Romania’s Concentric Circles ‘in the Line of Fire’?

The Impact of Hybrid Actions and a Possible ’Ukrainian Scenario’ in the Balkans

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Executive Summary

The ongoing Ukrainian crisis represents one of the biggest security challenges in the Post Cold War Europe. Situated ‘in the line of fire,’ Romania has to undertake a series of actions to enable effective cooperation between the elements in the NATO chain of military response in the Eastern flank and at the Black Sea region. However, we argue that this should not be the only area of concern for Bucharest. The subtle spill-over effects of the Ukraine crisis into the Balkans are becoming increasingly worrying.

The main policy issue addressed by this paper tackles the evidence that Russia has conducted a series of hybrid actions in the Balkans in the last three years. They have been targeted to promote the image of a vulnerable, disintegrating European Union and a weak NATO with hidden military interests. Besides undermining the attractiveness and credibility of the Euro-Atlantic community in the Balkans, these actions might, however, bring unprecedented security threats to Romania’s position as a EU and NATO member.

We also argue that there are a series of recent political developments most visibly in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, which point towards a possible “export” of a ‘Ukrainian scenario’ based on a masterful use of various hybrid actions. Finally, the analysis advocates for the idea that the main focus of Romania’s foreign policy in short and medium term should be a matter of its immediate ‘concentric circles’, the first priority being three of its neighbouring states/areas: Ukraine, Moldova and the Balkans. As we focus on the Balkans, the policy recommendations are based primarily on the recent political dynamics in this region and suggest the types of actions Romania should conduct in order to build social economic and political resilience. We are pleading for:

(1) increasing visibility of the political, social and security evolutions of the Western Balkans in the Romanian public space;

(2) a stronger voice of Bucharest in the EU while warning on the dangers the Balkan states are exposed to, (this comes especially in the preparation of the 2019 EU Presidency);

(3) a much more assertive involvement of Romania as a facilitator to the EU/NATO Western Balkans integration process.
The year 2017 finds Romania in a challenging regional and international environment. At the North-Eastern border - the Ukrainian crisis is still simmering, while in the Republic of Moldova the political infighting keeps the country balancing between Russia and the EU; at the Western intra-Union frontier - Hungary, in a discordant note with the acquis communautaire, promotes ‘iliber democracy’ – a governing philosophy closer to Moscow’s political model than to Brussel’s values; and at the Southern border - Bulgarians elected a pro-Russian president, while the former Yugoslav countries, with diplomatic tensions and ethno-nationalist rhetoric, continue tightrope walking between economic ties with Russia and the formal commitment to EU accession. Beyond these regional challenges, the White House’s shown disinterest for „obsolete” NATO and the debates inside the EU itself about a Post-Brexit Europe have the potential to further complicate Romania’s international positions. However, we believe that this complex international setting provides Bucharest both with challenges and opportunities.

For the last three years, Romania has faced a changing regional environment, witnessing tightened tensions in the Balkan non-EU and non-NATO vicinity. Shaped by an interplay between
Russia, EU and the US interests, the countries from this area have experienced a special dynamic that deserves a closer attention. In October 2016, Montenegro, a NATO candidate, found itself challenged by an alleged coup d’etat for which the government in Podgorica held Russia responsible; the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina defied the authority of Bosnian federal institutions in the January 2017 referendum on a second national holiday, threatening to undo the 1995 Dayton Peace Accord; Kosovo¹ has faced internal unrest and street violence against the EU-mediated agreement on the Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities, part of the normalization process between Pristina and Belgrade (autumn 2015); moreover, snap elections in Macedonia² have shown little sign of ending a protracted political crisis in Skopje. In addition to the serious threats to EU’s internal security (the terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, Nice, Berlin, London), the lasting war in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis (September 2015) have negatively impacted the overall stability on the European continent. The ‘Balkan route’ in particular, the main access point of the economic migrants and refugees to Western Europe, has created a combustible environment at Romanian Southern borders, and has weakened the Balkan non-EU neighbours.

Marked by a complex set of economic, political and social post-conflict vulnerabilities, the Balkan states are prone to a higher degree of influence by external actors. And in this geopolitical context, the syndrome of ‘donor dependency’ that still characterizes many of the Balkan economies further complicates their situation. However, even if surrounded by EU and NATO members, in Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia or Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), the Western actors are not the only players in the region. Moscow’s rhetoric of Slavic ‘brotherly ties’ coupled with a shared sense of victimhood after the dismantling of the USSR and Yugoslavia, bolsters Russia’s moves and initiatives in the Balkan countries. In addition, in our view, the crisis in Ukraine, in particular the annexation of Crimea and Moscow’s supporting for military insurgency in southeastern Ukraine, unveiled a certain wave of affection and sympathy to Kremlin’s policies, with numerous groups within the Balkans supporting Moscow.

