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USA vs Russia: The game of powers on the territory of the former Yugoslavia

Summary

At the end of the 20th century, the territory of the countries that came into existence with the dissolution of former Yugoslavia became the grounds on which conflict of interest between global superpowers started to take place, particularly that between the USA and Russia. The manner in which the two rivaling giants attempt to secure their interests in the region differs immensely. On the one hand, the USA secured its involvement in the region by establishing itself as a mediator in ending the wars in the 90s (BiH, Kosovo) and this grip got even stronger with the help of the so-called Euro-Atlantic integrations and inclusion of the newly formed Balkan countries into NATO (Slovenia, Croatia, Albania). On the other hand, Putin's Russia pulls leverage through energetic projects in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH. The most obvious culmination of the Russo-American diplomatic conflict in the region occurred in Montenegro, which escaped the sphere of Russian influence following a series of affairs involving Russian secret agencies, much to the benefit of the USA. After the incident Russia started exert its corruptive influence and set boogey-traps for „Western” initiatives aimed at political stabilization at the region. This spoiling influence (BiH, Kosovo, Macedonia) has as its agenda the strengthening of Russian geopolitical influence in Europe, destabilized through the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea.

Key words: former Yugoslav territory; great powers; NATO; Russia; Russo-American influence; Southeast Europe.

Historical continuity of conflict between big powers and civilizations on the territory of former Yugoslavia

The part of Eastern Europe consisting of former Yugoslav member-states Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, with Albania in addition, has been a place of unyielding conflict between civilizations and geopolitical

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great powers. Since the division of the Roman Empire into its western and eastern part in 395 AD, the region has been marked by a certain kind of fissure. In the Early Middle Ages, it functioned as the border and the place of contact between the Frankish and the Byzantine Empire. Its demarcatory quality was further strengthened by the Great Schism of 1054, when it became the boundary that separated the realms of the Catholic and the Orthodox Church and with it the cultural and civilizational frontier between the Eastern and the Western Europe. From the 15th century onwards, with the Ottoman invasion of Europe and its destructive consequences, the region retained its separatory capacity and functioned as the border between the Habsburg Monarchy, i.e. the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire until the early 20th century. Then, in the 20th century, the region justified its former notorious nickname „the powder keg of Europe” when in 1914 the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke and Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand and his wife¹ took place in Sarajevo, modern BiH.

The event prompted Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia, which in turn triggered a chain activation of intra-European alliances and the WWI. After the great war, the region reunited as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later renamed to Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a monarchy under the rule of the Serbian king Aleksandar Karađorđević, which existed as such until 1941. With the end of WWII, the communist Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia was established under the totalitarian rule of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and Josip Broz Tito as its lifetime president. In 1948 Tito broke his ties to the Soviet Union and Stalin, masterfully maintaining diplomatic relations with both the Eastern and the Western Block, thus simultaneously providing Yugoslavia with international help and cheap loans from the West and keeping Soviet influence at bay. Soon after Tito’s death in 1980 the territory of Yugoslavia suffered destabilization. The then federal communist republics of Croatia and Slovenia expressed their secessionist sentiments and proclaimed independence. Ultimately, in 1991 a bloody war broke out on the territory of contemporary Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina soon thereafter. The belligerent 1990’s on the former Yugoslav territory were marked by the external political vacuum. The USA was preoccupied with its war in Iraq, while Russia faced internal political turmoil following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The European Community, disunited and lacking coherent external policy, proved incapable of solving the bloodiest armed conflict in Europe since the end of WWII.

Although the region currently functions as a complex network in which influences of various external actors intertwine, among them the EU, NATO, China and Turkey, this

¹ The Archduke Franz Ferdinand was murdered on 28 June 1914 by Gavrilo Princip, member of the clandestine Bosnian-Serb nationalist-terrorist organization Young Bosnia.

paper focuses on two global powers, the USA and Russia, whose mutual relations and influences on the region have been most consequential since the end of the 20st century.

The USA's mighty comeback

With the election of Bill Clinton as the new American President in 1992, the territory of former Yugoslavia re-entered the focus of American foreign policy. At the time, chaos reigned in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Croatian Serbs attempting to occupy big chunks of Croatian territory and unite it with Serbia proper and with all three of Bosnia's current constitutive nations, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks warring against each other.

With no treaty negotiations in sight and the UN peacekeeping missions in Croatia and BiH only maintaining the *status quo*, the Serbs amassed an increasing amount of the BiH territory, as well as enough arms to actually only profit from the embargo on arms import imposed by the international committee. The geopolitical situation started to change only with the intervention of the USA and the 1994 Washington Treaty² effectively ended the Croat-Bosniak war in BiH. This allowed Croatia to launch two offensive military operations in May and August 1995, in which the rebelled Croatian Serbs were defeated. A united Croato-Bosniak offensive in BiH followed later that year. Although in July 1995 the world witnessed the tragic Srebrenica massacre³ committed by the Bosnian Serbs against the Bosniaks, under the patronage of the USA in November 1995 the Dayton Agreement⁴ was signed that finally ended the conflict in BiH.

