

***Russian soft power in the Balkans:  
Bosnia and Serbia, two states in comparison***

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## Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the two blocks world, the Russian way of dealing with international politics changed completely. If during Cold War, a certain degree of “control” and “balance” could be retraced in international relations, after 1990 the confusion brought by the birth of new national states, led to the creation of new means of control. Soft power was a strategy, already used by the USA, for indirectly influencing the political issues of a specific country. Throughout those last 20 years Russia mastered the art of soft power, adapting it to its political structure.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Balkan region represented for Russia a buffer zone between East and West, an area where it is possible to employ a certain degree of influence since it's free from soviet legacies. Here, the post-soviet giant can count on societal and cultural links and to a certain degree on trade. Even if in the last two years Russia has been busy on other fronts, Putin's country never stopped being interested in the region, keeping investments low, but political and cultural connections high.

Superficially, in the international arena the Balkan region is not anymore that important area which used to be in the 90s and the early 2000s. Middle-east and Asia look more attractive as controversial rivals to the Western political powers. Nevertheless, the relevance of the region should not be underestimated.

At the moment, the two main supporters of the region, the USA and the EU seem both too taken by their internal problems. Europe is indeed losing its attractiveness because of its own crisis and above all after Juncker's statement about no chances of enlargement in the next 5 years<sup>1</sup>, postponing the process to 2025. On the other side, there are Turkey and Russia. Turkey, with its *neo-Ottoman* foreign policy, is playing a great role in the area, offering a new authoritarian model. Russia, also exploiting this vacuum left by the West, is trying to affirm its influence, mainly using the Orthodox Church ties and weapons trade.

The most affected countries are Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina: in different ways, approaches and perspectives, but they are the ones Russia is looking to in strengthening its position in the region, above all after Montenegro's NATO accession. Hence, the research is going to focus on the comparison between Russian interference in Serbia, always considered a great ally with shared roots and traditions, and BiH where Russian presence is peculiar, through a direct impact on the Serb and Croat political leaders.

In the first paragraph, the Russian conception of soft power will be faced, for having an overall vision of Russian strategy in the region. In the second paragraph, Russian material chances will be explained, investigating Western projects in Serbia and BiH, their implications and dynamics, as far

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<sup>1</sup>Radosavljevic Z., *Juncker waves 'credible EU prospects' at Balkans, but no fast membership*, Euractive. Com, published September 13, 2017, last updated October 5, 2017, accessed on February 2, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/juncker-waves-credible-eu-prospects-at-balkans-but-no-fast-membership/>.

as the vacuums left by the West and Russia's way to exploit them. Serbian and BiH relations with Russia will be investigated, making an excursus to the historical links between those single countries and the former Soviet giant. Energy security and its limits in the region, will be examined too, trying to understand Russian strategy in the area, but underlining its real possibilities. In the end, all the aforementioned elements will contribute to answer to the questions at the core of this research: How have Russian political attitudes towards the two realities changed in these last years? Which are the main instruments Russia is using for interfering in Bosnian and Serbian political affairs? To what extent could this influence work in order to keep the two countries outside of the EU and NATO?

## Russian Foreign policy and its attempts to cover the vacuum: an outline of its strategy

According to J.N. Nye's definition, soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced."<sup>2</sup> Soft power mainly follows three paths for affirming itself: culture, political values and foreign policy. Russia exploited this *weapon*, adapting it to use it in its foreign policy.

The peculiarity of soft power is given by the fact that others feel attracted by something which they like or which they perceive as socially or culturally close, it implies that there are no enemies to defeat or resistances to be overcome. Throughout the decades, the concept has been subjected to variations and amplifications and there is still not a comprehensive definition for it. Traditionally, Russia has always been considered as a "hard power" country, mainly focused on its external and internal military strength. The relevance of soft power has been retraced after 2004, when numerous countries of the post-soviet space experienced the "coloured revolutions", at which point Kremlin realised the potential effectiveness of soft power.<sup>3</sup> Van Harpen clarifies and explains how under Russian rule this doctrine has been subjected to an adaptation, following three main changes<sup>4</sup>:

- If according to Nye, soft power could be employed both by society and state, in its Russian version it is relying completely on the state. This latter, through public diplomacy has the task of influencing foreign governments and public opinion.
- In its original version, multiple soft powers can coexist, but in the Russian version, the aim is to nullify other soft powers.
- The third reduction consists in its being part of a "hard power game", including even espionage and illegal activities within soft power instruments.

Several times, Vladimir Putin gave definitions of soft power, including them in his manifesto of foreign policy strategy. In 2012, in the *Moskovskie Novosti*, he mentioned soft power as the use of information and cultural links, as a part of a bigger hard power strategy.<sup>5</sup> Another document, *Basic Guidelines Concerning the Policy of the Russian Federation in the Sphere of International Cultural-Humanitarian Cooperation*<sup>6</sup>, cites the special role covered by culture in Russian foreign policy strategy.

