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## STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS AND GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS: THE BALKAN THEATRE IN THE RUSSO-WESTERN POWER PLAY

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper investigates the contemporary geopolitical struggle for influence in the Balkans between the Western powers and Russia. It discusses the implications of geopolitical dynamics for regional stability and international relations, emphasising the strategic use of diplomacy by Russia and Western actors, their economic investments and soft power in the Western Balkans. The evolution of European Union and NATO policies towards the Balkans reflect the wider goals of integrating the region into Western political and economic structures while the Russian strategic manoeuvres revolve around using the region's political vulnerability and maintaining strategic ties with its counterparts in the region with whom they share ideological and religious ties. This paper seeks to reveal the initiatives, tools and resources used by the opponents to exert influence in the Western Balkans.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Balkans; influence; deterrence; West; Russia; USA; EU; UK.

### 1. Introduction

This paper investigates the contemporary geopolitical struggle for influence in the Balkans between the Western powers and Russia. The strategic importance of the region with its tumultuous history and position at the crossroads between the Eastern and Western spheres of influence represents a terrain for continuous power play of the great powers. Both adversaries use multiple tools, resources and power to exert their dominance in the region. Historically, political elites in Russia perceived the Balkans as a very important strategic area for state economic and political interests (Abrahamyan, 2015). In contemporary times, Russian Federation relies heavily on spiritual ties, investment in the energy sector and intelligence activity to entice those political stakeholders who share

similar ideological values (Galeotti, 2019; Džankić et al., 2018; Lo, 2002). In response to the apparent vulnerability of state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other parts of the Balkans, Western powers have, in addition to state-building processes, strategically concentrated their efforts Euro-Atlantic integrations of Western Balkan countries, focusing on democratisation as well as supporting and utilising capacity of civil society sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in particular (Bieber&Tzifakis, 2020). This focus is part of a broader geopolitical initiative in which actors such as the United States (US), the European Union, and the United Kingdom (UK) allocate significant financial resources to counter Russian influence in the Balkans (Džankić et al., 2018). This study emphasises that despite tactical variations in approaches to the field, the comprehensive strategy of Western powers in suppressing the influence of competing interests in the Balkans remains unique based on the goal of aligning the region with Western political and economic institutions.

## **2. Geopolitics of the Balkans: A brief historical prelude**

For centuries the Balkans has been a site of interest for great powers. The Ottomans ruled the area for over 500 years and managed to transform and suitably modify social, political, and economic aspects of human life during long-lasting dominance. The Russians since the eighteenth century have been ceaselessly interested and involved in Balkan affairs dominantly because of czarist ambitions of access to the Mediterranean Sea. From a geographical and demographic perspective, the Russians were principally interested in the eastern part of the Balkans, which included Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece. Their efforts were rewarded by the 1881 creation of the first spheres of influence, whereby Austro-Hungary held sway over the Western Balkans and Russia over the Eastern (Bekich, 1985). World War I events had a remarkable impact on the political atmosphere in the Balkans: Austro-Hungary, as one of the great powers, vanished; a new state, Yugoslavia and Albania, emerged; and the United States as a new global power showed its interest in Balkan affairs (Rene, 1958).

Due to its strategic position on the map, the Balkans was an area of extreme significance for great powers during World War II as well. In 1941, the Nazi army invaded Yugoslavia and automatically posed a direct threat to Soviet security and interests. Furthermore, this invasion added to an establishment of a “natural alliance” composed of Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, against the advancement of the Axis powers. Soon after the invasion of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Partisans or the National Liberation Army organized resistance against the Nazi invasion. It was a Communist-led resistance (led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia) headed by Marshall Josip Broz Tito. Their efforts have been considered one of the most effective anti-Axis resistance movements during World War II. In 1946, Yugoslavia was officially renamed the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia

when a communist government was established, and Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito was elected president. Josip Broz Tito ruled the country until he died in 1980.

When Yugoslavia was resisting the Nazis in its territory, the Soviet military (Red Army) was growing and advancing throughout Southeast Europe. Such military advancement gave them a superior position in the negotiations over spheres of influence in the Balkans with the Western allies in general and Britain in particular. In October 1944, Stalin and Churchill signed an agreement concerning spheres of power in the Balkans: the agreement partitioned Yugoslavia 50-50, Bulgaria 75-25, and Romania 90-10 in favour of the Soviet Union, while Greece was divided 10-90 in turn of the British and Western allies (Bekich, 1985). This partition of spheres of influence was regarded as the first sign of weakening Western power in the Balkans. Furthermore, the establishment of the Communist Information Bureau (CIB) in 1947 and the establishment or imposition of communist and pro-Soviet regimes in all Balkan states except Greece could be seen as the highest point of Soviet influence. Soon after the communist insurgency rose in Greece in 1946, the United Kingdom announced it could no longer contain communism and transferred the responsibility to the United States. In 1947, the USA launched a military assistance programme to Greece and Turkey, known as the Truman Doctrine, signalling future presence.