¹ The present study opts for this designation without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.
² The present study opts for the constitutional name “Macedonia” to refer to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

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**Timeline 2015-2017**

- **Dec 2015**: NATO invited Montenegro to join, started intensified anti-NATO and anti-government protests in Podgorica
- **Apr 2016**: Large anti-government protests in the Republic of Macedonia
- **Oct 2016**: Elections in Montenegro, alleged coup plot
- **Nov 2016**: Referendum in Republika Srpska on the national Day; Kosovo’s Albanians protests against border demarcation agreement with Montenegro
- **Dec 2016**: Serbia and Russia signed arms deal
- **Jan 2017**: the Serbian–Kosovo "train incident"
- **Feb 2017**: President Poroshenko planned a referendum on NATO membership

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Yet, at the same time, the Ukrainian crisis and the overall confrontation between Russia and the West, have fueled fears that the tensions could spill over the former Soviet borders and reach the Balkans. A lot of articles in the international media have linked the events in the Balkans as dangerous potential triggers for new clashes and even war\(^3\). In the light of the recent developments and in particular, the Russian use of hybrid warfare\(^4\), we have noticed that the common idea of the Balkan region as a playground for the interests of great powers is frequently used in the recent policy debates and international media coverage.

There is a widespread concern among Western policymakers that Russia has embarked on a more confrontational policy that can have far-reaching implications for Moscow’s relations with the West and for the overall European stability. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis and the Balkans’ instability, Romania has complied with the EU and NATO positions, without defining its own position on neither of the two cases. However, we consider that while defending the borders and actively engaging in the ‘multiple-speed EU’ scenario, Bucharest should firstly pivot in a more assertive way on the countries from its closest orbit. We believe that the Western Balkans require more attention from Romanian diplomacy, and that their political dynamic should be more present in Romanian media. We argue that this problematic context at Romania’s borders should not be viewed only as a security challenge for Bucharest, but more as an opportunity for a redefined and strengthened regional foreign policy. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to propose a series of timely recommendations for strengthening Romania’s foreign policy, by addressing Bucharest’s ‘concentric circles’, while assessing the viability and the impact of a potential “Ukrainian scenario” in the Balkans.

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3 For an article that has created many adverse reactions in international media for its alarmist claims about a future war in the Balkans see more in Less. T. (2016), “Dysfunction in the Balkans” Foreign Affairs, 20 December, available at [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2016-12-20/dysfunction-balkans](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2016-12-20/dysfunction-balkans)

In the light of the recent developments in South-East Europe and the preoccupation for the Russian use of hybrid warfare, we observed that the common idea of the Balkan region as a playground for the interests of great powers and for possible uses of ‘Ukrainian precedents’ has been frequently mentioned in public debates. These foreign policy key figures have most recently drawn attention towards the great potential for confrontation or even war in the Balkans in the context of Russia’s intensified actions in the region.

1. ‘Hybrid Actions’ in the Balkans - a possible Ukrainian Precedent?

Russia’s preoccupation for its ‘Southern Slavic brothers’ is historically rooted. Over the years, natural gas supplies, infrastructure projects and Russian investments have reinforced the links between Moscow and the Balkans. Additionally, Russia’s foreign policy has been able to build upon traditional foreign policy ties with the former Yugoslav countries, religious and ethno-cultural ties, and on harsh criticism of Western conflict resolution policies in the war torn region. Russia’s focus in the Balkans has been more country-specific than regional. Its business and political ambitions have concentrated mainly on three countries: Serbia, BiH (in particular in the entity of Republika Srpska), and Montenegro.

In the recent years, against the background of an EU absorbed with its own and other international crises, Russia has deftly spread its web of influence across the Balkans. Vladimir Putin’s high-level trip to Belgrade in 2014 was indicative of this strategy. Yet, in Bosnia, Putin’s personal endorsement of Milorad Dodik (who toys with a ‘Crimea-style scenario’ in Republika Srpska) and Moscow’s
Defining ‘Hybrid Actions’

The Latin-based concept ‘hybrid’ refers to a mixed character; to something composed of different elements. The word has been very present in political and media narratives describing the recent events in Ukraine (e.g. hybrid warfare). Yet, its overuse by media outlets in particular creates the risk to consider almost everything as ‘hybrid’. This becomes a huge discursive vulnerability because it does not allow proper distinctions anymore. In order to avoid such confusions, we will use the concept ‘hybrid’ to refer to the mixed character of the events occurring in the former Soviet space and in the Balkans, to the interconnected nature of challenges, multiplicity of actors involved and the diversity of conventional and unconventional means used by Russia to achieve its goals.