So, if soft power represents a key point in Russian strategy, it is necessary to underline the key aim of it. In a world ruled by uncertainties and devoid of ideologies which lead international relations,

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<sup>2</sup> Nye S. N. Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1990, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> Van Harpen M. H., *Putin's Propaganda machine. Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Putin V., *Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir*, *Moskovskie Novosti*, February 7, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> *Osnovnye napravleniya politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v sfere mezhdunarodnogo kulturno-gumanitarnogo sotrudnichestva*, January, 2010.

the way of relating with other states merely depends on interests and profit. Often, national and supra national institutions find themselves in a situation of inability to cover the commitments which the international society requests. Since the impossibility of materially subjugating new territories and political realities (at least after Crimea annexation), Russia, being outside of these dynamics, acquired the tendency to fill those vacuums left by traditional international relations assets by exploiting the weaknesses of the international system.

This short overview frames the context of Russian interest in BiH and Serbia. If on one side, the weapon of soft power is used *a priori* for expanding influence, on the other side in these last years, Russian political adversaries left it space for implementing its strategy in the Balkan region.

### EU and NATO strategies in the Balkans

The relations of BiH and Serbia with NATO follow two different paths. Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian President and former Prime Minister, many times declared of not being interested in a possible Serbian NATO membership. Those statements were sometimes severe and recalled the bombing experience of 1999, when the alliance intervened harshly against Belgrade.<sup>7</sup> The last assertion on the topic can be dated to December 2017, when, with calmer tones, Vučić confirmed Serbian neutrality and its intention of not joining the transatlantic alliance.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Serbia never neglected its cooperation with NATO, with which it held some military training, participating in the “Winter 2017” exercise. NATO secured cooperation with Serbia in 2006, the latter joining the Partnership for Peace Program and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council; in 2015 the cooperation deepened thanks to the establishment of an Individual Partnership Action Plan.<sup>9</sup>

BiH, on its side, is willing to join NATO and is participating in some of its missions (Afghanistan). The country joined the Partnership for Peace Program in 2006 and it has been invited to activate the Membership Action Plan, pending a resolution overcoming immovable defence property.<sup>10</sup> In November 2017, NATO representatives visited Sarajevo and strengthened their relations with Bosnian Defence Ministry, discussing Bosnian Membership Action Plan developments and the Alliance operations supported by the country. Nevertheless, the situation is not simple as it looks. Prior to the visit, in October, the National Assembly of *Republika Srpska*, adopted a resolution standing its neutrality in military issues and its will of respecting and following Serbian policies on the topic. The resolution, legally, cannot compromise Bosnian political will to join NATO, but it can postpone its accession bringing further destabilisation in the region. The Butmir base, NATO’s Bosnian headquarters and EUFOR office must also be mentioned. *Republika Srpska*, claiming its

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<sup>7</sup> Vučić: *Serbia will never join NATO*, in Serbia Today, March 25, 2017, accessed on February 6, 2018, <https://inserbia.info/today/2017/03/Vučić-serbia-will-never-join-nato/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Serbia eyes buying more Russian military helicopters*, TASS- Russian news agency, December 8, 2017, accessed on February 6, 2018, <http://tass.com/world/979924>.

<sup>9</sup> *Relations with Serbia*, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, December 11, 2017, accessed on February 6, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics\\_50100.htm..](https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_50100.htm..)

<sup>10</sup> *Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina*, North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, June 23, 2017, accessed on February 6, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49127.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49127.htm).

neutrality *de facto*, is ignoring the presence of NATO offices on its soil, since the Butmir base is halved by the entity border. Also, in mid-December, *Republika Srpska's* President Milorad Dodik, stated that in any case he will not support BiH NATO membership, since the alliance will favour just Bosniaks, he will do everything in his power to impede the future Bosnian accession.<sup>11</sup>

In a recent interview, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov<sup>12</sup> affirmed that the Alliance broke the gentleman's agreement on NATO's non-proliferation and now is trying to "invade" the Balkans. The West is accused of having preferred a NATO expansion to a European Cooperation security structure, disregarding all those promises made in the 90s about not enlarging NATO Eastern flanks. Lavrov also said that Eastern Partnership has been implemented on the basis of being with Russia or EU, in a point of view of a zero sum game. Russia never tried to jeopardize Balkan countries relations with the West, this latter on the contrary is proceeding exactly on this path, according to Lavrov. A possible NATO enlargement would imply a destabilisation in the European security landscape, re-affirming a situation datable back to more than 50 years ago, the world divided in two spheres, which in Lavrov's opinion is unrealistic and dangerous. In the end, the positive relevance of EU membership is underlined as something Russia could benefit from, bringing economic and political stability in the region and so improving ties between Russia, the region and EU.

On February 6, 2018, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, together with Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, outlined the strategy the EU will follow in order to guarantee Western Balkan countries accession in 2025.<sup>13</sup> Both of them stated that the region is geographically and traditionally part of Europe, and that the moment for membership in the EU has finally come. Serbia is a front runner in the EU race (candidate since 2014), but it is mandatory to solve its issues with Kosovo and stabilise its relations with Pristina before the potential accession and to negotiate through 37 chapters.