Even though it seemed the Soviet Union had absolute control over Yugoslavia after establishing the CIB, Tito refused to submit to Stalin's proposals. Parallel to carrying out the five-year economic development plan aimed to strengthen the industrialization of Yugoslavia, which was opposite to the Soviet's instruction, Tito pursued a foreign policy strategy that supported regional unity and countered Soviet dominance. He was undoubtedly a prominent political figure in the Balkan peninsula with charisma and great authority among the people. It is no secret that foreign officials were often impressed by his personality and the support he received from his advisers. However, although with a solid political character, Tito needed desperate help to save the Yugoslav economy, which was significantly affected by the pressure from Moscow. The need for service in industry, agriculture and health was more than evident.

Without hesitation, the United States decided to lend a helping hand to Tito and Yugoslavia. Although cooperation with the communist government sounded very controversial, the Truman administration noted the potential of Tito and the Yugoslav elite as a possible disruptive element in the communist world. As the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson in the Truman administration reportedly noted in 1949, "The Yugoslav dictator (Tito) might be a "son-of-a-bitch" ... but he was now "our son-of-a-bitch"" (Gaddis, 2005). Shortly after the split with Moscow, Yugoslavia began receiving grants and loans from the United States to recover its economy and industry. In the years that followed, the influx of American public and private sector activity increased, affecting the Yugoslav

economic, educational and social fields.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the American presence in the Balkans was further strengthened. Russia, on the other hand, had in the early 1990s faced a downturn in coping with its own transition. However, both countries participated in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans starting in 1995. In the early to mid-1990s, instability and crises in the Balkans required a strong response from the international community and new forms of political and military cooperation. A single IFOR operation united NATO and Russian troops under a special command system, with NATO and Russian troops executing missions and tasks according to a single operational plan, with a common purpose, a common mission, and common rules of engagement. NATO and Russia have committed thousands of troops to the NATO-led SFOR and KFOR Balkan operations, serving side-by-side with a joint mission, successfully accomplishing a myriad of complex military tasks while operating in a shared risk environment (NATO, 2003). Also, Russian troops participated in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo starting in 1999, contributing, in addition to their regular duties, to the restoration and operation of the airport in Pristina, and the management of a hospital that provided crucial medical services to the local population (NATO, 2003). The presence of Russian military forces in the Balkans for peacekeeping operations lasted until 2003, when their official withdrawal from this region took place (NATO, 2003). The Russian participation in the joint operation was also a reflection of the unipolar order and geopolitical circumstances at the time. The Russian Federation was undergoing the transition and state-building process and was not considered nor acted as a super-power in the late 1990ies and early 2000s.

With the end of the instability in Kosovo, the European Union decided to use its enlargement policy as an umbrella framework for consolidating peace and stability in the Western Balkans, and this invitation to the Balkan countries was supplemented by a similar offer from NATO (Bieber & Tzifakis, 2020). However, due to new challenges and priorities that plagued the European Union as well as the NATO organisation, the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region has not progressed as originally planned. In addition to political and economic problems within the European Union, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a crucial factor in changing the balance of power politics in the Balkan region. At the same time, the preoccupation of most of the Balkan countries with economic problems, democratic setbacks, and corruption has given space for Russia's 're-entry' points to this region. Russia has used various types of instruments to exert its influence in the Balkans, focusing on actors with whom it has cultural and religious ties, Serbia, Republika Srpska (Bosnia-Herzegovina entity), Montenegro, and North Macedonia, acting as a spoiler of various Western initiatives (Bieber&Tzifakis, 2020).

### **3. Literature Review and Impact**

Struggle for geopolitical influence in the Balkans has political, historical, and strategic dimensions. The main problem of the struggle for influence in the Balkans is between the West, led by the United States, and Russia, which traditionally has its own interests in this part of Europe. Due to a perceived threat of increased Russian influence and the fact that part of the region is already integrated into political and military 'Western' organisations, the collective West mainly develops strategies to suppress the spread of Russian influence dominantly in the Balkan states that are not yet full members of NATO or the European Union.