The Alleged Coup in Montenegro

The 16 October 2016 parliamentary elections in Montenegro were marked by suspicions of a coup attempt. In the voting day, the authorities arrested a group of 20 Serbian and Montenegrin citizens, and the general prosecutor declared that he had information that a criminal group had been formed with the intention to “cause violence” in the election night, to take over parliament, and hire assassin snipers to murder Prime Minister Đukanović. These actions would have been aimed at stopping Montenegro from entering NATO and prevent Russia from losing an ally in the Balkans. The prosecutor declared later that there was no evidence that Russian government was involved in any sense in the alleged plot, but there was indication that among the organizers were two Russian nationalists. Russian officials denied any involvement. The Montenegrin opposition considers that the conspiracy theory was created in order to influence the results of the elections.

During the October 2016 alleged coup plot in Montenegro, the local and Western media outlets have also speculated a possible use of the Ukrainian scenario in this Balkan country. Then, in January 2017, in the context of the scandal provoked by the Serbian train, Prishtina accused Belgrade of aiming to seize Northern Kosovo on the Crimea model. Kosovo’s president Hashim Thaci pointed that the train that was supposed to resume rail traffic between the two entities, but that was bearing the slogan “Kosovo is Serbia”, was aimed at provoking Kosovars in order to offer Belgrade a pretext to militarily intervene and to annex a slice of its territory, as it happened in March 2014 with the Ukrainian peninsula.

The Ukrainian scenario(s) are seen both by local and Western experts and policymakers as threatening hybrid precedents, as they might employ a variety of tools, ranging from conventional to irregular combat operations, sponsorship of political protests, economic coercion, and a powerful information campaign. They would be facilitated in the Balkans by Moscow’s already existing influence in the area, that unfolds across a variety of domains - from energy, to inter-ethnic relations, religion, society and political culture.

For the Kremlin it is practically the easiest task to interfere in Serbia’s internal political processes, given the presence of dozens of pro-Russian parties7 and Gazprom ownership of more than 50 percent of NIS oil monopoly and of a majority stake in Serbia’s natural gas supplier. These elements offer Russia a wide margin of maneuverability over the Serbian government. Hence, after the spring 2016 elections in Serbia, media outlets have reported that during the meeting between premier Vucic and the Russian president, V. Putin directly expressed his interest that the new government included “Russia’s men”, such as Ivica Dacic and Dushan Bajatovic, who is a close friend of Aleksey Miller, the head of Gazprom8.

The 2015 protests in Macedonia have brought to the frontline Russia’s unequivocal support for the incumbent prime-minister Gruevski. During the social unrest caused by alleged abundance of criminal, corrupt, undemocratic and immoral behavior of the Head of Skopje’s government, Moscow made efforts in distorting public opinion from the domestic issues. Also, similarly to the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow accused the West of fomenting “revolutions” in Macedonia because of Skopje’s refusal to join EU anti-Russian sanctions and because of its support for the Turkish Stream pipeline – a project opposed by many in Brussels9, which, has provided Gruevski with strong domestic and international support, contributing to his political survival. The political crisis of the country continues to this day. Macedonia has not been able to form a government since the December 2016 elections, as the president has refused to give a mandate to a coalition that includes the ethnic Albanian platform (the so-called “Tirana platform”), which, according to him, threatens the unitary character of the country. Russian foreign ministry accused Tirana of trying to create ‘Greater Albania’, and the EU and NATO - of causing the crisis and endorsing the “Tirana platform”10.

Similar interference in domestic affairs have been reported in Montenegro, where the local

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authorities have first accused Russia of fomenting mass anti-NATO demonstrations in capital Podgorica, and then, in October 2016 the Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic denounced Russia of supporting Serbian nationalists in a bid to force a regime change.

Bosnia’s Contested Referendum for a Second National Holiday

On 25 September 2016 the citizens of Republika Srpska (the Serb majority entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina) voted in a referendum to change its National Day from 1st of March (when BiH declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1992) to 9th of January (when Republika Srpska declared independence from the Yugoslav Federation). More than 90% of the voters agreed on this initiative, while Bosnia’s Muslim and Croat population felt ‘offended’ by this gesture that ‘despises’ the memory if the Bosnian war victims. In November 2015, Bosnia’s Constitutional Court had declared the intention of celebrating a ‘different national holiday’ unconstitutional and banned the organization of a referendum on this matter. The EU, NATO and the US clearly expressed their concerns that this referendum does not respect the provisions of the Dayton Peace Treaty that ended the Bosnian war in 1995 and whose Annex 4 represents Bosnia’s constitution.

