



WESTERN BALKANS AS A BATTLEFIELD FOR THE U.S. AND RUSSIAN INTERESTS

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- What kind of influence and interference do Russia and the U.S. exert in the Western Balkans states over the last ten years?
- What are the implications of the interest of these two countries in each of the Western Balkans states?
- What are the states' responses to the U.S. and Russian interferences?

Introduction

As a junction between the East and the West, Western Balkans are a geostrategically important area in Europe. The six states of the region - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia - have served as a “front line” for confronting geopolitical, economic and strategic interests of the Russian Federation and the United States of America. While some experts, such as Robert Kaplan, claim that the roots of this confrontation are to be found in the common geography, others, like Zbigniew Brzezinski, claim that they actually illustrate divergent political systems, values and ideologies (Stanicek & Caprile, 2023). Whatever lies in the background of such contest it is certain that Western Balkans states also view these superpowers differently. That is, while some states like the North Macedonia have never showed interest in deeper partnerships and affiliations with Russia

and have always wanted to join NATO others, such as Serbia has been strongly tied to Russia due to cultural and geopolitical reasons (Georgievski, 2015). Political leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in contrast, is divided in their attitudes towards the U.S. and Russia, while Kosovo, still not recognised by Russia, is naturally more affiliated to the U.S. (Đorđević, 2025). Finally, since Albania has limited economic and frozen diplomatic relations with Russia, it is therefore not subject to Russian interference and influences, while Albania “unquestioningly follows everything America thinks, not just what it wants” (Loshaj, 2024; Bisenić, 2023).

The aim of this paper's analysis is to answer three core questions. First of them is what kind of influence and interference do Russia and the U.S. exert in the Western Balkans states over the last ten years. Second one is what are the implications of the interest of

these two countries in each of the Western Balkans states, specifically in the wake of more recent events with the arrival of a new president at the helm of the United States, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the disruption in relations between countries at the global level caused by the war, but also due to the well-known overall global influence of these two world powers. The last one is what are the states' responses to the U.S. and Russian interferences. Finally, this paper also offers policy recommendations for Western Balkans' governments to best attend to the two superpowers' influences.

Analysis

Frozen bilateral relations together with the lack of historical, cultural and traditional ties with Albania have made the Russian leadership completely uninterested in interfering this state. However, Bisenić (2023) claims that, in the contemporary age of “anti-Americanism,” there is no country more “American” than Albania, which blindly follows every step the US takes in its intention to create “the Greater Albania”. In fact, the current strong affection from the Albanian side is due to the efforts of the U.S. administration to ensure that Albania remains independent and safe from being divided among the neighbouring counterparts. Hence, Albania perceives the U.S. as a strong political and defence ally and the two states have strong security and military relationships which resulted in Washington's support for Albanian accession in NATO (Rakipi, 2020).

One of the most specific relations of a Western Balkan state with both the U.S. and the

Russian Federation is found in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the two entities of the states, namely Republika Srpska and the Federation of B&H, have different political interests and aspirations, the perceptions of the influence of the West and the East therefore differ among their political leaders and officials.

The attitude of Russia towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is ambivalent just as the attitude of the BiH leadership towards it. Although Russia is a member of the Steering Committee of the Peace Implementation Council of the Dayton Peace Accord, Moscow is encouraging separatist tendencies of Republika Srpska's political officials and their nationalist, anti-state and anti-systemic policies towards Bosnia and Herzegovina (Đukić & Varga, 2019). In addition to Russian “soft power” influences in the entity of Republika Srpska, reflected mainly through support for Serbian militant nationalism, incitement to separatism and anti-NATO sentiment, Russia also advocates for the abolition of the position of the High Representative, with the explanation that its protectorate presence only harms only the state's development and consolidation of democracy (Đukić & Varga, 2019). Besides interference in politics, Russia has also had its hands on Bosnian economy and industry. In 2007, Russia became the fifth largest investor in Bosnia and Herzegovina but was displaced from the list of the largest investors in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the past few years.

