid war, populism, Western Balkans, EU Foreign and Security Policy*

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Emergence of Putin and New Perspectives for the Western Balkans

After the first wave of EU integration, in the late 1990s, Russia became increasingly dissatisfied with the US-dominated position in international relations, seeking to restore its superpower status lost during the Soviet disintegration and the first transition period that followed. Russia also faced frustrations as the society sharply split into extreme winners and extreme losers, while the state apparatus of ideological guidance and political coercion, now in coalition with the Russian Orthodox Church and transitional oligarchs, started planning a revenge on a global scale. At the end of the twentieth century, Russia had two levers of power and global influence for the twenty-first century: strategic weapons and the export of cheap energy to the European market.

Vladimir Putin came to power thanks to resentments following the collapse of the USSR and the growing disorder in Russian Federation 1991—1999. Conservative circles in Russia, army, secret services and the church were trying to rebuild the imperial power, while it was becoming apparent, facing the new realities in world politics and economy. The rise of Vladimir Putin was accompanied by the political support from a society fed by generated feelings of anxiety, powerlessness and the conspiracy theories. From 1991, the deep state was feeling uneasy within the strategic interlude created by the US unilateral power. Putin provided a national consensus by including the tsarist tradition to Soviet heritage and relying on personally loyal transitional winners. Putin's model was based on criticism of the failed state, although appointed by Boris Yeltsin to serve as his successor. Official propaganda identified disorder with the Westernization. Instead of joining the West, the doctrine of liberation from the West was built around the core idea of a "sovereign democracy", a political order allegedly adapted to Russian interests and habits (Krastev 2006, 113-117).

Putin's propaganda used fears and was fed by fears. The fear of the EU was based on rejection of the liberal values. The fear of NATO was based on the impulse to restore Soviet strategic power. For Russia, the unipolar world of the nineties was unacceptable. Official propaganda was reconsidering European postmodernism as dangerous pathology, freedom and individualism as destructive forces with regards to the traditional values of "Russian man" and Russian society, using historic fears of European invaders (Shevtsova 2008, 34-40). "Information warfare, according to the original Russian government document *Conceptual Views Regarding the Activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Information Space*, is defined as confronting a state in the information space by damaging information systems, processes, and resources" (Ajir & Vailliant 2018, 72-79).

The Soviet empire was built with strategic reliance on buffer states as a defensive belt from prospective European conquerors. The fall of communism and European integration deprived Russia of continental strategic security. In opposition to European liberal-democratic order, and wishing to restore the status of a planetary superpower, Russia retained the territorial logic again subordinating the system to the logic and needs of authoritarian order. Over time, Russia was including internal propaganda in relations with the outside world, recommending a return to the concept of national sovereignty and traditional values as the concept of a general European stability (Glazychev 2009, 9-14).

During 1991—1999 Yugoslav wars South-eastern Europe was emerging as a latter platform for Russia's relations with the EU and NATO. Yugoslav conflict was the last major war in Europe in the twentieth century. War crimes and genocide provoked the first and last NATO military interventions ever, 1995 and 1999. EU and NATO integration of post-Yugoslav republics was delayed, if compared to the integrative, developmental and reformist potentials of pre-war Yugoslavia. Yugoslav disintegration was also becoming a paradigm, a scale model of the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Serbia mimicked Russia's role in trying to maintain control over the largest possible segment of former Yugoslav territory, and prevent political changes that followed the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. The former Yugoslav "core state", Serbia played an imaginary but employable role of Yugoslav Russia, the former Soviet core state (Samardžić 2005, 117-120).

In the following years after 1995 NATO intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia was showing increasing dissatisfaction with the US-dominated international relations and indicated intention to restore its former status of the superpower. A turning point for the new Russia's strategic policy, or the reason for the shift, was the 1999 NATO intervention in Serbia and Montenegro. Furthermore, in April 1999, NATO introduced a new strategic policy. Official Russia began to reconsider the West as a strategic threat. Russia's security concept of 1999 was based on restored anti-Western political views. Putin centralized the political power and imposed his personal role in the chain of command. On 12 March 1999 Czech Republic and Hungary joined the NATO, and on 24 March NATO campaign was launched in Serbia and Montenegro, to last until 10 June 1999. On April 13 the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) unilaterally joined the alliance with Russia and Belarus, apparently in an attempt to involve Russia into conflict. The creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus, signed later, on December 8, 1999, was envisaged with a particular strategic importance. Putin also tightened the position of the national Security Council taking over part of the authorities of the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff. Events were accelerating (Haas 2010, 16-18).

The new Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 emphasized that Russia is a great power, and must strengthen its influence on international politics. Cooperation and integration of the Russian Commonwealth of Independent States were priorities. Russia was concerned about NATO's intention to expand beyond its European borders, and with the economic and strategic domination of the US and the EU enlargement. Russia was warning, that the UN Security Council is the central institution of international relations. The NATO enlargement was interpreted as an obvious threat. Even a more complex challenge was the forthcoming EU integration of the former Soviet satellite states in Eastern, Central and South-eastern Europe. EU integration has opened and democratized societies, emancipated institutions from the executive power, freed the individuals. NATO and EU expansion also cast a shadow on the UN. The 1999 intervention in Serbia and Montenegro had not received Security Council approval and a few NATO members fenced off. EU threatened with substantial changes as the new Russian concept preferred a closed, controlled society, subject to manipulation by the authorities and the church. Russia was also dissatisfied with the election of pro-Western governments in Georgia and Ukraine (Haas 2010, 34-35).

Since 2001, Russia could draw the benefits from favourable global changes as the US unilateralism was overthrown almost at once. The 9/11 terrorist attacks revealed the vulnerability of the US as the greatest single global military force and the guarantor of Euro-Atlantic security. A new global reality emerged also thanks to the integration of PC China in World Trade Organization on 11 December 2001. Goldman Sachs chief economist Jim O'Neill coined the BRIC acronym and predicted that four emerging powers, Brazil, Russia, India and China, were on their way to reshape the world economy. In a long-term Sino-Russian axis was formed in terms of an authoritarian alternative to the dominant Western liberal order (Öniş 2017, 1-16). Occasionally, it was wrongly assumed that the economic opening would contribute to a new wave of democratization (Rose & Chull Shin 2001; Wright 2009; Gilley 2009; Miller 2012). And that never happened. Of contrary, followed a global deterioration of democracies, marked, among other things, by the emergence of populism, a new essentially totalitarian form of "immediate democracy". Subsequently, the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 could not acquire a full consent of European partners.

Between 2000 and 2005, on the other side, Russian authorities and state services were building a populist cult of Vladimir Putin, emphasizing his merits in rebuilding the economy, intrusion of a supposed order into social relations, dealing with financial moguls (YUKOS affair 2003—2006³). New Russian populism has be-

³ "The Yukos case revealed the dangers of the commercialization of the political sphere, but the outcome was the further politicization of the economic sphere. We thus have a tri-

come a model for any European populist movement that relied on Putin's Russia (Sakwa 2009, 94-107).