This mighty American intervention provided a huge milestone for the future of American influence on the territory of former Yugoslavia, which was further fortified in 1999 with the conclusion of the Serbo-Albanian conflicts on Kosovo through direct intervention of NATO's *Operation Allied Force*⁵ and the bombardment of the Federal

² The Washington Treaty (signed on 18 March 1994) was a peace treaty signed between the Bosnian Muslims and the Bosnian Croats, i.e. the republics of Bosnia and Herzegovina Croatia with the mediation of the American President Bill Clinton.

³ The massacre of Srebrenica took place from 13 – 19 July 1995 and consisted of brutal executions of 8000 Bosniak men and boys. It was carried out by the Army of Republika Srpska under the command of general Ratko Mladić.

⁴ The Dayton Agreement (1 – 21 November 1995) was a peace treaty among Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats took place the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, USA, under the supervision of the chief American negotiator Richard Holbrooke.

⁵ *Operation Allied Force* was the name of the military operation undertaken by NATO against the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (federal union of Serbia and Montenegro) in order to stop the commenced genocide against the Kosovo Albanians. Due to the opposition of Chinese and Russian representatives in the UN, the operation was conducted by NATO instead of the UN. It effectively ended armed conflicts and the arrival of KFOR-forces drew the Serbian forces out of Kosovo.

Republic of Yugoslavia. Russia quite weak at the time and without an active prospect to counter the allied military operations. Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the USSR is frequently divided into the time before and the time after the rise to power of Vladimir Putin. The period in which it coincided with the Yugoslav Wars is described as the period of idealism and pragmatism of Boris Yeltsin's (Sakwa, 2007). The end of 1990's is characterized by external political pragmatism embodied in Russia's diplomatic efforts to solve the existing problems on the Balkans through by supporting Serbia and opposing external military interventions on the one hand, and the absence of a more determined and downright action on the other hand. An example of this is the „Primakov's Loop” of March 1999, an action of the former Prime Minister of Russia Yevgeny Primakov, who expressed his symbolic protest against NATO's operation against the FR Yugoslavia by cancelling his visit to Washington and returning to Moscow. Equally indicative is the unorganized and unannounced deployment of Russian KFOR-forces from BiH to Kosovo and their subsequent seizure of the Priština airport in June 1999 (Jelavić, 2000: 187), which was done in response to the distribution of NATO's forces throughout Kosovo in spite of Russia not having been involved in the peace negotiations between NATO and Serbia. A deployment of international KFOR military forces followed, ultimately paving the way for the proclamation of Kosovo's independence in 2008, which turned that country in yet another focus of American influence. The 2000 resignation and the subsequent 2001 arrest of Slobodan Milošević ensued. This series of highly consequential military and diplomatic interventions on the territory of former Yugoslav member-states determined the final balance of power in the geopolitical context concerning the region. Also Kosovo crisis and sequence of events will later be described as humiliation to Russia (Bechev, 2019: 7).

Euro-Atlantic integrations as a lever for the influence of American foreign policy

The next step was the American support for and the intention to include all former Yugoslav member-states into the so-called Euro-Atlantic integrations. The first of those actions took place in 2003, when Slovenia became a NATO member together with Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. In the same year Slovenia joined the EU.

Apart from the action plan for NATO membership, the remaining former Yugoslav member-states, that were politically and socially exhausted by the Yugoslav Wars and undergoing slow transition, were included in the Adriatic Charter by the USA. The charter was signed in 2003 in Tirana and solidified the partnership of Croatia, Albania and Macedonia with the USA. Its purpose was to provide American aid in the attempts to include those countries into the Euro-Atlantic Integrations. The Charter

was joined by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro in 2008, while Serbia was given the observer status. This way, the whole former Yugoslav territory was united in the prospect of entering NATO. In 2009 Croatia and Albania became full members of the organization, while Macedonia⁶ was prevented from doing so due to its bilateral dispute with Greece over the name, despite having fulfilled the entry conditions. In 2012 the Republic of Kosovo gained the observer status within the Charter. This way, the whole territory of former Yugoslavia was united under the prospect of joining NATO.

The reception of former Yugoslav member-states into the Euro-Atlantic Integrations and subsequently the EU was the *modus operandi* for exerting the American influence and „stabilizing” the region. Although the same principle was applied in case of every post-communist state (from Poland to Hungary), so that they first joined NATO and then the EU, in the region shook and destabilized by the Yugoslav Wars the process could not take place with the same dynamic and speed. Apart from the already mentioned factor of war, there was a strong influence of Russian interests on the territory of Serbia, Montenegro and BiH.