The Train Incident between Serbia and Kosovo

On 14 January 2017 Serbia launched the first passenger train from Belgrade to Mitrovica (Kosovo) since 1999. The train, however, was bearing the message ‘Kosovo is Serbia’ translated into 21 different languages and was decorated with Serbian flag and Christian Orthodox symbols. It failed to reach its destination, being stopped in the Serbian town of Raska, before reaching the border, where special units of Kosovo Police had been deployed. Kosovo government opposed the train as illegal, claiming it was a provocation of the Serbian government. This incident revived ethnic tensions and came just a month after the Serb ethnic minority built a concrete wall in Mitrovica, near their side of the bridge that ethnically divides the Kosovo town, calling it a ‘technical support barrier against a landslide’.

In Bosnia, the Kremlin’s support for Miodrag Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska is anything but new. Vladimir Putin met the latter just before the controversial referendum from last year that established 9 January as the national day of Republika Srpska, on the same date that marks the declaration in 1992 of an independent Bosnian Serb state. In response, the US imposed sanctions on the Bosnian Serb leader, for obstructing the Dayton Agreement. Amidst the ethnic and political tensions caused by the contested celebrations of a parallel “Statehood Day” in Bosnia’s Serb-dominated entity early this year, Milorad Dodik has amplified local and international concerns by pledging to hold another “historic” referendum in 2017.

The start of 2017 has seen a deterioration of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The ‘cherry on top’ for regional tensions was the controversial train that was supposed to resume the rail traffic between Belgrade and Kosovo Mitrovica, but that was carrying the message “Kosovo is Serbia”. This much-debated event with attracted worldwide attention could be part of a propaganda-oriented hybrid strategy as well, taking into account that Moscow subsidized the rehabilitation of Serbian railways and that since 2008 the Kremlin is continuously blocking the recognition of Kosovo’s independence by the UN. The train incident resulted in reviving ethnic tensions between representatives of both Belgrade and Prishtina, who reacted with harsh accusations, turning what might seem at first sight a ‘patriotic’ gesture of political infantilism into something close to a serious military threat. The train incident came just a month after another symbolic gesture that promoted obstructionism in the EU mediated Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue: the erection of the wall on the banks of the Ibar river in Mitrovica in December 2016. This stirred the tense debate over the Brussels negotiated plan to remove barriers to free movement on the Mitrovica bridge.

As the Ukrainian crisis shows, the Russian hybrid activity can also involve financing anti-government groups disseminating false information and propaganda, infiltrating agents of influence. Within this context it is important to mention that on 11th September 2016, the “Balkan Cossack forces” were created in Kotor (Montenegro). The decision was taken by 26 delegates of “Cossack centers” from Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Montenegro and Greece. Each delegate claimed that was representing at least 50 Cossacks. The ceremony was attended also by the bikers from the club “Night Wolves”, close to Russian president Putin, which apparently, by coincidence, happened to be in the right place at the right time. The supreme ataman was elected Viktor Zaplatin – a former paratrooper officer that fought in all known regional conflicts in the 90s - from Transnistria and Abkhazia to Bosnia, where he headed the so-called Cossack battalion, that according to him killed more than a dozen Bosnian Muslims. In 2014 he became deputy commander of the border troops of the self-proclaimed Lugansk Popular Republic (LNR). This event shows another facet of the intertwinement between Ukrainian events and the developments in the Balkans.

While the Balkans may be peaceful for now, the trajectory is worrying. The re-awakening of the warlike rhetoric of the ‘90s, as well as declining public interest in joining the EU, had rapidly spread in the last year among political elites and ordinary citizens from the ex-Yugoslav republics. A possible ‘Ukrainian scenario’ consisting in hybrid actions targeted to influence public opinion in the Balkans promotes the idea that the problem of separatism, contained for two decades, is returning to the region, enabled not only by a shifting geopolitical environment, which has tipped the local balance of power in favour of the so-called ‘revisionists’, but also fueled by Moscow’s foreign policy discourses and actions.

2. Strengthening EU’s role in the Balkans

The Western Balkan countries we are focusing on – Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia – are united by the common goal of joining the EU. However, they still face divisions, both infrastructural and political, and are confronted with a worrying economic situation, bilateral disputes and instability. Within this context, many analysts express fears that the possible marginalization of the Western Balkans by the EU could encourage radical domestic actors that would choose to strengthen the relations with Russia or Turkey as regional alternatives to the EU path. However, neither Russia nor Turkey can offer real alternatives to EU integration. Thus, by using the setting of the EU Global Strategy, we believe that the EU should build on its unique instruments and leverage in the region, as a vigilant counter-reaction to the recent challenges when the beneficial role of the EU in stabilizing the Balkans is contested by populist local politicians.