Ten years after the 1992 Maastricht Treaty on European Union the final boundaries of the European project's geographical spread were becoming clearer. The Russia-EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement from 1994, enforced on 1 December 1997 to last 10 years, established the basic common goals, and recognized a shared responsibility for the international order based on multilateralism. The European Security Strategy has highlighted that the EU and Russia, with the US and NATO, and other international partners, have made the Balkans no longer at risk of major conflict. However, between 1998 and 2008, EU and Russia were mutually distancing. Europe was imposing its values of freedoms and democracy, science, knowledge, technologies and open market economy as an instrument of power. Russia imposed a concept of personal rule and energy as an instrument of power (Tichý 2019, 23-28). Energy resource has become a key political instrument of Russia especially after 2004 due to rising global oil and gas prices and increasing demand, and thanks to the global economic growth (China and India) (Haas 2010, 45-46). In 2003, Putin indicated the Russian gas company Gazprom as a near future powerful lever of influence over the rest of the world (Sakwa 2009, 94-107).

Optimism of EU and NATO enlargement to Southeast Europe was short-lived, culminating in Thessaloniki EU-Western Balkans Summit on 21 June, 2003: "The EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union. The ongoing enlargement and the signing of the Treaty of Athens in April 2003 inspire and encourage the countries of the Western Balkans to follow the same successful path. Preparation for integration into European structures and ultimate membership into

angle of power, freedom, and property accompanied by political as well as economic contradictions. The Yukos affair inhibited the move away from neo-patrimonial approaches to economic life, but it did not resolve the fundamental constitutional question about the proper scope for autonomous economic activity. The Yukos affair came to symbolize both the achievement and failings of Russia's headlong rush to the market. The freedom of the 1990s came at a high price, but the attempt in the 2000s to modify the earlier settlement came with penalties of its own. Sections of the elite used the attack on Khodorkovsky to achieve certain goals of the regime and to enhance the perceived interests of the state. Whether these goals are desirable, laudable, or achievable remain contested. The Yukos affair was not a Tiananmen Square massacre, when in June 1989 the Chinese authorities asserted their power over mass popular demonstrations calling for greater popular inclusion in the political process, but it did mark the moment when the political state in Russia reasserted its predominance over the nascent business class to determine the main contours of domestic and foreign policy. The power of the oligarchs had originally derived from authority delegated from government, and this practical dependency was now turned into political reality" (Sakwa 2009, 380).

the European Union, through adoption of European standards, is now the big challenge ahead. The Croatian application for EU membership is currently under examination by the Commission. The speed of movement ahead lies in the hands of the countries of the region” (EU-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki 2003).

In the meanwhile, assassination of the Serbian prime minister Zoran Đinđić, supported with a discreet approval of official Moscow, in the long run turned out to become successful as Serbia’s gradual dissociation from the EU and NATO caused restlessness and instability in the former Yugoslav neighbourhood. Slovenia became a full EU member on 29 March 2004. At that point, obstruction of further EU integration and NATO enlargement in South-eastern Europe has become one of Russia’s priorities in strategic pressure and corruptive influence.

Russia considered the 2004 EU and NATO enlargement a new strategic challenge in Eastern Europe and Mediterranean. The integration of several states of Eastern Europe into the EU in 2004 and 2007, followed by NATO, brought the West to Russian borders. Ukraine’s Orange Revolution of 2004—2005 frustrated the Russian elite, challenging the essence of the Soviet power restoration project. Facing its strategic retreat, Russia started to search for weak within the increasingly complex EU structure. On the other hand, the EU was beginning to reveal the lack of unity in interests and attitudes. Its growing weakness was reflected in indecisive and unfocused foreign and security policy, energy dependency, corruption of officials and other members of political, cultural, and scientific establishment, and internal dissatisfactions caused by social shifts and inequalities. While preparing for a great Eastern Europe in 2004, the EU did not really have enough capacity to commit its foreign and security policy to Ukraine (Conradi 2017, 273-326).

As Romania and Bulgaria also joined the EU in 2007, and upon their accession to NATO, a buffer zone was established between Russia and the Western Balkans (Haas 2010, 52-55). Montenegro declared independence in 2006 with the intention to join the NATO and the EU. Points of strategic pressure after 2007 were Russian communities in the Baltic Republics and Ukraine, and former Yugoslav republics in South-eastern Europe. At these points, Russia sought to lay the strategic foundations of its renewed imperial power.⁴

⁴ “As a researcher at the Levada Analytical Center, Russia’s leading institute for the study of public opinion, writes: ‘Today, all categories of the population care about Russia recovering its power. As soon as a young man becomes conscious of his citizenship, the following idea emerges: The country is in bad shape, its authority in the world needs to be enhanced.’ 12 Indeed, in 200, among those who regret the collapse of the USSR, 55 percent (as opposed to only 29 percent in 1990) cite as their main reason: ‘People no longer feel they belong to a great power.’ And those who regret the passing of the Soviet Union are not a small minority. In answer to the question, ‘Would you like the Soviet Union and the socialist system to be reestablished,’ 12 percent answer, ‘Yes, and I think it quite realistic’;

In South-eastern Europe Russia continued to rely mainly on frozen Kosovo conflict. The logic of proxy wars could also be felt in other rather unfinished post-Yugoslav states, still burdened by ethnic and religious differences, or border and cross border disputes. Russia explicitly opposed recognition of Kosovo independence without the consent of Serbia, and possibly even with the consent of Serbia. Serbia and Russia were using the frozen conflict as a stronghold of domestic and exported populism, a concept of an opposition to the Western values and integrations, based on the notion of a conservative nation founded on and traditional institutions of the state, church and authoritarian culture. Otherwise, the Kosovo crisis was the starting point for the Yugoslav crisis. The Kosovo “precedent” has been used already during the secret negotiations between the Serbian and Croat leadership on the partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from 1992.

Russia established strategic influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans since the fall of the Milošević’s regime in 2000. Russia has already taken a sharper course during 1999 NATO intervention, and found a new political perspective in new conservative forces determined to reject Western influences, with increasing support from security circles and the church. Three important issues have been raised, relations with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), relations in the state union of Serbia-Montenegro, and future status of Kosovo. Obstruction of relations with ICTY was supposed to stop the process of understanding and confronting the politics and consequences of war aggression, crimes and genocide in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. It was necessary to tie Montenegro to the pro-Putin, anti-Western course, and prevent Montenegro to join the EU and NATO. Preserving the frozen conflict in Kosovo was following the Russia’s model of manipulating ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet neighbourhood. Serbian conservative forces assassinated the first democratic, pro-European prime minister, Zoran Đinđić. The promise at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003 that the Western Balkans had a European future turned to be insufficient and ineffective consolation. Serbia’s EU prospects with negotiations frozen outright in May of 2006 as part of the EU’s response to Serbia’s perceived non-cooperation with the ICTY. In 2006. Montenegro declared independence. Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari proposed an ultimate settlement for Serbia and Kosovo in February 2007, after a period of consultations with both parties, to be proposed to the UN Security Council. However, political leaders from both sides signalled a total unwillingness to compromise on their central demands, so the EU finally acknowledged the complete failure of the negotiations. In the meanwhile, Russia repeatedly affirmed the intention to veto any

48 percent say, ‘Yes, but I think now it is unrealistic; and only 31 percent say, ‘No, I would not’” (Hassner 2008, 11).

proposal not acceptable to both sides of the negotiations. Kosovo unilaterally declared independence on February 17, 2008. The United States and a majority of EU member states quickly recognized the Kosovo independence (Weller 2008, 47-55).