BiH applied for becoming candidate in 2016 but it seems that the country needs a long period of recover and development implementation before its membership could be taken into account. In the Western Balkans enlargement implementation strategy the publication of an Opinion about BiH status of candidate has been announced as soon as BiH answers to the Questionnaire.

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<sup>11</sup> Kovacevic D., *Bosnia Serbs Vow to Block NATO Accession Plan*, BalkanInsight, December 15, 2017, accessed on February 6, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosnia-serbs-oppose-nato-acession-bid-12-15-2017>.

<sup>12</sup> Zorani Bojic Sisojeva B., *Lavrov: Ako Srbi podrže zahteve EU to je onda izbor naroda*, b92, February 19, 2018, accessed on February 19, 2018.

[https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=19&nav\\_category=11&nav\\_id=1360292](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=02&dd=19&nav_category=11&nav_id=1360292)

<sup>13</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Region- A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, European Commission, Strasbourg, February 6, 2018, accessed on February 6, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf).

In a recent analysis carried out by the *Moscow Times*<sup>14</sup> Bechev stated that EU holds more cards than NATO into attracting Serbia and BiH in its sphere. As stated, Serbia being a front runner in EU's new potential enlargement, the Union engagement strategy could work better than NATO and US remarks on Serbian-Russian links. Furthermore it seems that Russia has no long-term strategy in the region, rather mainly depending on the different situations throughout the area; the Russian strategy is based on *ad hoc* solutions which change from occasion to occasion and from political context to political context.

The countries of the region, according to the EU strategy, have to make a lot of efforts for stabilising the rule of law (often institutions are too much linked to organised crime and are affected by corruption), security and migration issues should be also clarified as far as a turning point to the reconciliation process should be guaranteed. Materially, efforts have to be made for improving infrastructure and energy connectivity, digital agenda (decreasing roaming costs for instance) and bringing social development favouring SMEs and start-ups. So while on one side Serbia undertook the right path towards EU, but is always too much in the Russian sphere, on the other side, BiH is initiating a long journey towards EU, which probably would not end in 2025, since its position as candidate must still be evaluated by the Commission.

#### Serbian-Russian brotherhood is standing on the way of EU integration

Historically, Russia is considered the protector of Serbia. From the XVI century until Tito's era, the relations between the two countries flourished, fostered by the shared Orthodox cult. The Yugoslavian implosion in the 90s offered Russia an important chance. It had to reshape its relations with the West, its political path and find its place in the post-Cold War order. But for the political actors at the time, it looked like the old brotherhood between the two realities never fell. Nevertheless, at the beginning Russia mainly followed the "West" decisions posing itself as a mediator between Serbia and the Western Powers. According to Kazyrev (Russian Foreign Minister at the time) "it [was] not a coincidence that our Western partners appeal[ed] to Russia as a privileged interlocutor to Belgrade", adding that his diplomatic team did "everything so that the lawful interests of Serbs and Serbia [were] fulfilled."<sup>15</sup>

Russia played its cards in a way to achieve Contact Group membership and to support all the resolutions linked to the Balkan crisis during that period. Its line was based on the principle that Serbia was not the only responsible and that Moscow has to be a mandatory participant of the resolutions, otherwise they would not be feasible. Concerning the Kosovo issue, the situation was quite different since it damaged Russian relations with the West and NATO. Russia always supported Serbian national integrity and strongly condemned NATO intervention in Belgrade, although maintaining its collaborative behaviour.

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<sup>14</sup> Bechev D., The Balkans — Between Russia and the West (Op-ed), The Moscow Times, November 23, 2017, accessed on February the 16, 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/the-balkans-between-russia-and-the-west-59677>.

<sup>15</sup> Kozыrev A., *Preobrazhenie*, Moscow: Mezhdunarodnie otnosheniia, 1995, p. 121.



The Balkan scenario showed the ambivalent attitudes towards the region. If on one side it was able to show Russian will of overcoming political disputes with the West. On the other, it demonstrated how delicate it can be to deal with such a controversial situation. Russian friendship has been used by Milosevic for his own interests. Nevertheless, the military withdrawal from Kosovo and BiH reshaped Russian attitudes in the area. With the beginning of the 2000s, the region looked at the EU and the West as potential allies, leaving little framework for Russian interference. The post-Soviet giant at that point started to watch back to the EU and the USA fostering its relations with them. But once in 2004 the Kosovo situation gained new attention, until its declaration of independence, the relations between Russia and Serbia came to the ancient glories. In its dual political attitude, towards Russia and the EU, Serbia voted a declaration of military neutrality in 2007<sup>16</sup>, just one year after having joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program. In the end, the Ukrainian crisis brought to a reshape of Serbian attitudes towards Russia, as it has to balance its position between Russia, NATO and the EU.

Political closeness is not the only weapon used by Russia in the area. As aforementioned, references to the common Orthodox and Slavic roots are at the core of Russian strategy in Serbia. The Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies in Belgrade mapped more than 100 organisations referring to Russian roots, culture, traditions and brotherhood in Serbia.<sup>17</sup> Their main aim is to influence public opinion and to promote Russian-Serbian relations. It is possible to count within them, associations for Russian citizens, students' organisations, political movements, cultural centres, internet portals and Russian media sources.