In the context of populist contestation, the last visit of Federica Mogherini, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission, in the Western Balkans’ countries is to be mentioned. This occurred between 1-4 March 2017, at a time when ethnic and political tensions are undermining the European integration process. Mogherini’s trip was confronted with a series of challenges and contestations coming from populist anti-EU local politicians which gained media attention. In Bosnia she had to approach the sensitive topic of the refusal of the Bosnian Serb officials to cooperate in the preparation of joint answers to the EU questionnaire, the key document that is to guide the country’s future integration process. In Macedonia the opposition boycotted her speech in the Parliament and the room was half empty.

But the most disturbing incident occurred at Mogherini’s speech in the Serbian parliament, where members of the Serbian Radical party chanted: “Serbia! Russia! We don’t need the [European] Union!”. Moreover, Vojislav Seselj, the leader of the far-right Serbian Radical Party, said the chants sent “a clear message that Serbia doesn’t want to enter the EU, but wants integration with Russia”. Four deputies from the nationalist Dveri party held banners reading: “Serbia does not trust Brussels.” We believe that these incidents did not overshadow the reconciliatory message sent by the EU foreign policy chief, but they confirm the dangers posed by anti-EU/populist messages spread in the media with the help of various hybrid actions.

The process of continuously doubting and questioning EU’s viability has become a very fashionable practice among the Balkan populists and anti-EU rhetoric started to abound in the local media. This tendency grew stronger in connection with the Brexit debate, or with Donald Trump’s statements and the stereotype of EU ‘enlargement fatigue’ and scenarios talking even about an imminent disintegration. The populist rhetoric is popular, even if inconsistent, and relies often on ‘hybrid arguments’ - a mixture of true claims with fake ones. An example in this regard, is the assessment in public local narratives that the EU is not preoccupied anymore with enlargement, and it will ignore the Balkan candidate countries for the next decade. Furthermore, in order not to lose popularity in the region and to hide this lack of interest, some EU member states launched the Berlin process as an attempt to offer the Western Balkans an alternative to enlargement, which was not popular any longer among their own citizens. According to this perspective, this shift would imply a downgrading from the enlargement agenda launched in Thessaloniki in 2003, focusing on economic benefits, but abandoning the idea of a real membership perspective. This view is meant to create a lot of frustration and negative feelings towards Brussels in the eyes of both experts and ordinary citizens in the Balkans. It is also an illustrative example of a ‘hybrid’ argumentation that aims to propagate misleading information targeting EU’s loss of credibility in the Balkans by mixing true facts with fake elements. Indeed, in 2014, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced a five-year halt on enlargement, however, acknowledging the need for an EU perspective on the Western Balkans. Even though it was negatively perceived by local politicians, that announcement proved a realistic assessment given the level of stagnation of reforms in countries like Bosnia or Macedonia.

In the context of EU’s preoccupation with its domestic crises and the halting of Western Balkans membership prospects, Russia might easily win the hearts of the ordinary Serbians. The March 2017 poll showed that the support of the citizens of Serbia for the EU integrations is falling, and it may be the result of the loss of confidence in the real chances of accession. The Director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) Sonja Stojanović Gajić drew attention to the high polarization in the Serbian society, outlining that 41% of citizens think that Serbia will never become EU member, while additional 12% don’t expect membership in the next 10 years. We believe these numbers, together with the vast majority gained by Aleksandar Vucic in the 2nd of April presidential elections and his reassurance that he will commit both to close ties with Russia and the EU, represent to a certain extent results of Moscow’s hybrid measures in Serbia.

The halting of the membership prospects, along with the assessment that the long-term stability

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and the transforming of the region could best be secured through economic growth and increased regional cooperation, led to the launching of the so-called ‘Berlin process’. Supported by Chancellor Merkel, this initiative is not at all ‘an alternative’ to the enlargement process, because the candidate countries successfully continued their negotiations, and even achieved visible positive results (like Serbia and Montenegro who managed to close two negotiation chapters by the end of 2016).

Thus, the launch of the Berlin process was in fact a way to reconfirm the EU’s continued commitment to the region’s accession and to give a new momentum to the enlargement process. The agenda was conceived with a three-pillar structure with ‘diplomatic, economic and soft’ dimensions, that tackle issues related to bilateral disputes, economic governance and connectivity, social affairs, cooperation with civil society, and youth. In 2015, in the framework of the Berlin process, the Connectivity Agenda\(^\text{16}\) was launched - the most concrete project ever for the Balkans, implying a wide-ranging effort to modernize and integrate the region’s economic and transportation infrastructure. Moreover, many diplomats in EU countries perceived the Connectivity Agenda as the most significant regional policy initiative since the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration. Last year, also in the framework of the Berlin Process the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) was launched, expected to open in January 2017 in Tirana\(^\text{17}\). RYCO envisages funding for regional cooperation initiatives (such as public university exchanges and language schools within the countries of the Western Balkans), and its total annual budget is €2 million. Thus, it is a clear false claim to state that the only merit of the Berlin process is to ‘keep the momentum’ of the EU integration process, by promoting closer ties with the EU in the non-political fields, while the more political negotiations are supposedly postponed.