Russia and the West have fundamental differences in how they see and define the Balkan region. In addition to the obvious Russian goal of preventing the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union and NATO, there are also deep differences in the narrative and terminology according to the current political development of the situation in the Balkans in which Russia approaches the Balkans as a wider region and integral definitions as "Balkans" and "Central and Southeast Europe", while the West promotes narrower geographical and political definitions such as the "Western Balkan Six", (Entina & Pivovarenko, 2020; Strategic Comments, 2019), the categorisation that reflects the fact that the six countries aspire, but have not yet joined the EU. Although Russia has had an inconsistent policy towards the Balkans due to internal political changes, Russia has preserved an integral vision of the region and the development of constructive transregional projects that, according to Entina and Pivovarenko, can promote stability and be useful for Russia and the Euro-Atlantic society (Entina & Pivovarenko, 2020). The Western alliance, predominantly spearheaded by the United States, plays a pivotal role in the geopolitical dynamics of the Balkans. This observation is particularly salient when considering the limitations of the European Union in this context. The EU, characterised by its complex institutional structure, appears to be less effective in extending its influence and in driving consequential geopolitical transformations within the Balkan region. In this regard, Lami in his study believes that the European Union maintains a status quo in the Western Balkans and maintains a hesitant approach in geopolitical comparisons with other powers such as Russia, China and Turkey (Lami, 2020). The lack of influence and role of the EU leadership in the Balkans opens up space primarily for Russian geopolitical advancement in the Balkans, which uses crises in the European Union to form its foreign policy towards the states of this part of Europe (Peeva, 2016).

The main pillar of Russian activity and influence in these regions is Serbia, which occupies the central part of Southeastern Europe and maintains very good relations with the Russian Federation primarily due to its ethnic and spiritual ties (Abrahamyan, 2015). In his research, Djokic states that Russia has great potential for peaceful diplomacy and the expansion of soft power in the Western Balkans in today's geopolitical circumstances, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union,

which had a uniform ideological approach to “soft power” politics (Djokic, 2020). Nevertheless, the author states that the approaches and methods of Russian diplomacy as well as the potential financing of various projects (which can be used to spread cultural influence in the region) will largely determine whether the Russian Federation can endure in the struggle for influence in the region against direct rivals of the United States and the European Union. (Djokic, 2020).

Russian influence in the Balkans also creates space for the spread of hybrid threats that are used to exploit the vulnerabilities of certain Balkan states in security spheres, primarily with the aim of opposing EU and NATO expansion and influencing energy transportation infrastructure (Bihari, 2019; Khudolei & Koloskov, 2021). In this respect, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the most vulnerable country in the Balkans primarily due to its structure, which is based on a quasi-federal arrangement of power sharing. The close relations of a Bosnian entity of Republika Srpska with Russia provide scope for preventing, i.e. blocking the entry of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the NATO alliance (Sharifzoda, 2020). In order to maintain political influence in the region, Jagiello states that Russia will not hesitate to use a scenario of hybrid action as in Ukraine (Jagiello, 2021). He believes that the consistent policy of accession of the Balkan countries to the European Union and the economic strengthening of the member countries are the only tools for weakening Russian influence in the region (Jagiello, 2021). However, it is important to note that the process of joining the Union is a complicated process for the countries of the Western Balkans, primarily Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, due to the harmonisation of their foreign and security policies with the European Union. For this reason, these countries are torn between the intention of joining the EU and harmonising with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU on the one hand and avoiding the disruption of existing relations with the Russian Federation (Đukanović, 2015).

The European Union and the United States/NATO share the same strategic goals in the Western Balkans, which are primarily based on guaranteeing the independence of Kosovo, preserving the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and keeping the entire region on the Euro-Atlantic path by not allowing strategic partnerships between the countries of the region and the Russian Federation.

In the context of the analysis of the US policy in the Balkans and the process of suppressing Russian interests, our research has a dominant focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on the reviewed literature, several potential gaps can be identified. First, our study aims to compare the US, EU, and British strategies in Bosnia and Herzegovina/Balkans in terms of strengthening Western influence in the region. This primarily refers to the focus on similarities and differences in approach, which provides valuable insights in the geopolitical assessment of the Balkans. The individual approaches of the aforementioned powers to the Balkan region have been discussed to a certain extent

in the literature, especially in terms of the West's attitude towards the turbulent 90s. For instance, Ivanov in his study analysed strategies of the United States and the UK towards Russia and the Balkans after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wars and turbulence in the Balkans in the 90s. In his study, he emphasised the shift in the US administration's policy towards Russia, which went from liberal internationalism to containment policy (Ivanov, 2020).