As the 2007 EU integration of Romania and Bulgaria built an additional barrier between Russia and the Western Balkans, the remaining channels of Russia's influence remained the power of the energy sector, corruption of South-eastern European officials and propaganda. However, Russia has also strengthened its reliance on classic strategic resources. Considering that the international environment had changed significantly, in March 2008, Russia announced a new foreign policy strategy. Russia also considered a threat of NATO expansion to Ukraine and Georgia, and a planned US missile shield, and the intent to deploy US troops in Eastern Europe. In order to restore the status of a great power, Russia further encouraged the energy policy and diplomacy based on the energy sector. The defence budget was increased from 2.5 to 3.5% of GNP, and the function of Minister of Defence extended to the function of Deputy Commander-in-Chief. The Minister was thus effectively provided with the position of Vice-President and supervision of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Ministry of the Interior affairs (Haas 2010, 33).

The First Milestone, the 2008 Crisis

EU and NATO 2004—2013 enlargement took place in states that proved to be able to apply EU institutional standards and democratic procedures, and ensure the effectuation of European freedoms. However, a series of crises that have erupted since 2008 have provoked populist responses in the EU and its neighbourhood. The rise of populism was especially successful where the influence of Russia and conservative forces prevailed over independent institutions and democratic procedures. In Baltic states and Ukraine, Russia counted on Russian ethnic minorities and urged for respect of their collective rights. In South-eastern Europe, Russia found its sphere of influence in unresolved ethnic, religious and border conflicts. The domino effect of collapse of fragile democracies in South-eastern Europe was caused by the 2008 elections in Serbia. The alleged victory of the European forces was illusive, as the true outcome revealed the long term return of the communist nationalist regime in its full capacity. The day after definite election victory, the new president of Serbia-Montenegro, Vojislav Koštunica, received explicit support from Russian diplomacy on October 6, 2000, who was primarily interested in his predecessor not answering to the ICTY.⁵

Previously, president Boris Tadić visited Russia during his presidential campaign. The Socialist Party of Serbia, the most responsible for war aggression, war

⁵ Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/39421>.

crimes, genocide, international sanctions, self-isolation and the destruction of institutions and society possessed the key coalition capacity to influence strategic decisions of all governments since. The Socialist Party of Serbia became the most important intermediate of the Russian state influence. Immediately after the elections, Serbia sold to the Russia's state owned Gazprom the 51% based control over the state-owned oil company "Naftna Industrija Srbije" (NIS) and an exclusive right to exploit natural resources. The agreement, otherwise approved both by a convincing pro-government and opposition majority in parliament, was disputed as under-priced, in Russian benefit. Serbia justified the deal as a necessity to secure energy stability in the region, announcing its benefits in the South Stream project, and Russia's involvement in defending Serbia's territorial rights over Kosovo (Vlček 2019, 163-176).⁶

By taking over the energy sector Russia has also provided means of financial penetration and corruption. Russian Sberbank appeared both in Serbia and in the neighbourhood, also in Croatia, as an extended arm of the Russian state. Serbia's foreign policy was established on "four pillars", the EU, the US, Russia, and China (Serbia's cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America 2017, 11).

The events that followed, in a long run, confirmed that Serbia had given up EU integration, and only simulated agreements and cooperative efforts in order to maintain EU financial assistance and political support.

Dimitri Medvedev's presidency 2008—2011 was only a following interlude in Russia-EU relations. Medvedev enjoyed an otherwise unfounded liberal reputation in the EU (Donath 2007; Aslund 2012).

Croatia and Albania joined NATO on 1 April 2009.

The EU-Russia summit in 2010 led to a series of bilateral modernization partnerships between Russia and EU member states. At that point, Russia had already exploited the weaknesses of the EU's foreign and security policy to consolidate its foothold in the Caucasus region, and prepare aggression against Ukraine. Russia needed a stronger foothold with Western Balkan states in order to undermine EU enlargement objectives. The 2012 presidential and parliamentary elections in Serbia

⁶ "Gazprom has taken advantage of the disarray inside the European Union by forging ahead with its own contracts with Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary and now Serbia, as it consolidates its presence in southeastern Europe. Under terms of the provisional agreement, approved Tuesday by Serbia's cabinet, Gazprom has offered to pay \$600 million for a 51 percent stake in NIS, with pledges to turn Serbia into a hub for Russian energy. The contract is to be signed Friday in Moscow" — Dempsey, J. "Russia's Gazprom Takes Control of Serbian Oil Monopoly". *The New York Times* (Jan. 23, 2008) <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/23/world/europe/23serbia.html>.

facilitated the return of the war coalition of the Socialist Party of Serbia and the Serbian Progressive Party (which emerged from the Serbian Radical Party). Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt stated that, with the new president, “Serbia under Nikolić must create confidence in its will to move towards Europe and partnership in the region” (Ristic, Andric & Barlovac 2012). For a while, Serbia did indeed hold a pro EU course. Under strong EU pressure, and under the tide of Euro-enthusiasm in Serbian society, on 19 April 2013 was concluded the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations between the governments of Serbia and Kosovo, on the normalization of their relations, mediated by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton.⁷

The next and last major EU success in the Western Balkans took place as Croatia became the 28th member state on 1 July 2013. Following the EU integration of Croatia in 2013, and the signing of the Brussels Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, aimed at ensuring a peaceful solution and mutual recognition, the obstruction of the EU and NATO integration of the rest of the Western Balkans became Russia’s priority. “Russia has successfully hindered almost every step the Western Balkan states have taken to move closer to NATO or the EU. This helped President Putin to consolidate his popularity and strongman image in Serbia (with a 57% approval rating there, he is the most trusted foreign leader), while sustaining sympathy in Republic Srpska, the northern municipalities in Kosovo, a pro-Russian base in Montenegro and the nationalist political party VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia” (Secrieru 2019). Along with its aggression on Ukraine, Russia definitely launched, a hybrid war against the EU using propaganda, campaigns of lies and deception, corruption of officials, and support for populists both in ruling parties and in the opposition. In order to achieve its strategic goals, Russia had to ensure subordinate clientele bound to obstruct the reforms and promote anti-EU alternatives (Galeotti 2016; Chivvis 2017).