Despite those threats, the process of EU integration is vital both for the stabilization of the Western Balkans and for securing EU’s borders. The great danger in this regional context is that many politicians in the Balkans play a ‘double game’ with the EU, trusting and doubting its impact at the same time. We believe that in this context the EU needs to strengthen its role in the Balkans, and to seriously consider Russia’s attempts to offer alternatives to the “only game in town”, as the EU integration process was initially perceived. Another important idea that we want to stress is that the allegiance of some countries from the Western Balkans poses many problems. In this regard, the Western Balkans need to remain on the priority list of the European Union to ensure that a possible split on spheres of influence in the regions will not be viable. The warning set by the recent events is that if the EU will step down from the region, other actors (like Russia or China) will take its place.

\(^\text{17}\) See more on https://rycowesternbalkans.org
3. Testing the West? Defining a New Security Dilemma

Russian Military Doctrine defines the approach of NATO's military infrastructure to Russia's borders and the expansion of the North-Atlantic bloc as one of the main security threat for Moscow. This was highlighted also in the discourses that legitimized the annexation of Crimea and was further stated by the foreign minister Lavrov at 2017 Munich Security conference, when he declared that NATO “remained a Cold War organization” and that its expansion had nothing but created unprecedented tensions in Europe over the past 30 years. Moscow’s main preoccupation is not to allow NATO to expand in its immediate vicinity, however, the Kremlin is not opposing only the rapprochement of the former Soviet republics with the North-Atlantic bloc. A similar position has been shown by Russian officials on Balkan countries’ relations with NATO too. During the March 2011 visit to Belgrade Vladimir Putin underlined that he had “nothing against” Serbia joining the EU, however, he strongly warned that it should never join NATO. If it did, he said, Russia would have to point its nuclear arsenal toward the Balkan country. More recently, Nikolai Patrushev, the former FSB director and the head of Russia’s Security Council, described the potential joining of Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia to NATO among the biggest Western threats to Russia.

Russia perceives NATO expansion in the Balkans as a threat to its own security, and on short-term aims to prevent the Adriatic Sea from becoming a so-called ‘NATO sea’. Within this context fit media reports and official declarations on Russia’s attempts to prevent Montenegro’s accession to NATO by igniting social unrest in the Balkan country or by using pressure on the political leaders in Podgorica. In 2015 the Montenegrin authorities accused Russia of fomenting anti-NATO demonstration in the capital city. Accusations towards Russia were formulated after the October 2016 alleged plot in Montenegro too – the events would have been financed and organized by Russian intelligence services as a warning to Podgorica to abandon its plans to join the North Atlantic alliance; and the Kremlin would have demanded Montenegro to host a Russian naval base, promising in return billions and, if Podgorica did not agree, threatening to send in “polite people”.

Against the background of Russia’s special relations with the countries of the Western Balkans; Moscow has recently tested the idea of a Balkan 4 group of countries (Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia) that would be neutral and abandon their NATO bids. This scenario has, however, been dismissed by Secretary General Stoltenberg, that defined this “proposal” as unacceptable. Stoltenberg also declared that if NATO closes its doors in order to cut a broader geopolitical deal with Russia, that would legitimate the spheres of influence, a situation in which major powers would determine the fate of smaller countries. Hence, unable to attain the neutrality of the Balkan countries and in front of rapprochement of Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia, and Bosnia to the Euro-Atlantic community, Moscow has sought to at least build influence in these countries if not stop their EU or/and NATO membership. Within this context fit Moscow’s interest in keeping “Russia’s men”

in Serbian government; the unequivocal backing of Macedonian prime-minister Gruevski; or the support for the leader of Republika Srpska, Miodrag Dodik (see above).