Second, the role and influence of non-state actors, such as the media, NGOs, private corporations, as tools in shaping geopolitical dynamics in the Balkans is a field that has not been sufficiently explored. Therefore, the analysis provided in this study on Western support to non-state actors in the fight against Russian influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans provides a more nuanced understanding of the power play. Finally, our study provides insight into contemporary Russian strategies and tactics. This includes an analysis of the development of the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans over the past two decades with a focus on the Russian expansion of influence through investments in the energy sector, intelligence activities, and maintaining spiritual ties with its counterparts in the region. In terms of data collection and methodology, this study uses qualitative research methods. The research provides contextual historical analysis covering the period after World War II to the present, with an emphasis on major geopolitical events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the end of the Cold War, EU and NATO expansion efforts, and focuses on Russia's path, in the past 20 years, to return to the Balkans. It uses primary and secondary sources including historical documents, diplomatic communications, official government announcements, reports and previous academic studies relevant to geopolitical changes in the Balkans. Also, this study aims to provide insight into the importance of non-state actors in international relations, and their role that complements or challenges the roles traditionally held by nation-states.

#### **4. Russian Entry Points in the Balkans**

The main goal of the Russian presence in the Balkans has been manifested in preventing the integration of the countries of the region into Euro-Atlantic, Western institutions. In this sense, the area of the Balkans has become the focal point of the conflict of interests of Western countries, led by the United States, and Russia. The Russian Federation has been using economic, political and soft tools to exert its influence in the Balkan countries. Government controlled corporations have invested in energy and petrol sectors in the region as well as in tourism and property. Apart from economic tools, Russia uses diplomacy and soft tools to extend its influence on the media and culture. The Russian Orthodox Church is a powerful ally to the government in gaining popularity and influence on a sizable Christian Orthodox population in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro

and North Macedonia (Stronski, Himes, 2019). Russian intelligence activity is also quite vibrant. It is believed that the Russian humanitarian centre in Niš, Serbia is the front for the Russian intelligence operations in the region (Stronski, Himes, 2019).

Russia finds its main strongholds in Serbia and the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska (RS). The Russian ties with Serbia have been strengthened over the last decade. Apart from the Russian investment in the energy sector, both countries claim historical and cultural commonalities and rely on those to play a role in the relationship. The countries also increased their cooperation in the security sector by signing military technical assistance agreements in 2016. Russia supplied Serbia with MIG-29 fighters (Radio Free Europe, 2017) and the countries conducted joint military exercises. Popular support to the Russian aggression on Ukraine has been evident in Serbia while the Serbian government, although reserved to show support, refused to follow the lead of the European Union to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation. Russia also exploits the negative sentiment towards NATO and Western organizations in Serbia and Republika Srpska connected to the 1999 NATO intervention against Serbia amid the Kosovo war.

With the aim of assessing the current political situation in Serbia, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy conducted a survey of public opinion at the national level in Serbia in 2023. In addition to the findings on citizens' views on internal policies and events, the perspectives of Serbian citizens on international issues were of particular importance for this research. A survey conducted revealed that 43.1% of Serbian respondents viewed Russia's attack on Ukraine as justified, whereas 36% opposed it. The same survey indicated a divided national identity, with 42.6% of participants stating that Serbia does not align with either the West or the East, while 28.1% leaned towards the East and 17.3% towards the West. In terms of international alliances, 42.1% of respondents preferred reliance on Russia, followed by 25.8% favouring the EU. A significant 74.3% opposed imposing sanctions on Russia. Additionally, the New Third Way organisation's 2023 study highlighted that 66% of Serbians blamed the West for the conflict in Ukraine, and while 43% considered Russia as Serbia's most crucial political ally, 51% saw the EU as the economic solution. This reflects a broader trend noted by the National Institute for Democracy, which documented a rise in pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia, increasing by over 20% since 2013.