⁷ “In fact, the lack of transparency was a deliberate and strategic choice on the part of the EU to allow both parties to interpret the agreements in a way that would be beneficial for their respective positions. The talks involved only high-level government representatives from the beginning. Both parliaments, as noted above, were informed and provided their support for the agreements. However, this was a consequence of governments seeking to secure legitimacy for any agreements rather than EU policy, and parliaments received only minimal information. Considering the vagueness of the agreements, it is in fact odd that parliament would ratify such an agreement in which all key aspects remain unelaborated. In keeping with the absence of a comprehensive agreement, the idea of any public vote also never featured on the agenda. Without a clear end point, there was little to ratify in a referendum, and the risk would have been considerable that any agreement might be rejected in Kosovo or Serbia. However, the absence of a public vote on the agreement makes it arguably more easily reversible.” (Bieber 2015, 316).

Along with aggression on Ukraine, Russia has launched a hybrid war within the EU using propaganda, campaigns of lies and deception, corruption of officials and support for populists in government or the opposition. In order to achieve its strategic goals, Russia had to ensure subordinate clientele bound to obstruct the reforms and promote anti-EU alternatives (Rácz; Galeotti 2016; Chivvis 2017). “In Russia, soft power is the exclusive tool of state sponsored agencies supported by state-controlled media. The underlying message is promotion of a common faith in the superiority of approved behavioural standards and supremacy of conservative, orthodox cultural norms. Under Putin, the nascent civil society that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union was eliminated or severely curtailed under the resurgent strong-state government model. Internal critics, nearly all of whom have been silenced in one way or another, are forced to accept the present model as a carbon copy of the old Soviet system.” (McNabb 2016, 65-66).

Favourable circumstances have occurred in a series of successive crises that turned the EU leadership and institutions becoming ineffective and unconvincing: the 2008 financial crisis, Ukraine crisis 2013—2014, migrant crisis from 2015, and 2016 Brexit. EU foreign and security policy failures further aggravated all serious internal issues in the Western Balkans. The Russian authorities have launched disinformation campaigns using both traditional and online media, including social networks.⁸

The Western Balkans were further weakened by the long duration of Yugoslav disintegration, while the challenges of Serbia’s recognition of Kosovo and Greece’s

⁸ “Russian pro-government traditional media have a large reach and budget. Two of those outlets, RT and Sputnik, operate in 100 countries and broadcast programs in thirty languages. RT’s annual budget of around € 270 million allows it to compete on the global news scene with BBC World and France 24, which have similar budgets. Then there is the Internet Research Agency, which was revealed to be a so-called troll factory owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Putin. The agency conducts online information operations and is an important part of Russian disinformation activities. Operating since 2013, it has a monthly budget of around € 1 million and employs about eighty people divided across foreign sections. The task of the employees — the “trolls” — is to set up fake social media accounts and conduct discussions online with people from all over the world with the goal of inducing extreme emotions and riling up people. Since the beginning of 2020, they have also been spreading disinformation about the coronavirus with the aim of inducing distrust in public institutions and aggravating the public health crisis in the EU. Most often, their posts on social media (Twitter, Facebook, Telegram) and other online platforms (YouTube, Google) question the EU’s democratic legitimacy and play up sensitive topics in public debate such as migration, national sovereignty, and values. The channels and disinformation strategies they use depend on the target country and target group of their message, and the effectiveness of it depends on the resilience of societies to counter information, manipulation, and provocation”: Legucka, A., “Russia’s Long-Term Campaign of Disinformation in Europe” In <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/81322>

recognition of Northern Macedonia were postponed, and cross-border disputes also unresolved, even between Slovenia and Croatia, already integrated in EU. The most important pillar of that clientele was the transition boot concentrated in circles related to the security services. Utilizing a clientele in the ruling parties and administration, Russia soon submerged the influence of the EU on key political decisions, and has primarily achieved success in public information and propaganda, in sectors where editorial influence has been established by the linkages of the executive power, secret services, transition moguls and the Orthodox church. Russia was imposing a concept of personal rule and energy as instruments of power and influence. Energy resource became Russia's key political instrument, especially after 2004 due to rising global oil and gas prices that responded to the increasing demand to a large degree caused by global economic growth (China and India), so that Russia could blackmail the European market by pointing the demands from Asian markets. In 2003, Putin defined Russian gas company Gazprom as a future powerful lever of influence over the rest of the world (Tichý 2019, 22). The definite decision was the sale of Serbian Oil and Gas Industry (NIS) to Russia's Gazprom monopoly in 2008 at a controversial price while Russian and Serbian officials spoke in unison about Serbia and Russia's historical friendship (Socor 2009).

Why the EU enlargement policy became a special challenge for Putin's Russia? The EU enlargement was a foreign policy tool to promote values, institutions and democracy. Enlargement implies the adoption and application of laws, norms and values, and profoundly changes institutions and social relations, economy, rule of law, good and efficient administration, ecology, security, some decisions are transferred to supranational institutions, European ideas spread further in a neighbourhood. The enlargement of the EU took place almost in parallel with the expansion of NATO. While NATO enlargement was an immediate challenge, EU integration was bringing substantially more dangerous undermining features for the Putin regime.

For Russia, the EU is also an identity problem. The expansion of the EU to the east also aroused economic interests. The EU "threatened to limit Russian commercial leverage" with Ukraine. One of the interests was the transit route for Russian gas. Russia's Gazprom often enjoys exclusive rights with respect to access to infrastructure and other non-competitive privileges, such as a prohibition of re-sale or re-export (Zorić 2017, 15).

The EU enlargement delay after 2007, or after 2013, belongs to the series of events that followed, exposing internal weaknesses of the candidate states, malign alien influences, and subsequent EU crises. The most contentious internal aspects were corruption, organized crime, weaknesses of the judiciary, poor economic performance, loath protection of minorities, state mismanagement. Propaganda raised

scepticism towards reforms, the EU value system and the concept of supranational unity, to a distrust of representative institutions. One of the propaganda platforms was the alleged Slovene closeness. Russia's official pressures ran from the UN Security Council, by disposing the right to veto every decision aimed at WB states that did not match Russian interests. Putin's regime was also using corruption as a tool of political influence (Harding 2005; Koval 2017; Benner 2017).