Besides the “security” concerns, Russia’s involvement in the Balkans is meant also to “clearly test NATO and the West” by “seeking to destabilise countries and weaken the alliance” in the Balkans.24 After challenging NATO between 2014-2015 with multiple Russian military aircrafts conducting significant military maneuvers in European airspace over the Baltic Sea, North Sea/Atlantic Ocean, and Black Sea without filing flight, without maintaining radio contact with civilian air traffic control authorities, without using on-board transponders; and the 2015 incident with the Russian warplane that would have entered Turkey’s space and ignored the warnings of Turkish military, resulted in having been shot down; Moscow has challenged the reaction of the Euro-Atlantic community in the Balkans. Thus, even if military neutral, in 2016 Serbia together with Russia took part in military exercises in the Western part of the Balkan country, at around 50 kilometers from Serbia’s border with NATO-member Croatia. Also in 2016, Serbian, Belarusian and Russian paratroopers took part the in joint exercises “Slavic brotherhood” on the polygon near Belgrade, at the same time with the NATO military training in the neighbouring Montenegro. In the same logic of challenging NATO in the Balkans, shortly after Croatia made public its plans to acquire the US tactical missiles MGM-140 ATACMS, Russia announced that will give Serbia six MiG-29 fighters and dozens of armored vehicles for free.

On the other side, if the Balkan countries get weaker and unstable they will not be appealing neither to the EU, nor to NATO. In addition, a failure of these states would be pointed as a failure of Western policies in the region. As such, besides competing with NATO in terms of military trainings and deliveries of military equipment, Russia has been exploiting the divisions in the Balkan states: in Bosnia, Russia has constantly supported the president of Republika Srpska, Miodrag Dodik to assert Serbian identity; in Montenegro – the Montenegrin defence minister “has no doubt” that the October 2016 plot was financed and organised by Russian intelligence officers alongside local radicals. Russia has always expressed its support for Serbia’s territorial integrity (with Kosovo included) publicly and observed with interest the 2017 incident with the first train that was supposed to resume rail traffic between Belgrade and Kosovo.

At the moment, the Western Balkans region is in a rather vulnerable situation. Exposed to external influence, with unconsolidated democracies, weakened by ‘frozen conflicts’ (such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina) or ‘frozen disputes’ (in Macedonia), and in a process of ‘frozen enlargement’, the region has the potential to become a new front line of Russia-West confrontation. Such a scenario would challenge both the security and stability of the EU and NATO, Romania being in particular affected as a direct neighbour of this region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the latest incidents and political turbulences, the Western Balkans, as the region in the heart of Europe and with a clear European identity, should remain a key priority for the European Union and even more so for Romania. It is to be expected that the countries analyzed in the present policy paper will move forward on the reform path in different rhythms, and facing numerous obstacles, but their accession process is irreversible. Regional cooperation and good neighborly relations remain essential in this context. Romania’s position in the Balkans has to be aligned to the perspective of the Euro-Atlantic organizations and should be aware of the fact that the ignition of a regional conflict or regional instability can represent important challenges for the security of NATO and EU.

In the following policy recommendations we tried to bring a more comprehensive perspective on a topic which is and will continue to be of great importance for the Romanian foreign policy in the years to come - the application of the EU-driven concept of ‘resilience’ to the specific requirements of Romania’s strategy towards its complex neighborhood - the overlapping ‘concentric circles’ of the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans. Thus, we formulate the following recommendations:

1. Increasing visibility of the political, social and security evolutions of the Western Balkans in the Romanian public space.

We consider that the Romanian public is not sufficiently informed about the current developments in the Balkan vicinity. In the context of ‘weaponization of information’, when the growing visibility of Russian state-controlled media outlets contribute to shaping public opinion globally, this lack of accurate and up-to-date knowledge represents a significant vulnerability that should be seriously taken into account. A better coverage by Romanian and the Western media of the events in the Balkans would contribute to a correct information of targeted audience on the regional dynamic. Therefore, we would recommend Romanian foreign policy makers to launch a comprehensive strategy on the Balkans (coordinated with a similar strategy in the Black Sea region) for increasing the visibility and raising awareness on Romania’s immediate vicinity. Thus, we propose the following concrete steps:

- greater exposure of Romanian public to the academic and think tank debates on the recent events in the Balkans, partnerships with nationwide media outlets for dissemination included;
- launching of grants for Romanian journalists for field reporting from the Western Balkan countries;
- targeted scholarships and project grants aimed both to academic and think tanks experts for in-depth research on topics related to the Western Balkans provided by the Romanian Diplomatic Institute;
- tailor-made MA programs in cooperation with Romanian universities, with a regional outreach, on Black Sea and Balkan studies that will contribute on medium and long-term specialization of future generation of security and foreign policy experts on the two regions.

This integrated strategy would fit the recent EU preoccupations on the topic in the context of launching the European Center for Hybrid Threats. We believe that within this approach, Romanian expertise could take a leading role in configuring the future activities of this center.

2. Assuming a much more assertive involvement as a trustful facilitator to the Western Balkan countries’ process to European and/or NATO integration.