The Russians with anxiety observed the ex-Yugoslav member states' joining NATO and the gradual encircling of the Adriatic Sea by NATO members (Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Albania). The last country that remained beyond NATO's control was Montenegro. In 2006, despite its internal political affairs and uneasy surroundings due to the high percentage of Serbian minority,⁷ Montenegro, in which Russian capital was strongly present, especially in its tourist and real-estate sector, managed to proclaim its independence from Serbia and thus begin its own voyage toward the Euro-Atlantic Integrations. Apart from leaving the grip of Serbia, this new direction of Montenegro's foreign policy had distancing from Russia as one of its consequences.

Montenegro was of special significance to Russia thanks to its geostrategic location on the Adriatic Sea, which spoke to Russian predilections of extending their influence to the Adriatic shores.⁸ In 2013 the Russians allegedly tried to realize that interest by making a request to Montenegrin authorities for access to the ports of Bar and Kotor (Secieru, 2019: 3). However, in 2015 it came to a turning point when Montenegro finalized the fulfilling of the conditions for joining NATO. In the same year the small Balkan country witnessed an alleged unsuccessful Russian *coup d'état*.

⁶ Macedonia, one of the former Yugoslav member-states, is recognized by the Republic of Croatia under that name, yet due to Greek opposition to its usage the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was used in international institutions until January 2019, when the Prespa Agreement between Greece and FYR Macedonia ruled out the name change into Republic of North Macedonia.

⁷ According to the 2011 census, Serbs make up 28,73% of the country's population.

⁸ The Albanian military base of Pashaliman used to be the only Soviet military base on the Adriatic Sea until 1961, when Albania left the Warsaw Pact.

Russia's role in the alleged unsuccessful *coup d'état* with the attempt to prevent Montenegro's entry into NATO

Despite the absence of Russia's opposition to Croatia's and Albania's entry into NATO, in case of Montenegro's its reaction was quite different. The Montenegrin authorities blamed Serbia and Russia when in October 2015 the members of opposition and pro-Russian oriented politicians of Serbian pedigree instigated demonstrations against the country's accession into NATO. Furthermore, after Montenegro had been officially invited to join the organization in December 2015, Serbian opposition parties in the country, provided with Russian political support, demanded a referendum (Bechev, 2018: 9; Beckmann-Dierkes, 2018: 34).

The boiling point was reached in October 2016, when Montenegrin authorities accused Russia and Serbia of participating in a conspiracy that involved a military coup organized by the former gendarmerie commander of Serbian nationality. The accused Serbian Prime Minister Vučić denied the allegations of Serbian involvement in the incident, yet simultaneously admitted that the territory of Serbia housed a group of militants aided by foreign intelligence agencies with the aim of assassinating the Montenegrin president (Bechev, 2018: 10–11). In 2017 a special investigator made a direct accusation against Russia, citing an attempted *coup d'état* by the Russian intelligence agency GRU as its grounds. Regardless of the real extent of Moscow's involvement in the affair, the incident clearly displayed the boundaries of Russia's presence in the political situation of Serbia and Montenegro (Bechev, 2017). Nevertheless, Montenegro officially become NATO member on 5 June 2017. During his visit to Montenegro in August 2017, US Vice-President Mike Pence described Russia as an „unpredictable country that casts a shadow from the east,” directly accusing it of a coup attempt: „Russia has worked to destabilize the region, undermine your democracies and divide you from each other and from the rest of Europe” (Chan, 2017).

A year and a half of trials ensued, until in May 2019 the High Court in Podgorica ruled out that the 12 defendants be sentenced to prison due for attempted coup that ought to have prevented Montenegro's joining NATO. Of that number, two Russian agents were sentenced *in absentia* to 12 years in prison and two politicians from the opposition parties close to the Belgrade regime received 5 years in prison. The High Court determined that their trips to Moscow were undertaken in order to receive instructions from the GRU agents to depose the regime in Podgorica. In its verdict, the Court stated that the group attempted to overtake the Parliament on the day of the scheduled October 2016 elections, as well as to assassinate the Prime Minister Milo Đukanović and install a pro-Russian government (Walker, 2019). Serbian opposition accused the Montenegrin regime of making up and fabricating the whole case.

Although the circumstances around the alleged *coup d'état* remain unclear and it is possible that it didn't happen in the exact way as it was portrayed by the Montenegrin authorities, there are indications that Russian intelligence agency was involved in it (Bieber, 2020: 94–95). Apart from the accusation of hacking the 2016 USA Presidential Elections and poisoning Sergey and Yulia Skripal in 2018, this was the third large scandal that tackled the GRU agents' disruptive activities.