Apart from Serbia, the Putin's administration has also found a fruitful ground in entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska where Russian companies have sizable, although very dubious, investments and where they found an ally in a leading politician of the entity, Milorad Dodik. Dodik has been enjoying support of the Russian Ambassadors who continuously blocked any attempt of condemnation of Dodik's separatist politics in the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), an institutional body established to oversee the implementation of Dayton Peace Agreement (Kožljak,

2020). The influence is being exerted through media, church and by official agreements between states' education institutions (mladibl.com, 2023). In terms of popular support, for instance, the results of the Metrics Agency's research in the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska in 2023 showed that the citizens of this entity have great sympathy for the Russian Federation. To the question "Which countries, besides Serbia, do you see as friends of Republika Srpska?" 46% of respondents answered 'Russia', 15% answered 'Hungary', 15% 'China', and 8% answered 'Montenegro' (Metrics, 2023). The same survey showed that 39% of respondents in the Republika Srpska entity believe that the entry of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the EU would not have a direct impact on their lives, while 28% of respondents believed that such a development would have a significant impact on the lives of citizens (Metrics, 2023).

The Russian influence in Montenegro has started with a heavy investment in property and tourism on the Adriatic coast and has been spreading on political and religious actors and affiliations. This culminated in the 2016 elections when Russia tried to rig the election results to bring their supporters in power (Secrieru, 2019). The 2020 elections in Montenegro brought a relative victory to pro-Russian parties. These developments have led to a growing instability in Montenegro, creating divisions along the lines of pro- Russian and pro- European forces. In North Macedonia, Russia supported nationalistic VMRO-DPMNE party to accomplish its hegemonic objectives in the country. The regression of democratic political practice demonstrated in forcible removal of a number of opposition MPs and journalists from Parliament on 24th December 2012, triggering a political crisis and contributing to deterioration of media freedom and human rights (European Commission, 2013). After 2014 presidential elections, by emphasising its relations with Russia and appealing to ethno-nationalistic and religious sentiments, VMRO-DPMNE gained overwhelming support of ethnic North Macedonians (Karišik, 2021). Russia supported VMRO-DPMNE amid mounting tensions between 2015-2017, thus contributing to growing instability in the country (Stronski, Himes, 2019). The corruption affairs and widespread wiretapping scandal contributed to VMRO-DPMNE narrowly losing elections in 2016 (Dimishkovski, 2016). However, the stalling of the North Macedonian EU accession, due to the Bulgarian blockade, have brought the party back in power in 2024 (Zoksimovska & Heil, 2024).

While actively pursuing interest, Russia is also engaging in suppressing the Western influence in the Balkans, mainly by promoting a controversial 'foreign agents' law that imposes non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to publicly declare themselves as 'agents of foreign influence' in case they receive any funding from abroad. After a failed attempt to get the 'foreign agents' law passed, in another geo-strategic region – Caucasus, by the Georgian parliament, (Cordell, 2023), they found fertile ground in the Balkans by attempting to have the law passed by the BiH entity Republika Srpska

(RS). The law that is in parliamentary procedure in RS would restrict any advocacy activity by non-governmental organisations receiving funds by foreign donors (Lučka, 2023). This is a clear attempt to contain the progressive civil society actors which align their agendas with and receive assistance from the Western-based donors. The „chilling effect“ of this legislative action has already been felt among the civil society actors in Republika Srpska through exercising self-censorship and showing restraint in opposing the policy.

## **5. Strategies and Approaches by Western Powers in the Balkans**

The Western government donors have, since the early 1990s, been unambiguous about their intent to link the development aid to political goals. Adopting increasingly political goals and pursuit of democratic governance and emphasis on state-citizen's relational values have affected the evolution of aid organizations' operations methods. To produce the desired change and gain understanding of local contexts, the development actors have broadened the range of actors with which they partner (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013).

The Western powers, primarily European Union (EU) and its Member States, US and UK, have had an undisputed influence in shaping the regions' policy and outlook towards the Euro-Atlantic integration in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and the break-up of the country. The interest has been revived with increased Russian influence in the region. These players have devised strategies and approaches to deter the Russian threat and, through their development aid agencies and diplomatic missions, fund and implement projects that support Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the countries and contribute to overall development and democratization. The American administration that sponsored the Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with their Atlantic allies, had led international efforts to assist state-building processes and create democratic institutions in line with the Washington Consensus. Citizens' participation, inclusion and state-citizen relations were at the heart of these processes and development aid organizations had supported creation and capacity building of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that share neoliberal values and operational requirements of the Western donors. This type of organizations together with private contractors have become main recipients and implementers of donor aid programmes in the contemporary times, making these non-state actors politically unneutral and development aid politically contentious issue (Basu, 2011). Deterring malign foreign influence have re-energised efforts of Western allies in the Western Balkans. Supporting democratization processes through citizens' participation and free media assistance and strengthening economic base and free market economy have been a main intervention vehicle of the development assistance. Private service providers and NGOs that the devel-

