



ANALYSIS

RUSSIA'S SECOND FRONT: THE BALKANS

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Introduction

Both President Joe Biden and France's Minister-Delegate for Europe, Jean-Noel Barrott, stated on March 7, 2024, that Vladimir Putin will not stop in Ukraine.¹ Because both men correctly assessed Putin's objectives and modus operandi it is important to understand that Russia's war also aims at Europe as a whole and that the Balkans, because they adjoin Ukraine and the Black Sea, are therefore also in Russia's crosshairs. Thus, Balkan security is inextricable from any concept of European security and regional if not international order. Indeed, for some Balkan states, e.g., Romania, the narrative of European integration shapes their overall foreign policy.² Consequently Russia's aggression against Ukraine threatens the Balkans and every other region adjacent to Ukraine and the Black Sea: the Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East.³

Understanding Four Key Precepts

To grasp Russia's Balkan objectives and the tactics needed to stop Moscow, first by defeating Russian forces in Ukraine and also by overcoming Russia's "hybrid war" in the Balkans, it is important to begin with four historically validated precepts. First, every Balkan challenge, if not crisis, since 1750 either reveals or triggers a major crisis of the European state system. At the same time, non-Balkan crises like the invasion of Ukraine, render the Balkan situation more fragile because of the pre-existing cleavages there. Indeed, the currently unresolved tensions across the Balkans, not only those involving Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia, but also those within or between Balkan states, continue to demonstrate the validity of these observations. Hence when these crises emerge, they necessarily engage every major player in European security in protracted struggles.

For example, earlier this year, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the Western Balkan states, led by staunchly ant-Russian Albania, to elicit their military-political support against Russia. His visit occurred under the backdrop of French President

¹ Joseph R. Biden, "2024 State of the Union Address," March 7, 2024, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2024/>; Douglas Herbert, "Vladimir Putin will not stop in Ukraine": French Minister Delegate for Europe," *France 24*, March 8, 2024, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/talking-europe/20240308-vladimir-putin-will-not-stop-in-ukraine-says-french-minister-delegate-for-europe>.

² Lucian Moga, Nadiia Burelko, Loredana Maria Simionov, "Constructing Romania's Foreign Policy and Security Role In Its Eastern Neighborhood: The Cases Of Moldova and Ukraine," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 21 No. 4, 2021, pp. 615-638.

³ Galip Dalay and Natalie Sabanadze, "How Geopolitical Competition In the Black Sea Is Redefining Regional Order," Chatham House, March 7, 2024, available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/how-geopolitical-competition-black-sea-redefining-regional-order>.



Emmanuel Macron's remark that European forces could go to Ukraine.⁴ Not surprisingly, President Alexander Vucic of Serbia, who often speaks and acts on behalf of Russian interests, retorted that the West is engaged in a "mad" total militarization against Russia. Thus, Vucic attempted to fracture this latest attempt at uniting the Balkans.⁵ Clearly much of the Russia-Europe confrontation in the Balkans preceded the war in Ukraine and could, if unchecked, continue afterwards. The good reasons why this confrontation still pervades the Balkans pertain to the second of these precepts.

Second, since Russia emerged as a major actor on the European scene, every Russian leader from Peter the Great to Putin has defined an integrated Europe, particularly if unified as a military-political entity under a single rubric, be it Napoleonic, Nazi, or NATO, as a lethal threat to the Russian empire and Moscow's autocracy. Even though a democratic Europe organized around NATO and the European Union (EU) in no way constitutes a military threat to Russia, that perspective still governs Moscow's thinking because a democratic Europe represents a constant reproach to Russia's autocracy and imperial ambitions. Thus, Russian officialdom, pace George Kennan, has hypnotized itself into believing Russia is under permanent threat. This obsession of confronting constant threats contributes greatly to the institutionalized paranoia, regardless of regime, that characterizes historical Russian policy and is a congenital driver of Russia's foreign and defense policies in and beyond the Balkans.

Regarding the Balkans there is a widespread military view that the wars in the former Yugoslavia represented "an indirect blow to Russia's sovereignty."⁶ Elite officialdom probably shares this viewpoint. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Moscow resists Western advances in the Balkans, and not only Ukraine, and seeks to overturn the entire Western enterprise as Moscow understands it. Since Russian elites also remain equally obsessed with forcing the world to acknowledge their threatened global great power status and privileged role in Europe, notwithstanding exterior realities, they have habitually sought by any means possible, including force, if necessary, to disrupt, fragment, and ultimately reverse such integration. Russia's answer to these perceived threats invariably entails at some point attempts to expand and extend autocratic power into new territories, that is, empire-building often by force majeure. These interventions, whatever their nature, constitute Russia's reply to regional challenges and denote a heightened effort to intervene, possibly forcefully, to augment its power, influence, or even territory in the Balkans. While frequently those efforts, e.g. 1854, 1876-78, 1908-14, 1946, and the 1948-53 effort to unseat Josip Broz Tito, have failed leading to heightened external pressure upon Russia, many have also succeeded.