The Russian way to exploit soft power in Serbia is driven by different measures: intensive bilateral relations at the highest level, strong cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian one, media outlets and the mentioned associations. Most of these organisations are claiming a suspension of Serbian European integration, expressing nationalistic aims. The structure of these organisations revealed a lack of transparency in fund management, as they try to advocate non-democratic achievements, inattention for rule of law and separation of powers. Moreover, pro-Kremlin propaganda permeated the whole part of the Serbian media, reaching directly the public opinion. The same is trying to discredit the relations between EU and the former-Warsaw Pact countries. Russian media in the region claim how those countries, having no alternative at the time, have been almost forced by the situation to accede the EU.

A poll made by IPSOS<sup>18</sup> in 2015 shows the damages made by this kind of propaganda in the country where 94%<sup>19</sup> of the interviewed thought that Serbia would benefit more from a long-term relation with Russia, which for 63%<sup>20</sup> is the best partner for supporting Serbian interests. On the reasons behind these attitudes towards Russia people were divided, 23% thought to their Orthodox roots, for the 20% Russia represents the only opposition to West, and another 20% circa,

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<sup>16</sup> Bechev D., *Rival power: Russia in the Southeast Europe*, Yale University Press, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Eyes wide shut- Strengthening of Russian soft-power in Serbia*, Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, May 2016.

<sup>18</sup> *Survey of Serbian Public Opinion*, USAID- Centre for Insight Research- IPSOS, November-December 2015.

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, p. 22.

saw it as the historical “protector” of Serbia. The positive attitudes towards the West are mainly concerning lifestyle, music and fashion, when it comes to politics and military issues they are mostly pro-Russian.<sup>21</sup>

For reinforcing the formal alliance and the mutual support between the two countries, in Summer 2015, Russia voted against the UN resolution which classified Srebrenica as a genocide, justifying this behaviour claiming a potential further aggravation of the precarious situation in the Balkans.

Trade, which between 2009 and 2014 almost doubled,<sup>22</sup> passing from \$1'102.7 million dollars to \$2'123.0, is also an indirect way of influencing Serbian politics. Joint military exercises entitled *Brotherhood of Aviators of Russia and Serbia* and *Slavic Brotherhood* have been held in 2015/16/17<sup>23</sup>. In 2016, Russia provided Serbia six MiG-29 aircrafts, 30 T-72 tanks and 30 BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance vehicles.

In the end Serbia did not support EU sanctions towards Russia, maintaining its position of friendship and alliance. This is confirmed by another recent event: in mid-December UN General Assembly voted a resolution for denouncing Human Rights crimes in Crimea and in the city of Sevastopol<sup>24</sup>, in this occasion Serbia stood with Russia against the resolution. In the same period, Ukrainian agency Unian<sup>25</sup> reported the presence of Serbian mercenaries fighting alongside Russian separatists.

The question of the possibility that Serbia is using Russian influence for pushing the EU to fasten its enlargement provisions arises. The answer to it can be partially positive: fruitful ties with Russia can be used as a diversion for distracting the EU from other “hot” topics, like media freedom and state capture. Vice-versa it cannot be stated that the EU intentions for enlargement are coming from a Russian fear, enlargement had always had different drivers behind and a potential EU membership is considered much less dangerous than NATO accession.

### Russian strategy in BiH: strengthening decentralisation for destabilising the state

In BiH, the closest force to Russia is represented by *Republika Srpska* (RS), more specifically Moscow's fruitful relation with Dodik, a long-lasting relation, considered in the international political arena as destabilising for BiH stability and integration. The relations boomed when Milorad Dodik begun his political ascent, first as Prime Minister (2006-10) and then as President of

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<sup>21</sup> *Eyes wide shut- Strengthening of Russian soft-power in Serbia...op.cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Aghayev E., *Relations between Russia and Serbia*, The Independent International Political Research Center, April 11, 2017, accessed on February 1, 2018, <http://www.iiprc.org/relations-between-russia-and-serbia.html>.  
<http://www.iiprc.org/relations-between-russia-and-serbia.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Jacob L. P., *NATO arc of crisis- Keys to Understanding Russia's Relationship with Serbia*, NAOC-NATO Association for Canada, December 1, 2017, accessed on February 12, 2018, <http://natoassociation.ca/keys-to-understanding-russias-relationship-with-serbia/>.

<sup>24</sup> Zivanovic M., *Serbia stands by Russia at UN on Crimea Resolution*, Balkan Insight, December 20, 2017, accessed on February 7, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-back-russia-on-crimea-at-un-12-20-2017>.

<sup>25</sup> *ATO HQ: Group of Serbian snipers reportedly arrives in Donbas*, December 19, 2017, accessed on February 7, 2018 <http://www.unian.info/war/2306059-ato-hq-group-of-serbian-snipers-reportedly-arrives-in-donbas.html>.