Energetics as the main instrument of Russian influence

Despite having been involved in all 1990's UN missions in former Yugoslavia, from Croatia 1992 – 1995 as part of the UNPROFOR forces (around 1 000 peacekeepers) to Bosnia and Herzegovina 1996 – 2003 as part of SFOR forces (around 1 200 peacekeepers), to Kosovo 1999 – 2003 as part of the KFOR forces (around 3 150 peacekeepers), in 2003 Russia militarily retreated from the area and left the peacekeeping operations to the EU and NATO. This was the time when Vladimir Putin seized power in Russia, when the country's foreign political direction started to change and with it the focus of Russian interests in the region. (Secireu, 2019: 2–3).

Energetics became new instrument of Russian infiltration to the ex-Yugoslav territory, with the Russian state-owned energetic companies making strategic investments in the region. For example, in 2003 LUKoil bought 75% of shares of Beopetrol, the second-largest Serbian oil company. In 2005 a Russian oligarch bought an aluminum factory in Montenegro. Likewise, in 2007 Zarubezhneft took over both oil refineries in BiH, the one in Bosanski Brod and the other in Modrica, and purchased the Banjaluka Petrol Trading Company (Bechev, 2015). Also, Gazprom Neft took over the majority of shares in NIS (Oil Industry of Serbia), the largest Serbian oil company. This way Russia obtained a monopoly in the oil and gas sectors in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Although geopolitically and strategically extremely important, this move did not bring Russia significant financial profit. For example, both BiH refineries were doing business with significant losses, which may point to financial profit having been secondary to strategic and geopolitical interests behind these Russian investments (Secireu, 2019: 2–3). Although the impression may not be such, apart from energetics and the spread of the Russian Sberbank and VTB across the Balkans, in terms of its economic influence in the region, Russia was incomparably weaker than the EU, which was illustrated by its poor economic indicators (import – export) not surpassing 5% for 2018 (Eurostat, 2019).

The unprofitability, limitation and focus of Russian investments on energetics may be observed as part of a wider Russian plan to establish control over the new gas transit routes to Europe (Secireu, Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019: 11). Aware of that, Macedonia and Serbia had even before displayed an interest in becoming a part of TurkishStream, a

pipeline bringing gas via Turkey into Hungary envisaged for 2014, but terminated due to the dispute between Turkish authorities and Gazprom due to the gas prices (Bechev, 2015). Nevertheless, the whole region remained part of Russian plans as one of the key points for establishing an alternative gas pipeline route toward Europe.

One of such plans was the SouthStream, announced in 2007, which foresaw the construction of a pipeline that was supposed to go through the Black Sea, Bulgaria and Serbia to Slovenia and Hungary. Curiously enough, the SouthStream was offered to Croatia as well, even with the prospect of installing the section of the main pipeline in the country, which could therefore have benefited from the transit, but the offer was ignored by the Croatian authorities and with it the opportunity was missed, since after the country expressed its interest in the project later on, the offer was reduced to the installment of a branch that could be connected to the Serbian portion of the main pipeline (Biočina, 2012). The project later caused dissatisfaction among the heads of European politics, who believed that it would make the Balkans too dependent on the Russian gas, which would be transported through pipelines „in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Macedonia. The project was described as another Russian strategic move with the purpose of strengthening their influence over the region. It was ultimately abandoned in 2014, partly because of European sanctions imposed on Russia due to the Ukrainian crisis (Barber, 2015). In 2017 interest was expressed for the restoration of the project in form of 2 TurkishStream pipelines”.

The game of powers

Russo-American influence on Croatia and Slovenia

Apart from Serbia, Montenegro and BiH, which were located within the so-called „Russian sphere of interest”, the Russians expressed their interest in purchasing the majority of shares in the main Croatian oil company INA. However, the move provoked a strong reaction on part of the USA, with the American ambassador in Croatia Robert Kohorst stating that „the Russians aren't partners we'd like to see in INA. I think that they have been a disruptive force in the region in past years, with INA and Croatia needing a better quality partner” (Biočina, 2018). A sharp response of the Russian ambassador Azimov followed, but eventually no Russian investment or acquisition in Croatia was made.

The blockade of Russian interests in Croatia as exemplified in the cases of INA and the SouthStream is hardly an isolated case. The investment project Druzhba Adria, with which the Russians intended to gain access to the Croatian oil pipeline JANAF and thus export Russian oil to the global market was announced in 2010, but spectacularly failed. From this it may be concluded that Croatia is less than enthusiastic about the

introduction of Russian capital into its territory, especially through energetics projects, a stance that enjoys an obvious American encouragement. The Three Seas Initiative⁹ project may be observed from the same standpoint. The initiative was started in 2015 by the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and intended as an informal political platform Adriatic – Baltic – Black Sea with the purpose of strengthening regional politics, economy, traffic routes, safety and cooperation. It stressed as its first main project the construction of an alternative supply route of liquefied gas, which would be transported to the LNG-terminal on the Island of Krk, Croatia, and then transported through a new pipeline that would be connected to the already built Polish terminal (Altaras Penda, 2018; The Three Seas Initiative, 2018). The project, which was designed as a direct competition to the Russian gas transport routes expectedly faced American support and its strategic goal was to prevent Russian influence by segregating a tampon-zone consisting of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova from the Russian sphere of interest and maintaining an anchor on the Caucasus in Georgia (Kurečić, 2017).