opment agencies have supported and groomed throughout the years of transition in the Western Balkans have become the main partners in the process. The objectives and support to non-state actors in the Western Balkans are aligned with the political objectives related to the Euro-Atlantic integrations. The participating NGOs are required to engage in advocacy for policy making across various thematic areas including the fight against corruption, enhancement of professional capacity of media and increasing the inclusion of minorities into the societies. While the US and the UK rely more on Western-based private sector service providers to deliver economic assistance (and media assistance programming), the EU and its Member States increasingly rely on international and inter-governmental organisations for such contracts. The main partner of the EU for the economic assistance programmes in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (*EU4Business, EU4AGRI*). Partnering with other UN agencies as well as Member States' development organisations, i.e. German government development agency GIZ, UNDP provides technical assistance and channels EU funding to private sector, civil society organisations and development agencies. Bypassing governmental structures, by engaging civil society actors, private sector contractors and international organisations, signals the lack of trust in the state institutions (Acht et al., 2015), but also demonstrates the high mobilising capacity that enables these governments and institutions to assert influence through various channels and soft power.

### ***5.1. European Union***

The European Union strategy and assistance to the Balkan non-member state countries is focused on supporting the countries on their path to the EU accession. The consistent policy of accession and economic strengthening are the main tools the EU utilises to weaken Russian influence in the Western Balkans (Jagiełło, 2021). The EU's main vehicle for bringing the Western Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, and Türkiye closer to the Union is the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). The Instrument has been operational since 2007 and its main objective is to support reform processes in targeted countries by providing technical and financial assistance (*europa.eu*). Since 2007, the IPA has been upgraded and re-resourced and its third phase aims to progressively align beneficiary countries' policies and practices with the EU's rules, standards, policies and values. Adopting legislation in line with the European Union's *acquis*, which is the collection of common responsibilities and rights that constitute the body of EU law incorporated in members' legal systems (*eur-lex.europa.eu*).

The EU IPA assistance comes with a hefty financial envelope, although conditioned by strict requirements and dependent on the countries' abilities to develop sound and mature project proposals. IPA III (2021-2027) Multiannual Financial Framework, based on EU thematic priorities, is

designed to reward progress and performance by the countries rather than to make country-based allocations. The indicative allocations per thematic areas include:

	<b>%</b>	<b>Million EUR</b>
Window 1: Rule of law, fundamental rights and democracy	15,13%	2.089
Window 2: Good governance, EU acquis alignment, good neighbourly relations and strategic communication	16,59%	2.291
Window 3: Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	42,45%	5.860
Window 4: Competitiveness and inclusive growth	22,31%	3.080
Window 5: Territorial and cross-border cooperation	3,51%	485
Administrative Appropriations	0,17%	357
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>14.162</b>

Table 1: IPA III Indicative allocations; Source: European Commission (*IPA III Programming Framework*)

Compared to the EU, the aspirant countries are confronted with high levels of income disparity (Bucevska, 2019). Hence, recognizing that economic convergence is essential in bringing Western Balkans closer to the EU, the IPA instrument have been aligned with Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (2020) and Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (2023) that envisages EUR 6 billion investment in grants and loans for economic integration through Common Regional Market. In addition, 2023 EU Enlargement Package (*European Commission, 2023*) provides assessment for every aspirant country and guidance for implementation in the key reform areas.

The EU's main instrument for supporting non-state actors is the annual, regional and country specific, Civil Society Facility (CSF) and Media Programme that aims to enhance regional cooperation, good neighbourly relations and reconciliation and strengthen participatory democracies and the EU approximation process in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. The regional CSF and Media Programme is part of the IPA assistance and a significant part, 60 percent, of the EUR 14 mil budget for 2021-2023 is earmarked for sub-granting of the grassroots organisations, which significantly increases the outreach of the programme. Apart from CSF and Media Programme, the EU makes annual contributions of EUR 1-2 million to NGOs through Instruments for Democracy and Human Rights that mainly addresses policy issues and social inclusion of marginalised population groups.