RS. The Moscow seat at the Peace Implementation Council has been indispensable for Dodik into facing the US and EU attempts for centralising BiH power. Before this period there were not so many divergences between Russia and the West on the Bosnian issue; the former also supported the introduction of the Bonn-powers in 1997 which established that the Office of the High Representative (OHR)<sup>26</sup> could undertake binding decisions when the local administration was unable to deal with the problem and could remove public officers guilty of having violated Dayton agreements conditions. Actually, Russia used EU potential integration for asking a reduction of the work of OHR, claiming that its actions could block BiH improvement and development in rule of law, separation of powers and human rights. The main idea of Moscow was to replace the OHR with EU representatives.<sup>27</sup> The strategy from that moment mainly concerned the autonomy of the Serb-dominated part of BiH, *Republika Srpska*. This strategy entails that Russia provides support to Dodik's political decisions and sides his position against the West. During repeated claims made by Dodik to hold a referendum for independence of *Republika Srpska*, Russia stayed in the middle avoiding taking part to the dispute. Russian intentions came to the light during the Ukrainian crisis, shown through the provisions that have concerned both foreign policy and internal issues:

- In late 2014 Russia abstained during the UN Security Council voting on the extension EUFOR Althea mission.
- One year after, it opposed to the UN Resolution on the genocide in Srebrenica.
- The third move, the "internal" one, concerns Dodik's visit to Kremlin in 2014. Putin warmly supported his candidacy for *Republika Srpska* President. Furthermore, in 2015 Dodik announced a referendum on the authority of the National Court, and in the occasion Russian ambassador in Sarajevo refused to join the Peace Implementation Council to stop the referendum. Another episode of interference is dated back to fall 2016, when Dodik tried to call into question the decisions of BiH Constitutional Court: three days before Dodik was spotted in Moscow for meeting Putin.

The *Republika Srpska* and Moscow axis can seriously jeopardise BiH affiliation to the West, threatening its European integration and NATO membership. This latter is particularly obstructed by Banja Luka which, as mentioned, last October voted a resolution against BiH NATO membership claiming its neutrality consequent to the Serbian one.<sup>28</sup>

Anyway, *Republika Srpska* is not the only Russian ally in BiH. The Bosnian Croat leadership maintained good relations with Russia. In this way they can avoid backing Bosniaks and Serbs trying to earn more concessions from the central state. Last year, Čović<sup>29</sup>, leader of the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH and Member of the Presidency of BiH, stressed how the Croatian community in the country needs to deepen and strengthen its ties with Russia, and claimed the relevance of guaranteeing equality to the three communities in BiH political system. Čović's

<sup>26</sup> The Office of the High Representative was established by Dayton agreements- 1995 in order to master their implementation.

<sup>27</sup> Bechev D., *Rival power: Russia in the Southeast Europe...op.cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Katana G., Zuvella M, Sito-Susic D., Lawrence J., *Bosnia's Serb region declares neutrality in bid to block NATO membership*, Reuters, October 18, 2017, accessed on February 8, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-serbs/bosnias-serb-region-declares-neutrality-in-bid-to-block-nato-membership-idUSKBN1CN1F5>.

<sup>29</sup> Bechev. D., *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe...op.cit.*, p. 82.

political role is backed by Croatian ruling party HDZ, which is pushing its sister party, HDZ BiH, to foster the relations with the Kremlin for achieving more autonomy at a state level.

The situation here is much more controversial, if HDZ BiH, is expressing Croatian nationalism in the BiH, maintaining a certain degree of political correctness, nowadays its dynamics are darker than ever. The two sister-parties work in two different ways. The HDZ in Croatia always stood against Russia, developing long-term relations with EU, NATO and Washington, for counterbalancing Russian relation with Serbia. HDZ BiH instead, is pursuing a closer relation with Russia, overcoming those dynamics which always characterised the political assets in the country. Dodik and Čović cooperate against Sarajevo, in an aim to affirm their will in the country. Čović follows Dodik's example and the moves he makes, all with the aim to establish a "third entity"<sup>30</sup>, which would be majority Croat. Čović is essential for its Serbian counter-part in a way to block BiH Central Government attempts to build a homogeneous and administrative efficient state.

Hence, Russia is exploiting this situation claiming for Bosnian-Croatian self-determination. The traditional hostility between Russia and Croatia has been put aside for shared reasons. The new path and interference of Russia in this field has been possible thanks to the political crisis Croatia is currently experiencing. Economically, the biggest Croatian company *Agrokor* has a huge amount of debt towards the Russian *Sberbank*, and this means that given *Agrokor* closeness to failure, the company could shift in Russian hands in the nearest future. Consequently Croatia is at the moment closer to Russia more than ever.

The dualist Russian interest in BiH devoted to strengthen Serbs and Croats and aiming to pursue the self-determination path for them, risks compromising BiH alignment with NATO and EU. The convergence between an increasing Russian interference and the elections in October 2018 could really bring more destabilisation to the already divided country.