On the contrary, the U.S. influence on Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the sphere of politics, has often been a decisive factor for the state's overall development since

its independence, as well as its accession progress in the European Union and NATO (Buljubašić, 2024). Through our analysis, we came to an interesting finding that the U.S.' strategic interest to support the sovereignty, integrity and multiculturalism of Bosnia and Herzegovina have remained the same over the past three decades, despite its leadership changes. This and positive public perception and politicians' attitudes towards the U.S. influences and engagement can be justified by the Washingtons proactive involvement during the war and in the peacemaking and peacebuilding processes (Buljubašić, 2024). However, strong bilateral partnership between these two states is only strong in the sphere of politics, while economic and trade relations between the two states have always been low due to economic and market incompatibilities.

Kosovo's bilateral relations with Russia and the United States are co-related with the state's relations with Serbia. According to Đukić and Varga's (2019) analysis, not only is Kosovo the main stimulating factor of Serbia's domestic and foreign policy, but it is also the geopolitical anchor of Russia in the Western Balkans. Thus, Russia has been a staunch opponent of proposed solutions to reorganise state borders along ethnic lines which its leadership sees as unfavourable to Russian strategic and geopolitical position. Simultaneously, as long as Serbia is dependent on the Russian veto in the UNSC, Moscow is guaranteed a presence in Serbia and indirect involvement in internal affairs of Kosovo. Yet, Kosovo's leadership was very vocal with the majority of Western democra-

cies against Russia and has joined imposed sanctions on Russia. However, aside from these indirect diplomatic interferences, Russia doesn't recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state and their bilateral relations are non-existent.

On the other side, bilateral relations between Kosovo and the United States are largely different and date back to the 1996. After Kosovo's proclamation of independence in 2008, the two states have formally established diplomatic relations and the U.S. Informative Office became a U.S. embassy. Currently, the U.S. is involved in the internal affairs of Kosovo, through its diplomatic mission, with an aim to improve the rule of law, aid in achieving governance and political stability, assisting the state's economic development, support its efforts of integrating into Euro-Atlantic and similar (U.S. Embassy in Kosovo, n.d). However, the depicted inter-state relations are not so bright due to certain ambiguities and disagreements between the political leaders of these two states about the current state of relations.

After Russia annexed Crimea, Montenegrin officials finally broke the dual foreign policy and opted to take the path that leads towards the West. Because of this policy shift the state has faced "soft power" influences as well as harsh Cold War methods and an attempted coup d'état by Russians. In this way, Russia intended to undermine democracy and the sovereignty of Montenegro. Besides this, bilateral relations between the two states have also deteriorated after the mutually imposed

sanctions after 2014 which caused the slump in the flow of Russian tourists to Montenegro and has ultimately negatively affected Montenegrin tourism and economy. However, Montenegro never prioritised foreign trade with Russia and is one of the Western Balkans states that doesn't rely on Russian gas which additionally contributes to its independence from economic and market relations with Russia (Support4Partnership, 2023).

Right after it recognized Montenegro's independence in 2006, the United States established diplomatic relations with the state, which are primarily based on friendly foundations, continuous political dialogue and both-sided efforts for further development, bilaterally as well as through strategic partnership within NATO (Ministarstvo Vanjskih Poslova Crne Gore, n.d). Amongst all other fields, security plays one of the most important determinants of the two states cooperation, since the US has been actively supporting efforts of Montenegrin authorities to join NATO and is currently aiding and advocating for Montenegro's accession into the European Union (Mirković, 2021). Since Montenegro became a part of the NATO in 2017, but also prior to this, the U.S. provided financial, logistical and other types of assistance in fighting organized crime and corruption, strengthening civil society, encouraging independent journalism, promoting the overall socio-political stability, helping the Army of Montenegro to modernise and improve, supporting Montenegrin health-care system during the COVID-19 pandemic, etc. (Mirković, 2021).

North Macedonia has never been a particularly important, let alone a priority, for Russian foreign diplomacy so the Russian influences and interference in Macedonian internal political situation is largely mirrored in its counter-Euro-Atlantic strategy. However, there was a sudden increase of Russian interest in this WB state in 2015 which was rationalised by Russian aim to achieve its own strategic goals of showing that the U.S. and the EU should be concerned for other states besides Ukraine and Greece as well as to present the West as the greatest enemy for Russian interests (Georgievski, 2015). Such a shift in Russian foreign policy also illustrates how its activities in the Western Balkans in general are merely based on its perception of the U.S. (Georgievski, 2015). However, North Macedonia, along with Kosovo and Montenegro for instance, has shown a high level of alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and has also publicly showed strong support of UN resolutions and European Union's sanctions condemning Russian aggression of Ukraine in 2022 (Support4Partnership, 2023).

Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1995, North Macedonia and the U.S. have signed numerous bilateral agreements for scientific and technological cooperation, criminals' prosecution, agriculture and rural development, defence and military relations, funding, economic assistance and the like (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020). Throughout the years, the relationship between these two states has been strong and stable in a geopo-

litical and strategic sense, even amid certain security, economic and political challenges. In fact, proactive engagement of the US in North Macedonia and their successful constructive cooperation in the field of politics, military and defence, economy as well as in the socio-cultural aspect has had a positive impact on stabilisation of North Macedonia's government and has helped it become a candidate for the EU membership and made it a member of NATO. Also, the U.S. continuously advocated and financed North Macedonian democratic, judiciary and economic reforms.

Serbia is a Western Balkans state that is influenced the most by Russia and its foreign policy strategies, owing to the long-standing historical ties, a common religious belief and ethno-linguistic community. Russian influences in Serbia are carried out by various means and on a wide range of aspects – political, economic, media, security and social, while also resorting to hybrid warfare methods which aim to influence public opinion and internal political processes (Šormaz, 2025). In terms of its political influence, Russian high-profile politicians and policy-makers are affiliated to pro-Russian political parties in the state, it has a proactive diplomatic corps tasked with spreading Russian narratives and the two states have established strong inter-institutional networks and collaborations. Besides Russian embassy, pro-Russian national media outlets are also spreading Russian propaganda by continuously promoting the notion of world domination of “just Orthodox Russia” and the imminent collapse of the “rotten West”

(Šormaz, 2025). In the economical aspect, Russian influences are mostly reflected in Serbia's energy dependence on Russian gas as well as in certain investments infrastructure and energy (Šormaz, 2025). However, trade relations and the presence of Russian capital, at least in comparison to other countries, are negligible in Serbia (Petrović, 2022).

When it comes to relations between Serbia and the U.S., they are marked by various stable and destabilised periods in the periods after internationally imposed sanctions on Serbia in the 1990s and amid negotiations on the status of Kosovo (Igrutinović, 2018). From Serbian approval of the Russian annexation of Crimea, Serbia-U.S. relations have largely remained strained, but with several attempts to establish a strategic dialogue regarding several key areas, including economy, trade and investment, energy, environment, technology, media, regional and European political issues, defence and security, human rights and the rule of law (Euronews Srbija, 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Russian Federation and the United States have for decades been involved in the internal affairs of the Western Balkans. In addition, the recently elected American administration has led to a more open conflict between the two powers' perspectives regarding the future they see for this region. Also, conflicting positions on NATO integration has even emphasised the influence of both powers in the region, especially since Serbia and Bosnia are the only states who are out of the alliance, with the exception of

unrecognised Kosovo. Hence, the geopolitical struggle is even more narrowed down to these two states. Although the best solution for the WB states would be to maintain good relations with both of these superpowers and benefit the most from each of their engagement, this analysis has found different affiliations and affections are shown by the six respective states towards the two superpowers. For instance, while Serbia is leaning more towards the Russian Federation while North Macedonian politicians and general public is affiliated with the U.S. since it never had any significant ties with Russia anyway. Montenegro, on the other side, has been a profitable soil for Russian investments and businesses while Albania is the most “American” state in the region with frozen relations with Russia. Kosovo, however, still remains unrecognised by Russia and therefore has no relations with it. The most specific case is Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has internally diverse political affiliations towards the U.S. and Russia.

In general, the official position of states’ political leadership who perceive Russia as a threat should be focused on the Euro-Atlantic unity which is the crucial element of peace- and democracy- building efforts. More precisely, their orientations towards the West should serve as one of the means to combat the malign influence of Russia on their soil. Hence, those pro-Western Western Balkans states, such as Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro should aim to minimise Russian influences and economic and/or energy dependence on Russia, to ensure the U.S. administration remains their strong ally and partner. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have more or less ambiguous position towards Russia and the U.S. should converge their internal and foreign policies with their affiliations towards only one of the two superpowers. Taking a strong either pro-Russian or pro-U.S. stance is the only way in which Western Balkans states can fulfil their political, economic and security ambitions.

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