The accession process being a main EU strategy to deter Russian and other malign influences in the Western Balkans makes the EU a less effective player in the process. The lengthy bureaucratic procedures do not allow for swift response to political developments and changing context. The political interests of the Member States are also not always aligned with the EU Enlargement policy

and, thus, are impacting the decision making at the EU institutional level and indirectly aiding the Russian agenda. Thus far this has affected the North Macedonian accession path the most, with Greece blocking its accession bid until 2019 over to the country's name dispute and most recently with Bulgaria sabotaging the North Macedonian membership due to history and language related dispute (Brey, 2023). The EU officials, however, are explicit when it comes to their political agenda. During the 2024 Munich Security Conference, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen stated that the EU's intention is to have the Western Balkans along with Ukraine as part of the European Union and that this is a part of the EU strategy to 'stop Putin'. The realist paradigm von der Leyen laid out is that "there are no grey zones...either you are with Putin or you are with the democracies"(Ukrinform, 2024).

The main impediment when it comes to Western Balkans' countries accession processes is genuine lack of political will and lack of capacities to design and implement reform processes and adapt the legislation to the EU *acquis*. The post-conflict and post-transition societies of the Western Balkans are impaired with insufficient functionality and stability of democratic institutions and are infected with corruption (Delalić & Delalić, 2024). On the other hand, the EU institutions are not sufficiently sensitive to the post conflict context and deficiencies of systematic processes in societies that have been impacted by a conflict (Čakal & Ramić Mesihović, 2024). Bosnia and Herzegovina is a prime example of such a country that have, in the aftermath of the conflict, also undergone a state-building process in an imperfect structural setting that have encouraged identity politics and ethno-nationalism to thrive, making it exposed to other influences that lean on similar political agenda.

## **5.2. United States**

In the post-Cold War era, the United States has dominated a unipolar international order that in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with an increased economic and political influence of China and Russia, have started transforming. The gains the US and its Western allies have accomplished in terms of promoting neoliberal order in Eastern and Central Europe have also started to erode under the Russian influence and aggressive policy. The US Government has, thus, been investing efforts and resources to counter the Russian influence since 2017. The 2021 State Department report on "Countering Russian Influence Fund" (CRIF) reveals that the US Government has spent over USD 1 billion in the period 2017 – 2021 to fund activities of civil society actors and other entities. The activities were geared towards strengthening democratic institutions and processes, promoting rule of law, media, cyber, and other programmes with specific purpose to counter Russian influence and aggression. Over USD 621 million was invested in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans by

allocating USD 80,846,580 to Bosnia and Herzegovina, USD 67,472,572 to North Macedonia, USD 61,157,070 to Kosovo, USD 55,567,000 to Serbia, and USD 50,021,746 to Montenegro (Dragojlo, 2022). To further deter the threat, the US Government, through its USAID Bureau for Europe and Eurasia, in 2019, launched a policy called “Countering Malign Kremlin Influence (CMKI) Development Framework” (*usaid.gov*). The policy intent was to tailor assistance to address the most urgent threats posed by the Russian Federation while interventions were designed to strengthen the democratic institutions and rule of law, resist manipulation of information, reduce energy dependency, and reduce economic vulnerabilities. The USAID's assessment shows significant or moderate influence in all the target areas in the Western Balkans while activities USAID supports have to a great extent been directly or indirectly aligned with CMKI objectives.