#### US Vision on Russian soft power in the region

In a recent dossier, prepared by the US Department of the State and the Pentagon<sup>31</sup>, for supporting the US Committee of Foreign Relations into dealing with Russian Soft Power, Putin's relations with Serbia and with Semi-Consolidated Democracies are well explained. Beyond the stress on the cultural ties, propaganda, energy issues and the defence relations, what is really relevant in the Department analysis is Serbian dichotomy between Russia and the West. If on one side EU membership has been declared as a real chance in the close future, on the other side the application of EU principles in Serbian political environment could be counterproductive for its relations with Russia. Some EU decisions potentially followed by Serbia could face Russian disappointment. Nevertheless, what is more reflecting the aforementioned dichotomy are Serbian

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<sup>30</sup> Mujanovic J., *Russia's Bosnia gambit*, Foreign Affairs, September 6, 2017, accessed on February 8, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2017-09-06/russias-bosnia-gambit>.

<sup>31</sup> Minority Staff Report, *Putin's asymmetric assault on democracy in Russia and Europe: implications for U.S. national security*, U.S. Governmental Publishing Office, January 2018.

attitudes towards EU political positions on Russia: the former never backed EU's sanctions towards the latter, and given its close ties it is plausible to say that Serbia will keep not fostering them in the future, creating an uncomfortable "space" between itself and EU. Paradoxically, Serbia being the Balkan country closest to EU is also the closest to Russia.<sup>32</sup>

According to Financial Times<sup>33</sup> Sputnik provides stories and news to approximately 20 Radio and TV channels in Serbia, and response from the West has been scarce on this matter, just BBC decided to come back in the country in the next months of 2018. At the same time, press freedom seemed to be declined in the last years, as reported by *Freedom House*<sup>34</sup>.

In BiH, even if the situation cannot be defined similar, it is possible to state that Russian pressures on *Republika Srpska* have been able to destabilise Government Foreign Policy issues. The referendum held by Dodik last October, if not binding, puts at risk the credibility of the state government to the eyes of Western organisations. Putin met Dodik several times; on the contrary he never met officially state government representatives.

Even if the Western perspective of BiH policy has been stated its alignment to EU Foreign Policies issues cannot be given for granted. From an analysis of the last years (2014-17) it emerges that BiH did not support more than 20 EU declarations about Russian behaviour in Ukraine and the cyber attacks which according to EU Russia is carrying out.<sup>35</sup> BiH positions at the moment are much closer to the Serbian ones. So probably, in a subtle way, Russia is actually interfering, or at least is able to confuse the BiH State Government.

However, the USA has itself participated in creating a vacuum allowing Russian interference. This is due to the unclear USA intentions about the Alliance. At the moment in fact, the USA do not seem really interested in the Alliance future. It seems they want to keep it alive and strong, as they asked European members to increase their military spending and they were not enthusiast of the potential EU defence program; anyway this should not represent a possible burden on USA's way of making foreign policy, and given the tense relations between Moscow and Washington in the last period, eventually this is what a NATO enlargement would represent.

### Energy Issue: a weapon of soft-power

The main characteristic of the region lies in the infrastructures still dated back to the 60s/70s with standardised Eastern Block technological patterns. It is also necessary to consider that the number of pipelines (both for gas and oil) is not enough for the general national demand. BiH has for instance just one transportation system, which was part of a bigger system during the Yugoslav

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<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> Byrne A. , *Kremlin backed media adds to Western fears in Balkans*, Financial Times, March 19, 2017, accessed on February the 16, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press 2017: Serbia*, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Hadžović D., *Where is the foreign policy of Bosnia and Herzegovina shaped?- Press Release*, Centre For Security Studies-BiH, February 7, 2018, accessed on February 16, 2018.

period. This shortage of infrastructures brings to the energy problems also retraced by the International Energy Agency<sup>36</sup>, namely the inadequate access to energy services, the lack of reliable supply of energy and an inefficient use of energy.

BiH, even having a low import percentage (38%)<sup>37</sup> for coal and hydropower, is 100% dependent on Russia for natural gas, which arrives in the country passing through a single pipeline, while from Croatia, Serbia and Hungary it takes oil. In the same way Serbian dependency import is low too (40%)<sup>38</sup>, but it is depending on foreign oil and natural gas storage at 85%.

Russia is the dominant gas and oil supplier in Serbia led by *Gazprom*, and its companies cover a relevant role in economic term in the area strongly affecting its economy and dependence. Serbia produces oil in small quantity, but is fully dependent on Russia for gas, as said for BiH. This means that throughout BiH and Serbia it is possible to find networks of financial interests in the energy sector which could severely affect even political arena. This is due to a structural lack of diversification in energy suppliers. Even though both the countries are dependent on gas imports, the oil sector has to be mentioned too. *Gazprom Neft*, a subsidiary of *Gazprom*, is within the leader oil companies in Serbia after having acquired *Nafta Industrija Srbije* (NIS) in 2008. In BiH instead, during Dodik presidency many attempts of privatisation have been undertaken, privatisation which involved a great amount of FDI. Dodik, in this case allowed the Russian company *OAQ-Zarubhezneft* to acquire Modrica (*Republika Srpska*) oil refinery together with several petrol stations. This manoeuvre permitted Russian economic expansion in the BiH energy sector, expansion which skyrocketed the trade deficit between Russian and BiH without increasing the exports quota, affecting just the imports one.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, for the amount of gas pipelines in the region, and although this latter closeness to Russia, those countries are paying *Gazprom* monopoly a premium. According to a report by the European Commission analysed by Bechev<sup>40</sup> they pay 16% more compared to other European countries.