Such policy helped Croatia to become one of the most powerful American confidants among the former Yugoslav member-states. Croatia definitely obtained this status when it was received into NATO in 2009 in the company of Albania. The presence of American interests in the region behind this decision were apparent and Croatia enjoyed unrestrained support on its way into NATO. The strength of this support and the American geostrategic interests were evident from the so-called unsuccessful Slovenian blockade. Slovenia, namely, with which Croatia still has numerous territory and border disputes, attempted to prevent Croatian entry into NATO. During the ratification process in the Slovene Parliament, members of the political opposition were intentionally absent from the session, which temporarily disabled achieving the supermajority in favor. The issue escalated even further when the possibility of a referendum among the Slovenes arose, which could have highly complicated the resolution of events and perhaps even prevented the whole process of Croatia's accession into the organization. Therefore, the USA got actively involved in crushing the Slovenian blockade through its silent diplomacy, which is contained in the *Demarche*09STATE20395_a,¹⁰ in which other allies, above all France, Germany and Italy, were summoned to exert additional pressure to prevent jeopardizing Croatian entry into NATO. The pressure resulted in the Slovenian giving in and the successful Croatian entry into organization in 2009.

⁹ The Three Seas Initiative has twelve member states and extends from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

¹⁰ Secretary of State, „DEMARCHE - SLOVENIAN TIMELINE FOR RATIFICATION OF CROATIA INTO NATO,” WikiLeaks Cable: 09STATE20395_a” March 5, 2009. https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09STATE20395_a.html.

Despite being the NATO and the EU member-state since 2004, Slovenia did not limit its disruption of Croatian foreign policy to its unsuccessful blockade of Croatian NATO-entry. With the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 due to the Russian annexation of Crimean peninsula, the European Union assumed the stance in favor of imposing sanctions on Russia. Among the member-states opposing this stance was Slovenia, with Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs making a statement in which he said that „Slovenia, of all European member-states, has best relations with Russia. The relations have traditionally been good, not to mention that Russia is our very important economic partner” (Erjavac, 2014).

For a small country with a population of only 2 million, Slovenia maintained a political stance towards Russia that was characterized by NATO and the EU as quite daring. From the perspective of Cohen’s theory of world division (Cohen, 1963), this balancing of Slovenian allegiance between great powers may be interpreted as a strategic move with the aim of positioning Slovenia as a gateway-state that connects important geostrategic locations and regions. The territory of former Yugoslavia is, namely, located on the convergence of big geostrategic regions of Heartland and Eastern Europe with the Mediterranean and the Magreb, as well as on the transit zone from Middle to South-Eastern Europe (Kurečić, 2001). Such politics on Slovenian part may also be seen as an attempt to impose itself as a mediator between the great powers, which is perhaps confirmed by the fact that in 2001 a summit of presidents George W. Bush Jr. and Vladimir Putin in the Brdo Castle near Kranj was held.

Another example of this kind of Slovenian foreign policy occurred in 2018, when Russian authorities were accused of using the lethal amount of nerve gas to assassinate their former secret agent Sergey Skripal in Salisbury, UK. In the events following the assassination, Slovenia emerged as one of the nine EU member-states who decided not to impose sanctions on Russia that resulted in the expulsion of dozens of Russian diplomats from the countries across Europe (Scarsi, 2018).

Frequent and sophisticated diplomatic activity of Slovenia in favor of Russia led to the increasing perception of the country as pro-Russian. This put a pressure on the Slovenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Karl Erjavac, who felt the need to frequently defend himself from such allegations during his February 2018 meeting with his Russian colleague Sergey Lavrov in Ljubljana. On that occasion he denied any insinuation about him leading a pro-Russian foreign policy and simultaneously affirmed that Slovenia must practice balanced foreign policy (Erjavac ob obisku Lavrova, 2018). However, the country has continued to oppose the imposition of sanctions on Russia within the collective EU bodies and such foreign policy has certainly not made it a reliable ally in the region to the USA.