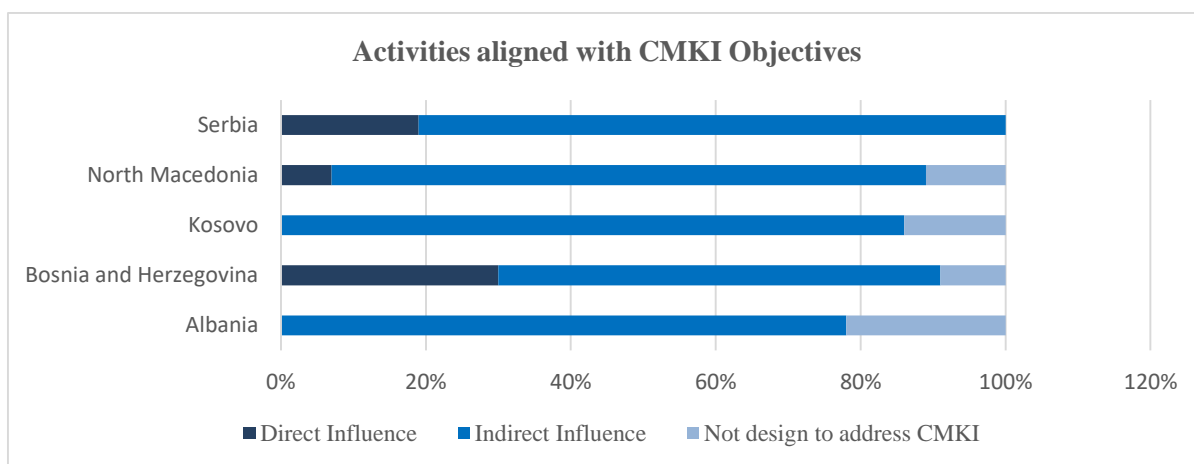


Figure 1: USAID activities aligned with CMKI objectives, Source: Countering Malign Kremlin Influence Development Framework Implementation Report

### 5.3. United Kingdom

While aligning its agenda with the European Union and the United States, the United Kingdom has, in the aftermath of Brexit, made an attempt to distinct its foreign policy and assert influence through diplomatic efforts and development assistance programmes. In the report “*The UK and the future of the Western Balkans*” (2018) of the House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations, the UK legislators assess the situation and make the commitment to continued engagement in the region in order to prevent deterioration of progress achieved towards the democratization, the integration with the West and deterrence of third countries influence including the Russian Federation. The report detects challenges in a form of authoritarian leadership, rise of ethno-nationalism, weakening of democratic institutions and serious threat from organised crime and corruption. The foreign ‘spoilers’ exacerbate the issues. The British Council – Written Evidence (BUB0029) submitted to the UK Parliament expresses concern over increased Russian influence through media funding,

investments in the energy sector and by supporting nationalist movements (committees.parliament.uk). Hence, in the period 2020-2023, the UK had invested, through its development assistance agency, GBP 16.5 million in Western Balkans Media, Cyber and Defence (MCD) Programme, GBP 10 million in Western Balkans Serious and Organised Crime Programme, and GBP 15.9 million in Western Balkans Stability Programme targeting civil society, think tanks and media actors (*gov.uk*). Further commitment to counter the region's internal and external destabilizing influences has been confirmed through 2023 UK – Western Balkans Region Development Partnership (*gov.uk*) and direct technical assistance in the security sector (Reuters, 2022).

## **6. Conclusions**

The ongoing geopolitical struggle for influence in the Western Balkans between the Western powers and Russian Federation showcases the variety of instruments the parties use to establish dominance and shape the political outlook of the region. Russia seeks to expand and maintain its influence in the Balkans through economic investment that mainly serves its own interest and soft power - historical, religious and cultural ties, that appeals to those pursuing and supporting identity politics. The economic investment includes the strategic investments in vital sectors like energy, petroleum, tourism, and real estate across several Balkan states, notably Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, while its soft power is mainly exercised through the Orthodox Church, political establishment with whom they share the ideological platform and politically controlled media. Russia's main interest is to regress the processes of Euro-Atlantic integrations in the Western Balkans and decrease the influence of the Western powers that have established a strong footprint in the region. The region's democratic setbacks paired with high corruption and economic issues has given Russia the opportunity to exploit political vulnerabilities and open 're-entry' points. On the other hand, the focus of the Western powers is based on strong financial assistance and building a strategic partnership with the countries of the Western Balkans, with an emphasis on the integration of the region into the EU and NATO. The key approach of the European Union is reflected in the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which has been operational since 2007, and which primarily helps align the policies of the beneficiary countries with EU standards through significant technical and financial assistance. The United States is also investing significant financial resources to combat Russian influence in the Balkans, with over \$1 billion spent between 2017 and 2021 through the Countering Russian Influence Fund (CRIF). Between 2020 and 2023, the UK, through its development aid agency, has invested GBP 16.5 million in the Western Balkans Media, Cyber and Defense (MCD) programme; GBP 10 million in the program to combat serious and or-

rganised crime in the Western Balkans; and GBP 15.9 million in the Western Balkans Stability Program. Their outreach is enhanced by using significant development aid that is able to mobilise civil society, including non-governmental organisations, private sector and media, whose support is sustained through long-term financial assistance. The rationale of Western powers is to strengthen democratic governance and encourage economic development in the region and, thus, demonstrate benefits of Euro-Atlantic integrations. The region, however, is at the cross-point and, while benefits of joining the EU and NATO supersede the interest of closing the political ties with Russia, it is essential for the Western powers to maintain interest, support and pressure in order to keep the momentum and advance the region's path into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

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