Regarding the EU integration of the Balkan countries, Romania should take the following steps:

- Beyond its active role in the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and SEECP, as the most relevant regional formats, Romania should express its support for the Berlin process (and become an associated/
observer country participating in the Western Balkans Summits, starting with the 2017 meeting in Trieste, Italy); this support would not imply a financial contribution, but we believe it will send a strong message for Romania’s positioning as a trustful Euro-Atlantic partner to both the member states and the Balkan countries.

- Romania should lobby for a faster integration of the Western Balkans in the EU, in order to help the countries in the region to be more engaged in the process. We consider that in responding to challenges posed by the Ukrainian crisis, the EU should speed up the EU-enlargement of the Western Balkans. Brussels should offer a clear membership perspective to all countries within the usual length of two terms in office of their politicians – thus, within the next eight to ten years.

- Romania should transfer the lesson learned to the Balkan EU-candidate countries. As Romania has helped Montenegro in attaining its European objectives through various cooperation programs including transposing and applying European regulations in the areas of judiciary and fundamental rights (chapter 23) justice, freedom and security (chapter 24) and freedoms environment and climate change, (chapter 27), Bucharest should have the same proactive approach with Serbia. We believe that the accession negotiations process with Serbia offers a series of possibilities for political and technical cooperation between the two countries, and Romania’s support in transferring scientific and technical know-how and experience would enhance also bilateral cooperation and will contribute to regional stability in the Balkans.

The Ukrainian crisis, ranging from November 2013 until the time being, marked one of the biggest security crises in Post Cold War Europe. Situated right ‘in the line of fire’, it proved necessary for Romania to undertake a series of actions to enable effective cooperation between all the elements in the NATO chain of military response in the Eastern flank and at the Black Sea region and starting with 2015 the ‘B9’ format was launched. We argue that this should not be the only area of concern for Bucharest. Given NATO’s preoccupation for the Balkans, we consider that Romania should consider the following steps:

- Raising awareness among NATO members on the most recent hybrid actions in the Balkans and use its leverage in the B9 format and the Craiova Group (as complementary regional initiatives) in order to both consolidate its position inside NATO and to have a stronger role in the regional security dimension;

- Re-building NATO-Russia confidence. We consider that Moscow’s negative perception towards Deveselu Missile Shield Base could be transferred to Belgrade given the close cooperation between Serbia and Russia. Thus, an enhanced NATO-Russia political dialogue would also positively impact the overall relations between Romania and Serbia;

- In relations with Russia, Romania should continue to pursue NATO’s position, however, without encouraging a further antagonisation between Moscow and the North Atlantic Organization. We consider that sharp anti-Russian declarations of Romanian experts and policy makers do not help the regional security environment, but on the contrary. Thus, Romania should acknowledge the need to project NATO security beyond its borders, but at the same time, the need for cooperation with Russian Federation in order to restore predictability.

The B9 Format

The Bucharest Format (B9) was established on 4 November 2015 during the high-level meeting of the heads of states and Government from 9 NATO countries of the Eastern flank, at the initiative of President Klaus Iohannis and his Polish counterpart Andrzej Duda. It includes Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary. This high level meeting was followed by a ministerial meeting in November 2016 in Bucharest where the focus was on the consolidation of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture on its eastern flank, the regional security developments in the Black Sea area and the process of implementing the decisions adopted in the NATO Summit in Warsaw.
3. In preparation of the 2019 EU Presidency, Romania should become a stronger voice in the EU and warn the member states on the dangers the Balkan states are exposed to.

As the chronology shows (see pages 4-5), the events that occurred in the last three years in the Balkans and Ukraine create a worrying picture, that Romania needs to take seriously into consideration for its upcoming medium term foreign policy strategy. In the context of the recent actions of Russia in Southern Europe, Romania needs to acknowledge the distorted geopolitical view shared for the moment by many people in the Balkans, of a revitalized Russia trying to take advantage of a distracted and vulnerable post-Brexit Europe. We believe there is a real risk that in the actual geopolitical context this distorted image will be even more assertively promoted in the years to come, and hybrid actions would play a significant role. As such, we consider that concrete hybrid actions will continue to exacerbate the region’s ethnic and political divisions (by spreading messages that promote separatism and the failure of multi-ethnicity in the Balkans). In our view, these actions will not be simple attempts to destabilize the Balkan region, but also to undermine the security of the EU and NATO. Within this context, Romania should:

1. place the security of the Black Sea and the Balkan as its top priority for the 2019 EU Presidency’s mandate;
2. take an active role in combating Euroscepticism and populist/nationalist rhetoric in the Balkans through a communication strategy based on outlining concrete examples of Romania’s gains after EU accession and promoting the message of a viable post-Brexit European project;
3. plead for an enhanced cooperation between the EU member states intelligence structures and the ones from the Balkan states. This is in the interest of the EU, as well in particular in the connection with the last evolutions of the migration/refugee crisis.
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