Croatian relations to Russia may be assessed in the context of the USA’s rising influence in the region. The diplomatic relations between the two countries coldened af-

ter the visit of the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković to Ukraine in November 2016, during which he expressed a sympathetic stance towards Ukrainian side in the Crimean conflict and offered Croatian help in reintegrating the occupied territories that might prove beneficial to the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea (Plenković u Ukrajini, 2016). Also, in the two-year period from 2015 to 2017 Croatia did not elect its ambassador to Russia (Uoči sastanka Vladimira Putina, 2017). Although an opportunity for embittering the diplomatic relations and economic cooperation between the two countries opened with the visit of the Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović to Moscow in 2017, it was not used.

When it comes to concrete diplomatic actions against Russia, Croatia, in contrast to Slovenia, solidarized with the UK after the assassination of Sergey Skripal and banished one Russian diplomat from its territory. This move provoked brisk reaction of the Russian ambassador in Zagreb Anvar Azamov, who described the action as an „inimical step” (I u ruskoj ambasadi žestoko reagirali, 2018) and had as a consequence the planned corrective visit of Vladimir Putin to Croatia. Furthermore, media clashes between the Russian and the American embassy in Croatia are frequent, as are the Russian ambassador’s outcries at the foreign political positioning of Croatia and its perceivedly inimical stance toward Russia (Ruski ambasador u Hrvatskoj, 2019).

„Spoiling” influence

On the other side, Serbia as the most important Russian player in the region has continued to express its „strong” intention to become an EU member-state, although, with their foreign political stance and moves, their high political officials betray the intention to mitigate between Russia and the EU. However, when the status of Serbia and the whole region among the priorities of Russian foreign policy is at concern, some political analysts consider that, despite Russia holding Serbia a valuable ally and an amical country, due to cultural and historical circumstances it is primarily viewed by Russia as a peripheral state outside of its main strategic focus or a „sleeping resource” for that matter (Nelaeva and Semenov, 2016: 69). Conversely, Khotkova (2002: 17) of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies considers the Balkans as a high-priority region in Russian foreign political enterprises. With Vladimir Putin’s ascension as the head of state, a case may be made for Russia’s return to the Balkans, yet according to Bechev (2017), Russia never abandoned the region in the first place.

From the „Western perspective”, the role of Russia in this area is that of a spoiler for multiple initiatives. It prevented the solution of the Kosovo crisis, withheld the recognition of its independence and used its status as a global power to prevent Kosovo’s joining of international organizations. When it comes to BiH, it has been practicing foreign policy that has been in continuous disbalance with that of the West, supporting the tendencies and the rhetoric of the head of Bosnian Serbs Milorad

Dodik toward secession of the Republika Srpska (Secireu, Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019: 6). The Republika Srpska and its president Milorad Dodik have thus been affirmed as one of the strongest Russian „clients” in the region. By supporting Dodik’s efforts, Russia has successfully achieved its spoiling influence for many international initiatives with the purpose of centralizing BiH, whereas Dodik returned that favor by obstructing the Bosnian way towards the Euro-Atlantic Integrations (Bechev, 2017, 2019). Russia has skilfully been using its good relations with the head of Bosnian Serbs, which helped it nurture its own geopolitical interests. In doing so, Russia has repeatedly pointed to the inability of the EU chiefs to solve the persisting problems in this red-hot zone and simultaneously created new diplomatic focal points, thus solidifying its international reputation that was jeopardized through the annexation of Crimea.

Another attempt at destabilization with the purpose of not solving the existing problems in the region was committed by Russia in Macedonia, when it tried to disrupt the negotiations the latter was having with Greece concerning its name (Greece orders, 2018). The diplomatic incident resulted in the expulsion of two Russian diplomats from Greece for endangering national security. They were accused of having tried to amass confidential information that included the contents of the negotiations between Greece and Macedonia. The incident itself and the response of Athens were quite harsh and dramatic, which pointed to the severity of the scandal, since Greece and Russia had usually maintained good relations. For instance, in the case of Sergey Skripal’s assassination, Greece did not join the international action of expulsing Russian diplomats.

This kind of Russia’s behavior can also be explained as a „payback” for meddling in its backyard (Ukraine, Moldova or Gruzia). Russia sees Balkan as a vulnerable periphery of Europe where can create leverage by exploiting weaknesses in Western policies for purpose to use it as a bargaining chip for future (Bechev, 2019: 6–7).