Following the EU and NATO enlargement in Eastern and South-eastern Europe, Russia laid strategic foundations on three important points: the Baltic, Ukraine and the Western Balkans. In South-eastern Europe Serbia became an ultimate stronghold of Russia's influence and destabilization of the neighbourhood. From 2008 to 2015, two Russian presidents, the Prime minister and Minister of foreign affairs visited Belgrade eight times. Serbian officials were hosted in Moscow nine times in total. In 2014 both Medvedev and Putin visited Belgrade, and imposed an agreement on South Stream gas pipeline, giving an "unconditional support" for the Kosovo turnover as Serbian officials rejected the application of the previously signed 2013 Brussels Agreement. Russia and Serbia also reached agreements on trade liberalization in 2009 and 2011, giving Serbia exclusive rights as the only state apart from Commonwealth of Independent States. Serbia used EU sanctions so exports to Russia rose up to 68% in comparison with the year 2013 (Zorić 2017, 39). Serbia even joined the military manoeuvres Slavic Brotherhood 2017.⁹

Ukraine War and Hybrid Warfare

Putin was re-elected again as a President in 2012, when a breakdown in relations with the EU was already being felt. But he did not immediately cause the crisis. Deterioration started from events at strategic points, in the Caucasus and the Black Sea. First Armenia suspended the negotiations with the EU and joined Eurasian Economic Union instead. The pressures on Moldova introduced pressures on Ukraine.

Russia's military intervention in Ukraine started in February 2014 in the Crimean peninsula and the Donbas region. On request of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin Federation Council of the Russian Federation decided to use military force on territory of Ukraine, on 1 March. Russia annexed Crimea after a referendum organized by Russian authorities on 16 March 2014. On 11 May, Donetsk Republic declared independence. On July 17, pro-Russian separatist forces shot down the Ma-

⁹ "Belarus, Russia and Serbia are holding joint military exercises of landing troops close to the Polish border. The choice of time, place and participants is not accidental. This is a response to Montenegro's accession to NATO and a further confirmation that Serbia and Russia closely cooperate in the field of security." In "Slavic Brotherhood against NATO". *Russia Monitor* (Warsaw Institute, 9 June 2017) <https://warsawinstitute.org/slavic-brotherhood-against-nato/>

laysia Airlines Boeing 777, believing that it was a Ukrainian air-force jet, and killed all 298 passengers, the majority of them Dutch, and 15 crew-members. In August, Russian military launched a land invasion on Donetsk Oblast and defeated Ukrainian forces in early September. Since March 2014, the EU has progressively imposed sanctions against Russia, as diplomatic measures, individual asset freeze and travel restrictions, restrictions on economic relations with Crimea and Sevastopol, restrictions on economic cooperation. Ukraine remained a divided state.

The Ukraine crisis coincided with the appointment of Federica Mogherini to the position of High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in Jean-Claude Juncker's new Commission, following the 2014 European election. Her nomination proposal had been opposed by Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland, and Sweden, Ireland, Netherlands and the United Kingdom also raised concerns, since her stance towards Russia concerning the Ukrainian crisis was considered to be "too soft" (Wright 2014). On 2 August 2014, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi formally nominated Mogherini to EC President-elect Jean-Claude Juncker, as Italy's official candidate for EU Commissioner. The decision was effective from 1 November 2014 (Juncker 2014).

The annexation of Crimea and the Russian occupation of the eastern Ukraine (similar to the partition of Poland in 1939), became a new basis of Russia-EU relations. "Following the annexation of Crimea and the ensuing worsening of EU—Russia relations, Moscow's strategy in cyberspace has been increasingly hostile and assertive. While Europe's multiple crises have been impacting on citizens' everyday lives, Russia has been making full use of its influence on traditional and social media to inject confusion and ignite fears in EU politics" (Viceré, 2). The Ukrainian crisis has spilled over into South-eastern Europe and Syria. The collapse of the EU's foreign and security policy encouraged populists both in the EU and in the immediate periphery of the EU. Visegrád Group, an intergovernmental cooperation between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, mainly opposed the EU sanctions against Kremlin. Only Poland clearly condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Since coming to power in 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been conducting a strongly pro-Russian foreign policy, officially called the "Eastern opening", and becoming strongly supportive in his relations with Balkan populists.¹⁰

¹⁰ Between 2007 and 2013 Serbia ignored or refused a several hundreds of EU declarations (Serbia 2013 Progress Report https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/serbia_2013.pdf). In 2014 crisis Serbia supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, however refused to vote of UN General Assembly Resolution in favor of the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Serbia repelled the European Commission decision on restrictive measures in response to the illegal

EU, however, recognized the reality of divided, partly occupied Ukraine. Already in January 2015, Mogherini launched an initiative among EU foreign ministers exploring a potential rapprochement with Russia, including a pathway to ease economic and open discussion on topics as travelling, visas and energy policy. The proposal sharply refused United Kingdom and Poland. During following years, Mogherini continued to avoid naming Russia as the main creator of hybrid war against the EU, especially the hostile disinformation campaigns and officials' corruption. On 27 April 2017, on her first official visit to Russia, Mogherini met with minister of foreign affairs Sergei Lavrov. Their discussion covered the implementation of the Minsk Agreement, the Annexation of Crimea, homophobic discrimination in Chechnya, and other topics. Mogherini stated that she supported policies in the spirit of "cooperation rather than confrontation."¹¹

Russia's Pressures and Failures in Western Balkans

In 2015 and 2016, Russia took the chance of the Mogherini's goodwill and weaknesses of EU foreign and security policy. Russia was using state agencies, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) to gather information and target public opinion and leadership in order to promote its foreign policy and political values (Haas 2010, 45). Populist leaders and organizations have become a key political tool. Populists have allowed Russia's official policy to penetrate the institutions of EU member states and candidate states. In the Western Balkans, the main vehicle for misinformation and public pressure campaigns has become agency Sputnik, related to the Russian government. While promoting official policies and values, Sputnik was disseminating lies and defamation to discourage public opinion in support of EU integration with NATO, and to direct the EU and NATO candidate countries' public policies towards self-isolationism in relation to the European neighbourhood. The campaigns also discredited democratic institutions, and included raising ethnic tensions and religious intolerance. The main goals were: to provide stable support in Serbia, to keep Kosovo in a state of so-called frozen conflict, to provoke new ethnic divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to stop Montenegro and Macedonia in their intentions to join NATO and the EU. The actions included support for populist leaders, organizations and governments in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.

annexation of Crimea (Serbia 2014 Progress Report https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/serbia_2013.pdf).

¹¹ "EU an 'indispensable' UN partner, working for rules-based international order, Security Council told". 2017. UN News 9 May. Retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/05/556932-eu-indispensable-un-partner-working-rules-based-international-order-security>

The central territory of Russian strategic influence became Republika Srpska, as Bosnia and Herzegovina failed to become an effective, functional state, with a minimum of common institutional interest. The other part of the State, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, was also split as the key influence was established by Turkey over the Bosnian people, and both Croatia and Russia over the Croatian people. Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica, the conservative Croat party, while declaratively pro-NATO and pro-EU, was blocking the state's NATO accession, as the party leader Dragan Čović became the immediate executor of Russian interests. "There are several levels where this influence is shown. Formal level of Russian influence is through the direct decision making powers in the functioning of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), the international representative in BiH whose primary mandate is to monitor the implementation of the peace settlement through being a part of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council. Peace Implementation Council also includes seven other countries, the EU and the Organization of the Islamic Conference represented by Turkey. The OHR is, together with the EU delegation, the most powerful international institution in the country, and this gives Russia a voice in every political dynamic in the country, as well as a direct influence on all work of the whole international community inside Republika Srpska". Russia's economic influence in Republika Srpska was established, similarly as in Serbia, with the purchase of the oil refinery in Brod, refinery in Modriča and distributor Petrol (for only 120 million euro), and the deal was confirmed by the National Assembly of Republika Srpska (the first session was declared secret). "The South Stream" narrative was mostly used by Serbian politicians in promotion of a Russian interest. The Russian state-owned „Sberbank“ established a wide regional presence (Kremlin Watch Program 2020, 8-16).