Russian power in the regional energy sector allows the country to employ co-option to government and national companies offering better contractual conditions, promising the improvement and development of infrastructures and economic advantages. These were the commitments behind the construction of South Stream corridor. But Russian real interest was to foster its dominance in the area trying to further distance EU request of energetic stability and reforms claimed in the Third Energy Package.<sup>41</sup> The package consisted in two main normative provisions: the first one and the most important, established the separation of companies' generation and sale operations from their transmission network (this clause was called *Gazprom*

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<sup>36</sup> *Energy in the Western Balkans- The Path to reform and reconstruction*, International Energy Agency, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi*, p. 171.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 319.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas M., Bojicic- Dzelilovic V., *Public Policy Making in the Western Balkans- Case studies of selected Economic and Social Policy reforms*, Springer, 2015, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> Bechev. D., *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe...op.cit.*, p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> Clark D., Foxall A., *Russia's Role in the Balkans- Cause of concern?*, The Henry Jackson Society, June 2014, p. 7.

clause<sup>42</sup> since it was implicitly referring to Russian dominance in European energy market), basically third countries energy provider has not to be owner of distribution companies. South Stream had the main aim of overcoming Ukrainian soil bringing gas in Europe following a different path from the Black Sea throughout the Balkans for arriving to Italy. Although the project received backing by *ENI* (Italian company), *Electricité de France* (EDF) and *Wintershall*, a daughter company of German *BASF*, it would not have channelled new amount of gas in region, it would just have rerouted the volume passing for Ukraine in another pipeline. Vladimir Putin committed himself directly in this project, but he has been obliged to cancel it in 2014. Russian President blamed EU lack of flexibility referring directly to the 50% of diversification requested by the Third Energy Package.<sup>43</sup> Russian strategy was of ignoring the provisions of the package, hoping that EU dependence on Russian supplies would force the EU to accept its construction once it has begun.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the real problem was concerning the oligarch Gennady Timchenko, as his company was responsible for building South Stream Bulgarian part. Timchenko's name was included in the list of people subjected to sanctions after Crimea annexation and for this reason the construction of the pipeline in the Bulgaria has been blocked. Furthermore, South Stream would have represented a problem for EU member states or candidate states. The project would have killed any kind of regional ambition for diversifying energy supplies.

Unfortunately, Russia played the wrong card annexing Crimea. Those European states which could back South Stream project after the Crimean crisis had to make a step back. The European Commission had organised a group to fix controversies in legislative aspects in cooperation with Russian Government; the group has been disbanded after the Crimea issue.

Due to its characteristics, the region's energy sector lands itself well to foreign pressures and is a melting pot of geopolitical, economic and market issues. Russia, thanks to its cultural ties, has been able to gain the energy sector supremacy in the area, managing even to buy refineries, plants and to renovate infrastructure.

Bechev<sup>45</sup> stresses three main limits of Russian energetic influence in the region. The first is the fact that the amount of gas consume is not high, definitely lower than in Western Europe, and this is mainly due to the fact that these countries use different sources. Secondly, *Gazprom*, which in the whole part of the cases has the monopoly of the energy market, is losing market shares. Third, the environment in which *Gazprom* is operating is quite difficult and different from previously and does not allow anymore expansion in that sense. Markets turned against *Gazprom*, because of EU economic crisis and attempts to diversify energy supplies.

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<sup>42</sup> Kaunert C., Léonard S., *European Security Governance and the European Neighbourhood after the Lisbon Treaty*, Routledge, 2013, p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Bechev. D., *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe...op.cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>44</sup> Stern J., Pirani S., and Yafimava K., *Does the Cancellation of South Stream Signal a Fundamental Reorientation of Russian Gas Export Policy?*, Oxford Energy Comment-Oxford Energy Institute, January 2015, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Bechev. D., *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe...op.cit.*, p. 211.

## Conclusion

It is possible to divide Russian approaches in the region, focusing on Serbia and BiH, in three main stages: the first one is dated back to the Yeltsin's presidency (1991-99), during this period Russian line was of trying to cover a new role, siding US and other Western powers for assuring stability in the region. Russian engagement in former Yugoslavia was an instrument for affirming the country never lost its power. Then, with the first Ukrainian gas crisis in 2006, Russia undertook energy policies and started acquiring importance in the region energy sector. It was also politically standing with Serbia, fact which fostered its position even in *Republika Srpska*. This was the period of South Stream promise and South Eastern Europe was a fertile soil on which Russia could build European energy strategies according to its preferences. The last stage was shaped by the Ukraine crisis between 2013-14. From this period ahead, Southeast Europe became another political battlefield for Russian dispute with the West. After the South Stream failure, Russia kept playing in the communication, media and cultural field in the area, exploiting similarities and weaknesses both of BiH and Serbia. It entered directly in the countries internal issues, as *Republika Srpska* case showed.

Russian economic and cultural ties grew constantly in these last years in both countries, sided by mutual political support: as demonstrated by Srebrenica UN Resolution and support against European sanctions.