„The mythical ally of Serbia”

Of all former Yugoslav member-states Russia’s largest resource resides with Serbia. Although the historical relationship between the two countries experienced its vicissitudes, Russia remains one of the most important historical allies of the South Slavic country, so that, at least from the Serbian nationalist and traditionalist perspective, it may be characterized as mythic. The friendly relations between the two states were expressed in 2014, when Serbian volunteers joined the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine (Secireu, 2019).¹¹ Apart from panslavic sentiments, the friendship between

¹¹ In contrast to Serbs, Croatian volunteers individually joined the clashes as part of the Ukrainian forces.

the Russians and the Serbs has historically been nurtured by Christian Orthodoxy and the connection between the Serbian and the Russian Orthodox Church. As one of the most important and most sensitive foreign political issues of Serbia, Kosovo was adeptly used by Russia to accomplish their interests in the region. Although, from the international legal perspective, a Kosovo – Crimea parallel may be drawn, such association has aptly been discarded by the Russians, who have continued to unremittingly support Serbia. The reasons behind this, apart from being able to act as a disruptive force on the Balkans, may be searched for in the Russian attempt to reclaim the influence in Europe they lost after the Crimea War and indirectly reproach the EU for being unable to clean their own doormat. This way the Russians have also managed to maintain Serbia as their loyal ally, since the unresolved situation on Kosovo continues to impede Serbian way towards Europe. If the Kosovo-Serbian relations normalized through Serbian recognition of the former's independence, Serbia could finally be able to accelerate its integration into the EU and distance itself from Russian influence. Besides the Kosovo case, Russia has shown itself to be a loyal protector of Serbian interests even in the UN Security Council, in which it has been acting on the latter's behalf, for instance, in recently having displayed that stance by vetoing the resolution on the Srebrenica massacre on occasion of its 20th anniversary.¹²

Bechev (2015) cited the US State John Kerry, who claimed that countries like Serbia, Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro were „in the line of fire.” Russian pressure on those countries is noticeable through energetics projects that aim to consolidate Russian influence over those countries' regimes. In April 2014, during the anti-establishment protest in Macedonia, Russian media accused the West of attempting to orchestrate another revolution¹³ and depose a regime that was sympathetic to Russia. The Kumanovo clashes¹⁴ that happened parallel to the protests in Skopje were used by the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, who, on his visit to Belgrade, accused the West of supporting separatism and the creation of „Great Albania” (Bechev, 2015).

Although often portrayed as „a pro-European politician”, Serbian President Vučić is well aware of the use the potential EU-membership may provide to Serbia, yet he simultaneously craftily uses his country's relations to Russia as a blackmail lever designed to fasten his country's integration into the EU. The last truly and most sincerely

¹² In 2007 The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) described the actions of Serbian military in Srebrenica as a genocide. In 2009 the European Parliament declared 11 July „The Srebrenica Memorial Day.”

¹³ It was compared to the Ukrainian one.

¹⁴ The Kumanovo clashes are a series of armed incidents that took in May 2015 place in Macedonian town of Kumanovo, close to the border to Serbia and Kosovo that. It consisted of shootouts between several dozens of Albanian „terrorists” and the Macedonian police.

pro-European politician in contemporary Serbia was Zoran Đinđić, who has been murdered in 2003 while performing the duty of the Serbian Prime Minister.

The mutual visits of Russian and Serbian presidents, respectively, are frequent and receive wide media coverage. For example, Putin's visit to Serbia in January 2019 was described as an event of utmost importance (Putin's visit to Serbia, 2019) and Vučić's visit to Sochi later that year was viewed as no less significant (President Vučić on a one-day visit, 2019). Similarly, their military cooperation and joined military exercises are used as taunting tactics against NATO. The most recent joined Serbo-Russian military exercise was held in October 2019 under the name „Slavic Shield” and, as a pompous manifestation of Serbo-Russian national brotherhood to which the Russians brought their powerful S-400 anti-missile system, it was intended as a show-off to NATO and the EU. Although otherwise maybe concluded from what was just stated, Serbia has continued to cooperate with NATO and abundantly used the funds of NATO's Partnership for Peace that in withdrawn sums by far exceeded those provided by the Russian military (NATO, 2019).

Despite having initiated the negotiations for EU membership in 2009, Serbia could become its member state no sooner than 2025 and then only if it normalizes its relations to Kosova first (De Munter, 2019). After the EU Summit on 17 October 2019 saw France vetoing the initiation of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania due to the change in negotiation terms and conditions (Nielsen, 2019), Vučić hastily signed an agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union on 25 October 2019. Immediately thereafter he stated that Serbia had no intention of becoming a NATO member, announcing the planned 2020 declaration of Serbia's military neutrality. However, his statements and actions were only about gaining priority, since the mentioned declaration had already been adopted by Serbia in 2007 (Announcement of Declaration, 2019), whereas the agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union represented the „so unwanted alternative” to the EU-membership.

In the current state of affairs Russia is the greatest potential winner. In the analysis of events preceding the 2019 NATO summit Bechev observed the following: „If the West is disengaged and lets the region go, then Russia has lots of opportunities to get mileage out of the situation.” If Serbia became an EU-member, Russia would gain another ally within the Union, alongside Cyprus and Hungary, which would be a win-win situation for them. „Serbia will be weak or pro-Russian if they end up in the EU, which is no bad outcome for Russia either” (Baker and Vasovic, 2019). Apart from donating the outdated aircrafts MIG 29, Russia continued with its activations and secured Russian helicopters Mi-35, H145M and Mi-17. This move provoked the American reaction via Matthew Palmer, special American delegate for the Balkans, who warned that Serbia risks attracting American sanctions if they purchase Russian military armaments (Serbia risks US sanctions, 2019).