Russia has profited profoundly from the weaknesses of the EU during the long period of political and crisis that probably also provoked crisis in EU leadership. Populist leaders, movements and parliamentary political parties were fed by the absence of clear views and visions of the future of EU leadership. Russian propaganda has wiped out deception campaigns on alleged dangers from the flows of migrants, fostered anti-vaccine campaigns that have cast doubts on scientific knowledge, especially scientific medicine, and interpreted the Brexit from a perspective of the futility of the entire EU project. The Visegrád Group states began to progressively violate democratic norms and procedures. In relation to Ukraine crisis, Poland supported personal and economic sanctions against the Russian Federation. The Czech Republic also criticized Russian activities, the social democrat Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek even compared aggression against Ukraine with German annexation of the Sudetenland and occupation of Czechoslovakia (1938-1939), however, Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka disputed the effectiveness

of the economic sanctions against the Russian Federation, and the government refused to supply Ukraine with weapons. “Former Czech president Václav Klaus and former conservative prime minister Petr Nečas also expressed explicitly pro-Russian stances”. The Slovak Prime Minister disagreed with official EU policy towards the Russian Federation, even stressing “the pointlessness of sanctions against Russia”. In September 2014, Fico described the conflict in Ukraine as a “geopolitical struggle between Russia and the USA”. “Despite these critical remarks Slovakia did not block the sanctions. Both Fico and M. Zeman participated in the 70th anniversary celebrations marking the end of the Second World War in Moscow in May 2015; however, Fico did not take part in the military parade. Their actions contradicted decisions made by Polish and Hungarian representatives not to attend the Victory Day celebrations. One month later, on a working visit to Moscow, Fico stressed that there were no controversial issues between Slovakia and the Russian Federation.” Hungary officially condemned the annexation of Crimea, however the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that “Hungary is not a part of the Russian—Ukrainian conflict. Orbán was disapproving economic sanctions against Russia, and stated that EU had “shot itself in the foot.” “In June 2015 Hungary was also one of the very few EU countries, besides Finland, Austria and Slovakia to hold bilateral talks with President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. Putin visited Budapest in February 2015” (Marusiak 2015, 38-44).

In another fragile state, in North Macedonia, Russia was using the Macedonian name dispute with Greece, internal tensions in relations between Macedonians and Albanians, and malign influences from Bulgaria and Serbia and their populist leaders. Increase in Russian intelligence activity was noticed already after the Greek veto for North Macedonia at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest. While confronting relatively little support in Macedonia for its strategic goals,¹² Russia was counting on the nationalistic VMRO-DPMNE (The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization — Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) and the support of the leader and prime minister Nikola Gruevski in Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary, and their populist leaders. Another tool of destabilization became the Democratic Party of the Serbs, included in ruling coalition with the VMRO-DPMNE.¹³ Russia was describing the ethnic relations in Macedonia as the result of foreign interference de-

¹² In 2017, 14% thought that Russia would be the best ally, comparing with the 42% for the EU and 17% for the US, and the opinion on who had the most significant influence, 41% thought that it was the US, 38% for the EU, and only 4% for Russia.

¹³ In June 2016, together with party representatives from Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia, and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), DPS signed a pact with the ruling United Russia Party, and called for neutrality for the Western Balkans and membership of North Macedonia in the Eurasian Economic Union.

signed to create the so-called Greater Albania. Disinformation campaigns outlined the Macedonian political elites as servile to the Albanian political elites.¹⁴

¹⁴ In Macedonia, a propaganda campaign by the Russian Sputnik agency was based on spreading the belief that “the Macedonian population does not want NATO membership” but that the government “will not ask it for an opinion”. An important pillar of the campaign was the anti-NATO policy of official Serbia. A dissemination of hostility in regard to ethnic Albanians was related to their alleged plans to make Macedonia part of Greater Albania: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201707181111960664-MAKEDONIJA/> Sputnik also pointed the EU and NATO hostility in relation to Russia, but also to China and its “Belt and Road initiative” <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201705191111236983-nato-vardar-rusija-kina/> Greece paved the way for Northern Macedonia in the EU, but France and the Netherlands “lowered the ramp”: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201910171121030965-koju-ilekciju-srbija-moze-da-nauci-iz-samara-makedoniji-video/> The “agents of chaos” in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are supported by the US. Apartheid and Nazism are based on “exceptionalism”: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/intervju/201506282875922/> Washington is “really afraid” of the Russian expansion to the Balkans: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/20171106113344416-nato-trik/> The decision of EU ministers not to give a date for the start of negotiations undermines the credibility of the First Minister Zoran Zaev <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201910161121024185-evropska-unija-saopstava-zemljama-balkana-ne-racunajte-na-nas/> Bulgaria restrained, believes that Northern Macedonia does not qualify for EU accession talks, also Johannes Hahn, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/regioni/201910181121036029-bugarska-o-pocetku-pregovora-o-pristupanju-makedonije-eu-mogli-bi-da-ostanu-u-cekaonici/> <https://rs.sputniknews.com/vesti/201906211120148578-nisu-jos-sazreli-premijer-bugarske-saopstio-makedoncima-pravi-uslov-za-pocetak-pregovora-sa-eu/> <https://rs.sputniknews.com/regioni/201706121111534633-makedonija/> Pro-Bulgarian nationalists against joining NATO: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201906241120173585-dzaba-su-se-odrekli-imena-makedonci-imaju-jos-jednu-krupnu-prepreku-do-eu-i-nato-a/> NATO will “ravage” Macedonia and Montenegro: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201708241112403640-Makedonija-NATO-cena/> NATO no longer has a purpose: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201912021121269197-severna-makedonija-clanstvo-u-nato-u-placa-najskupljom-cenom/> Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Đaćić sending hate messages to Macedonian Albanians: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201705171111213713-makedonija-vlada-mandat-1/> North Macedonia will not join NATO any soon: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/regioni/201909031120745255-severna-makedonija-nece-skoro-u-nato/> Macedonia rejects both EU and NATO in referendum: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201810011117362210-makedonija-referendum/> The new Macedonian government will increasingly resemble Ustasha’s Croatian government, threatening peace and stability in the region: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201702271110192586-makedonija-vlada-nato-1/> Efforts to create “Greater Albania” have gained momentum: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/regioni/201809011117042744-Makedonija-NATO-rat/>