The main difference which can be underlined between Russian approach in Serbia and in BiH is mainly due to a context issue. In the former, Russia can exploit the shared Orthodox roots and the cultural ties, creating always more organisations for spreading its influence throughout the country. Moreover, it is possible to observe that the main links lay officially at a governmental level; this case is similar to the Hungarian one. In Hungary, Russia has no need for unofficial campaigns because its political, cultural and economic issues are often backed by the Central Government. Of course Serbia has a different problem, because even if it rejects a potential NATO membership, it is a front-runner in EU race for enlargement, forecasted for 2025. Hence, it has always to keep a dualistic attitude, well balanced between the two powers. So in Serbia, Russia is playing an official and an unofficial game, on one side fostering its relations with the government and high charges of the state, on the other is stressing the point of cultural links and connections exploiting also the support of the Orthodox Church. In 2016 Patriarch Kirill of Moscow spoke of Russian-Serbian brotherhood with feelings of identity.<sup>46</sup> In the same way, when the Serbian Patriarch Irineus met Putin said "we rely on God and Russia".<sup>47</sup> Serbian relations with Russia are backed by the Serbian population, for this reason the Balkan front runner for EU accession will not quit its fruitful ties with Russia in order to fulfil EU requests, and in the same way Russia will not impede Serbia's possible EU membership.

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<sup>46</sup> *Russian patriarch: Serbia doesn't feel like foreign country*, b92, from Sputnik news, September 13, 2013, accessed on February 9, 2018, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2017&mm=09&dd=13&nav\\_id=102308](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2017&mm=09&dd=13&nav_id=102308).

<sup>47</sup> Bechev. D., *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe...op.cit.*, p. 220.



The situation for BiH is quite divergent, having no direct influence at the central government, or not having fully cultural shared points, Russia is looking at *Republika Srpska* and Serbs in BiH as main interlocutors for influencing and unbalancing the political arena in its favour. Russian open support to Dodik increases the complexities in a state which definitely does not need them. It compromises BiH's approaches to the NATO and the EU, even if those referendum attempts or political claims are not legally binding, they could seriously entail a backsliding in the process of integration, which is essential for BiH development. When it comes to Čović and the Croats in BiH, the situation presents itself still differently. Russian representatives claim their will of an equal representation of Croats at the state level. In this way they are creating a dualistic effect: on one side they destabilise balances in BiH, implicitly neglecting the international agreements which brought to this state asset; on the other side Russia retracts the classical vision of Croatian-Russian relations, which as mentioned previously, now is much less clear than earlier.

Concerning the energy field, it converges with economic interests and issues, but after the South Stream failure and given the scarce infrastructural reliability of the region, despite the well known Russian supremacy in the field, and its economic ability of buying structures and plants, unless the country would announce a renovation of existing or the construction of a new pipeline, its influence will be limited. And even in the case of new pipeline projects implementation these would be still subjected to European law which is pressing for liberalisation on energy issues, and if Serbia and BiH are aspiring to join, they should take into account the potential consequent implications. On the other side, even if Third Energy Package results as a material limit for Russian influence, *Gazprom* monopoly in the region and EU's inability to neutralise it, deserve of being mentioned. Russia then, is also advancing interesting purposes to Serbia, which is waiting for a purpose of joining Turkish Stream; at the same time, trying to comply with EU requirements of diversifying energy suppliers.

In the end, the Russian goals in the area are mainly classifiable as attempts to slow and obstruct democratisation processes or to exploit the weak existing democratic institutions. Russia can both play the card of self-determination and Slavic brotherhood relying on political and social structures which lend themselves well to manipulation. The race to join the EU is one of the main Russian fears. With the Western Balkans accession, the only buffer zone remaining in the West will be lost and the manoeuvring field of Russian influence will be reduced.

To Russian eyes, NATO enlargement would represent a bigger problem compared to EU membership. If through this latter Russia could achieve some economic advantages, from a NATO accession this is not true. Despite Serbia's playing on both sides for military subventions, Serbia would never join the Alliance; at least this is what is clear from its Government's statements. A problem could arise if EU membership would be conditional to the NATO one and part of consequent accession agreements. Russian *conditio sine qua non* would be that the two procedures must not be linked or related, and their fate and path would be up singularly to Serbia and BiH.

Before the Ukrainian crisis, Russia could accept sharing its influence with West in the region. After the EU and the international community took positions on Crimea annexation, the loud message Moscow wants to send is that if the EU and the West can interfere in Russian areas of interest, then Russia could interfere in theirs. The EU has been not only distracted by Euro and institutional crisis, but the Crimea issue caused a shift in EU attention from the Balkan area to the one closest to Ukraine, the Baltics for instance. The race between EU and Russia in this sense could increase democratic backsliding and facilitating vacuum of powers, that Russia is really good at filling through propaganda.

Russian ability to exploit weaknesses, vacuums is not debatable and hard to quantify. This makes the situation more complex and implies possible rise of its influence. But it is necessary to clarify that this does not represent coming back to the cold war, the international relations panorama is quite different from that period, less permeated by ideology and more dominated by practical interests.

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