A prospect?

The policies of the US and the EU on the territory of former Yugoslavia is one of conditioning and constant pressures for structural reforms, democratization and liberalization. Such politics facilitated the creation of a series of weaker states, some of which may be rendered unfinished experiments (BiH). Especially evident is the American influence on the geopolitical reconfiguration of the region, which had as its consequence the repetitive territorial shrinkage of Serbia – Montenegro in 2005, Kosovo in 2008 (Polović, 2013). Weak countries and failed democracies are a fertile soil for the growth of corrupted political regimes. The USA and Russia continue their game of power on the territory of former Yugoslavia. A positive effect of American influence was the end of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990's, which would have been even bloodier and more destructive were it not for American help, whereas it provoked Putin's geopolitically realist Russia to establish itself as an unavoidable power player in the region. Apart from the strategic energetics investments in the region, it is measured in its destabilizing activities on the former Yugoslav territory. Both USA and Russia profit from corrupted undemocratic regimes, which easily give way to rising regional xenophobia and nationalism (Secireu, Bieber and Tzifakis, 2019: 18). Whereas example the Bosnian Serb chief Milorad Dodik keeps his allegiance to Russia, the USA has such an ally in Montenegrin Milo Đukanović. The American „acquisition” of Montenegro represents the hardest hit to Russian interests and influence in region.

In comparison to other countries in the region, Croatia and Slovenia are more mature democracies, which may be ascribed to the conditions they received before joining the EU, whereas Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania, although NATO members, continue experiencing frequent accusations of housing regimes prone to corruption.

Despite being the NATO member, Slovenia frequently acts like a lone wolf and does not follow the pro-American politics of the neighboring countries without exception, cultivating and developing its political and economic ties with Russia. There is an impression that Croatia, which is described as a stable American ally that participates in NATO missions in Afghanistan, Poland and Lithuania, misses prospects of economic cooperations with Russia to its own detriment, blindly subscribing to American interests. Serbia skilfully balances between the EU, the USA and Russia, yet with constant pressure of Western powers for democratization and normalization of its relations with Kosova. On its part, the young and not enough mature Republic of Kosova enjoys the patronage of the USA in need of integration into international associations. This way is oftentimes boogeytrapped by Serbia with the enthusiastic help of Russia, which continues to exert its spoiling influence in BiH for its own geopolitical benefits. BiH, as an incomplete project and European experiment, thus becomes the most serious challenge without the clear perspective of progress. The danger for the whole region

lies in the halted expansion of the EU and its lack of prospects, which might plunge all the above-mentioned countries save for Croatia and Slovenia into an even more dangerous Russo-American, post-Cold War clash of interest in the region.

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SAD protiv Rusije: Igre velikih sila na prostoru bivše Jugoslavije

Sažetak

Prostor na kojem se nalaze države nastale raspadom bivše Jugoslavije postao je krajem 20. stoljeća područjem sukoba velikih sila, posebice između SAD-a i Rusije. No, strategije kojima su dvije velike sile nastojale osigurati svoj utjecaj u regiji znatno se razlikuju. Dok su SAD svoj položaj osigurale zahvaljujući važnoj ulozi u okončanju rata u BiH i na Kosovu, te ga učvrstile koristeći euroatlantske integracije što je rezultiralo uključivanjem novonastalih država (Slovenija, Hrvatska, Albanija) u NATO, Rusija je do laskom Putina na vlast kao svoju polugu utjecaja u regiji počela koristiti projekte u energetici, zauzevši s njima čvrsto uporište u Srbiji, Crnoj Gori te BiH. Eskalacija rusko-američkih tenzija u regiji kulminirala je u Crnoj Gori, čiji je bijeg iz sfere ruskog utjecaja, popraćen nizom špijunskih afera zajamčio veliku diplomatsku pobjedu interesima SAD-a. Nakon ovoga međunarodnog incidenta Rusija je regiju počela doživljavati kao poligon za ostvarivanje svojeg remetilačkog utjecaja, kojim minira „zapadne“ inicijative za stabilizacijom prostora, (BiH, Kosovo i Makedonija) s ciljem osnaživanja ruskog geopolitičkog utjecaja u Europi, poljuljanog ukrajinskom krizom i aneksijom Krima.

Ključne riječi: prostor bivše Jugoslavije; velike sile; NATO; Rusija; rusko-američki utjecaj; Jugoistočna Europa.