Corruption and abuse of institutions were the triggers for the 2015 and 2016 civil protests in Macedonia, against the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, President Gjorgje Ivanov and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The political change took place after the early parliamentary elections held on 11 December 2016, as the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia succeeded to form a coalition government. on late February 2017. Russian threats took place in critical moments during the change of government and the announcements of improving relations with neighbouring Greece. Russian actions in Macedonia turned out as more clumsy than the Sputnik-directed propaganda. The culmination of Russian interference took place on 27 April 2017, when the Serbian intelligence officer Goran Živaljević was exposed as a link in the chain of malignant influences of Serbian journalists, MPs, and intelligence officers.¹⁵ Around 200 demonstrators, many wearing masks, broke into parliament, attacking MPs in protest against the opposition Social Democrat party and others representing Albanian ethnic minority, and even wounded the opposition leader, Zoran Zaev.¹⁶

On May 31, 2017 the Macedonian parliament confirmed Zaev as the new Prime Minister. The Prespa Agreement was reached on 12 June 2018 between Greece and North Macedonia, concluding the 27-year name dispute. The Prespa agreement was ratified by the Macedonia's Parliament on 20 June. Opposition party VMRO-DPMNE boycotted the session and declared the Treaty as a "genocide of the legal state" and a "genocide of the entire nation". Political bots, organized trolling, disinformation, and hate speech on the referendum boycott campaign suggested an organized structure behind. Campaign was even related to the ruling party in Serbia, Serbian Progressive Party. The non-mandatory referendum was held on 30 September 2018, with voters asked whether they supported EU and NATO membership by accepting the Prespa agreement Despite 94% of voters voting in favour, voter turnout was

The EU is readily considering a US plan for the admission of a "united" Balkans under an accelerated procedure to the second EU echelon: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201608141107758848-eu-clanstvo-balkan-zajednica-amerika-srbija/>

¹⁵ Goran Živaljević had close contacts with the MP Ivan Stoiljkovic, and Miroslav Lazanski, a Serbian journalist, political analyst, and current appointed Ambassador of Serbia to the Russian Federation well known for his pro-Russian and anti-NATO attitudes. Lazanski frequently commended North Macedonia should not change its name to join NATO etc.

¹⁶ "Macedonia: protesters storm parliament and attack MPs." *The Guardian* (27. Apr. 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/27/macedonia-protesters-storm-parliament-and-attack-mps>; "Earlier this year five more people were added to the list of suspected organisers including former VMRO DPMNE Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who fled to Hungary in November 2018 to escape a two-year prison sentence for corruption" In "Heavy sentences handed down to North Macedonia parliament attackers." *EU-OSC* (March 19, 2019) <https://eu-ocs.com/heavy-sentences-handed-down-to-north-macedonia-parliament-attackers/>

around 37%, less than the 50% threshold required to validate the results (Kremlin Watch Program 2020, 17-27).

Pressures on Montenegro were deeply rooted in the starting points of the anti-western course adopted by Russia back in 1999.¹⁷ The final breakup of a state union with Serbia in 2006 it weakened Russia's strategic interests and discredited Serbia's rapprochement with Russia. Russia's presence in Montenegro was also based on historical closeness and the projections of Montenegro as an anchorage of Russian influence in South-eastern Europe, including access to the Mediterranean. An-

¹⁷ Russian state agency Sputnik took the most important role in the dissemination of fake news and diffamation campaigns. Sputnik (formerly The Voice of Russia and RIA Novosti) is a news agency, news website platform and radio broadcast service established by the Russian government-owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya. In Serbia and Republika Srpska Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sputnik is the central news agency backed by both governments, and a basic stronghold for pro-government media. From 2015, Sputnik campaigned vigorously against Montenegro's entry into EU and NATO and used mostly the statements of propagandists from Serbia. Professor at the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade, Miloš Bešić claimed that NATO integration of Montenegro is affecting deep divisions and that an unstable political solution is at stake: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201704281110970722-duboke-podele-crne-gore-i-makedonije-1/> A massive political resistance was announced, and the possibility that the next, or a future Parliament assembly would withdraw the decision to join NATO: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201704251110927133-sta-posle-ulaska-crne-gore-u-nato-/>

<https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201703291110561075-kako-ce-reagovati-opozicija-na-prijem-crne-gore-u-nato-/>

Montenegro's entry into NATO is an act of hostility towards Russia:

<https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201703281110549823-hoce-li-americka-vojska-uvuci-mila-u-nato-/>

Maybe Trump will distance Montenegro from joining NATO: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201703171110421915-hoce-li-crna-gora-docekati-prijem-u-nato1/>

Milo Đukanović introduces chaos into Montenegro:

<https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201704121110739351-crna-gora-nato-clanstvo-medojevic/>

It is possible that Montenegro will become the province of Greater Albania:

<https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201805221115686742-crna-gora-lazanski/>

The situation in Montenegro from the standpoint of EU standards from the chapters on Judiciary and Security, 23 and 24, is catastrophic: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201906041120010271-ek-crna-gora-napredak-/>

The EU has imposed entry into NATO. EU and NATO entry will trigger accelerated emigration of the working population: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201812181118197402-eu-nato-pristupanje-brzina-/>

USA will put Western Balkans under full control:

<https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201510251100556343-Crna-Gora-NATO-protest-policija-brutalnost/>

Support for the EU project is also falling in the Member States: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/201802131114536455-crna-gora-eu-clanstvo/>

Đukanović cannot be a part of a "final deal" with the EU: <https://rs.sputniknews.com/komentari/201809201117241931-milo-djukanovic-/>

other interesting moment became the fact that President of Montenegro Milo Đukanović remained is a single populist pro-EU and pro-NATO orientated. The levers of influence were also based on a vivid memory of the persecution of Montenegrin Stalinists in communist Yugoslavia since 1948. Subsequent pro-Stalinist generations remained close to the Kremlin and Belgrade, but also to the Serbian Orthodox Church as an exponent of conservative and belligerent politics.¹⁸

Russian pressures have grown right after declaration of Montenegro independence in 2006, as Serbia also became more and more pro-Russian, and the first outgrowths of European populism were emerging. Campaign of pressures, defamation and disqualification were also possible due to the growing weaknesses of EU diplomatic missions in the region. Montenegro is the only example that maintaining the commitment to the EU, and the success of NATO accession, were the results of populism. Montenegro has succeeded precisely thanks to the populist leadership that was not willing to retreat while facing the Russia's pressure and public opinion (Kremlin Watch Program 2020, 29-39).¹⁹ Moreover, the events have not been short of a serious drama. Large anti-government protests began in mid-October 2015, organized by opposition coalition Democratic Front, and escalated with large riots in Podgorica on October 24, 2015. Russian TV channels covering the protests were adding the anti-NATO comments. By then it was already uncovered that the Democratic Front leaders have taken trips to Russia and been supported by Russia to varying degrees. Montenegro has accused the Russian Federation of meddling in the 2016 parliamentary elections by attempting to violently overthrow the Government through the Democratic Front. "On the Election Day, on October 16, the Montenegrin security services arrested 20 Serbian nationals who were suspected of organizing a plot to prevent the election of a pro-NATO government, and possibly assassinate the-then Prime Minister, Milo Đukanović. The former Serbian Prime Minister and now-President Aleksandar Vučić himself later acknowledged the plot, even presented further evidence, and offered his cooperation to the Montenegrin Special Prosecution. The indictment for this case charged 14 people, including Andrija Man-

¹⁸ The ties of Serbian and Montenegrin nationalists with the Serbian Orthodox Church and circles in Russia that sought to stem the collapse of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism, were established immediately after the outbreak of conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. The last Minister of Defence in the Yugoslav government, from 1988, general Veljko Kadijević, and his aide general Vuk Obradović, visited Moscow in March of 1991, and it was assumed that the purpose was to request help from the USSR for a planned JNA coup. The defeat of the Soviet hardliners and Russia's subsequent independence opened a period of weak Russian influence in the region.

¹⁹ Public opinion polls have showed that Russia is more popular than the US or EU (47 % of Montenegrin citizens thought that the Russian military is a superior force to NATO, and only 37 % that NATO has the advantage) (Kremlin Watch Program 2020, 29-39).

dić and Milan Knežević. The trial for coup attempt was live broadcasted and attracted enormous media attention. After 19 months of trial all accused were found guilty at the first instance court in May 2019. Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević were each sentenced to five years in prison". Russia was even accused of organising plot to assassinate the Prime Minister (Zorić 2017, 11; Kremlin Watch Program 2019, 7).

Montenegro joined the NATO on 5 June 2017, and remained the most successful state in the negotiation process with the EU. North Macedonia joined the NATO on 27 March 2020.

Summary and Epilogue

The weaknesses in EU foreign and security policy, after 2008, and obviously since 2012, enabled Russia to establish three points of strategic pressure in response to EU and NATO enlargement in Eastern and South-eastern Europe: Baltic, Ukraine and Western Balkans. Simultaneously, Russia affected gradual rejection of the EU values and standards in the Visegrád Group states. Every major populist movement in EU member states enjoys the official Russian support and assistance. Russia failed only in the Baltic states. Russia annexed Crimea, divided Ukraine and partially plunged Turkey into its sphere of interest in the Middle East (Balta 2019, 69-86). Using an increasingly obvious affection of Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission from November 2014 to November 2019, Russia successfully affected the "freezing" of the Kosovo conflict, obstructing the process of consolidation of the former Yugoslav federal units at a point that promised the continued duration of unfinished states (Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Aleksandar Vučić's populist regime in Serbia has become the stronghold of Russia and China in South-eastern Europe. In Western Balkans, as in Ukraine, and previously in the Caucasus region, unfinished conflict and unfinished state building is eventually promising new ethnic and religious conflicts, similar to those that led to the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Russia's hybrid war against the EU in South-eastern Europe has paved the road to the growing influences of China and Turkey. The character of these influences was in accordance with the character of their regimes, as in the case of Russia. The EU has not been able to sanction destructive political influences brought about by new economic relations. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative started right from South-eastern Europe, and the project counted on the support of regional populists, followed by the Visegrád Group states. The Belt and Road Initiative became another Trojan horse within the EU, bringing corruptive arrangements in relation with infrastructure investments, and also exports of dirty technologies, and exports of surveillance and monitoring and eavesdropping technologies. Turkey focused its influ-

ence primarily on Balkan Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo, but also concluded non-transparent, corrupt agreements with other Western Balkans states. Exports of political influence to the South-eastern Europe have especially acquired malignant elements following the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016.

Russia's relations with the EU and the EU candidate states were focused on by supporting populist leaders and movements. After the 2016 US presidential elections, Donald Trump's anti-EU rhetoric has become additional support for Russian influence. The rapprochement between Trump and Putin has already been hinted as revealed in Cambridge Analytics affair.²⁰ Since the beginnings of EU the US policy has not been so antagonistic. The EU was left alone, and deprived of its own reliable leadership.

Populists have been the dominant force of political influence and government decisions in Southeast Europe since 2016. The power of populism grew as the legacy of communism, as the societies were facing the challenges of transition and European integration, transforming into nationalism, supported by clerical forces. Russia was using the disappointments of the post-communist transition, the religious influence of the Orthodox Church, and the crisis in the EU. The disintegration of Yugoslavia is still ongoing, based on a general denial of the idea of possible coexistence in cultural differences. From a populist perspective, tolerance, the communities of cultures, nationalities and races, are perceived as a cultural disorder of a united Europe. Populists began to condemn the right to cultural pluralism, and the separation of the public sphere from the private, as a rejection of tradition and collective identity. Populism has also imposed itself as a seductive alternative to any individual political or economic responsibility. In the postmodern reality, the need for protection, belonging, recognition, respect, becomes increasingly clear in the depths of society. Originating in relativisation syndrome of postmodern philosophy, post-truth is a system of illusions that release the individual from individual responsibilities. Such means were used by national populists and the Russian propaganda. Populists and Kremlin also counted on a new middle class dissatisfied with the pace of economic growth and social emancipation.

Expertise or scientific debates on populism as a symptom, and executive form of democratic regression and, in particular, an applied shape of Russia's influence, may credible views on European unity, its moral and identity grounds. European

²⁰ "In December of 2016, President Obama announced that he had signed Executive orders targeting Russian intelligence services in retaliation for harassment of American diplomats in Russia and, specifically, the meddling of the 2016 US Presidential election.⁹ The FBI and DHS released a joint statement that said that they were confident that the Russian government used cyber means to meddle in the US Presidential election" (Shuya 2018, 3).

values, based on cosmopolitanism, openness, diversity, with a strong focus on individualism, are becoming too complex to understand and apply, in comparison to simple solutions offered by populists. Populists also offer seductive alternatives to any individual political or economic responsibility. In postmodern reality, the need for collectivity, for singular and authoritarian leadership has fully arisen, for protection, belonging, recognition, appreciation. In their clash with liberalism populists play on feelings of hurt and insecurity. Extreme right-wing or left-wing voters are not always poorer than average, but the new middle classes are also dissatisfied with the pace of economic growth, with relative inequality and social emancipation. Putin has thus enforced new class conflicts, within the same social layers as economic differences no longer significantly affect the quality of life. It can be assumed that populism, new totalitarian tendency of the twenty-first century, becomes successful precisely in the absence of historical precedents, with the exception of remembrances of twentieth-century totalitarianisms, and those memories fade as they vanish in time.

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