But they all represented efforts at imperial aggrandizement. And empire inevitably means war or at least Cold War against the West, as it does today. Moreover, Russia's self-

⁴ "Madness!': West Is Conducting 'All-Out-Militarization' To Defeat Russia, Serbian President Warns," *Gulf Insider*, March 10, 2024, available at <https://www.gulf-insider.com/madness-west-is-conducting-all-out-militarization-to-defeat-russia-serbian-president-warns/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ MG I.N. Vorob'ev (Ret.) and Col. V.A. Kisel'ev (Ret.), "Strategies of Destruction and Attrition," Moscow, *Military Thought*, in English, No. 1, January 1, 2014-March 31, 2014.

proclaimed war against the West is not a recent invention. Putin has been at war with the United States and the West for over a decade.⁷ Already on January 18, 2005, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov told the Academy of Military Sciences, that,

Let us face it, there is a war against Russia under way, and it has been going on for quite a few years. No one declared war on us. There is not one country that would be in a state of war with Russia. But there are people and organizations in various countries, who take part in hostilities against the Russian Federation.⁸

Dmitri Trenin, then-Director of the Moscow office of the Carnegie Endowment, subsequently similarly observed that, for some time, “the Kremlin has been de facto operating in a war mode.”⁹ This posture is intrinsic to the idea and fundamental objective of restoring Russia’s former Eurasian empire because empire presupposes war even if it a non-kinetic war.¹⁰ As Alfred Rieber of the Central European University has written,

If imperial boundaries have no intrinsic limitations and are solely established by force, then they are bound to be heavily and persistently contested. The universal claims of empires, whatever the practical constraints may be in carrying them out, cannot by their very nature be accepted as legitimate by either the people they conquer or their rivals for the contested space. There can be no community of empires as there is a community of nation states. All empires share a common problem of legitimizing boundaries. As perceived through the prism of the community of nations imperial frontiers appear problematic because they are sustained by force, even though they might have been recognized from time to time by solemn treaties.¹¹

These precepts allow us to grasp the Russian motives that drive Putin’s and presumably any successor’s policy unless successors are ready to forego or renounce empire and/or autocracy, a highly unlikely forecast at present. Indeed, contemporary Russian policy frankly and openly contemplates a global multi-dimensional albeit not necessarily kinetic war against the West employing the tactics and instrument of “cross-domain coercion” and weaponized corruption that has been seen in the Balkans.¹²

⁷ PBS *Frontline*, “Putin’s Revenge,” available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/putins-revenge/>.

⁸ M.A. Gareyev, *Srazheniya na Voенno-Istoricheskom Fronte* (Moscow: ISAN Press, 2010), p. 729, cited in Vorob’ev and Kisel’ev, op. cit.

⁹ Dmitri Trenin, quoted in Ivo H. Daalder, “Responding to Russia’s Resurgence Not Quiet on the Eastern Front,” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2017), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2017-10-16/responding-russias-resurgence>.

¹⁰ Aliaksei Kazharski and Andrey Makarychev, “Suturing the Neighborhood? Russia and the EU in Conflictual Intersubjectivity,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 62, No. 6 (November-December 2015), pp. 328-339, 331, available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1057077>.

¹¹ Alfred J. Rieber, “Comparative Ecology of Complex Frontiers,” in *Imperial Rule*, Alexei Miller and Alfred J. Rieber (eds.) (Budapest and New York: Central European Press, 2004), pp. 199-200.

¹² Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Strategy: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Institut Francais Des Relations Internationales (IFRI), Proliferation Papers, No. 54, 2015, available at <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp54adamsky.pdf>; Thomas Kent, *How Russia Loses: Hubris and*

Therefore, the third precept is that, as often as not, Russia has chosen the Balkans as a place or theater where it will undertake not only to obstruct European integration but also to augment its own power, status, and even possibly territory whether on the grounds of security, ethno-cultural-religious affinity, or sheer opportunism or some *mélange* of all these motives. The governing principle here was expressed by Catherine the Great who proclaimed that the only way she had of protecting her frontiers was by expanding them. Thus, Putin's February 29, 2024, speech to the Federal Assembly laid down a marker for a global ideological campaign on behalf of the "traditional values" he ascribes to Russia and even to "millions in Western countries." This clearly underscores an unrelenting effort to expand Russia's ongoing non-kinetic and ideological war to the West, including the Balkans and Europe beyond them.¹³ We must therefore accept that the Balkans are a key theater in this war. For example, Dmitry Medvedev, Chairman of the Russian Security Council, just stated that Ukraine is Russia and must come home. Moreover, he unveiled a map of Russia's desired Ukraine where Moscow owns the entire coast and Poland and Romania swallow up much of Western Ukraine, indicating a Russian ambition to revamp not only Ukraine's and its own borders but those of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.¹⁴

The fourth precept states that a key element of Russia's habitual strategy of imperial expansion over a fragmented Eurasia has been for centuries a consistent campaign employing the tactics of elite capture in targeted states whether they be in economic, military, intelligence, media, or political domains. Elite capture or cooptation has been a fundamental if not primary tactic in Russian imperial aggrandizement since Russia's inception as a state and that remains true today.¹⁵ This strategy of elite capture, hopefully leading to state capture, also represents Russia's current global *modus operandi*.¹⁶ In the Balkans, as elsewhere, Russia's aims to capture permanent strategic leverage in targeted sectors of local governments and countries and then exploit that situation permanently to block these states' integration into Europe while also fragmenting other European states by similar means.

Even more specifically, by gaining leverage in one or more sector or in one or another state—particularly one where conflict is occurring, whether it be civil war or conflict with a neighbor—Russia then works to expand that leverage and obtain a "veto power" if not a

Miscalculation In Putin's Russia: Washington D.C, 2024, pp. 331-334; Matthew H. Murray, Alexander Vindman, Dominic Cruz Bustillos, "Perspectives: Assessing the Threat Of Weaponized Corruption," *Eurasianet*, July 12, 2021, available at https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-assessing-the-threat-of-weaponized-corruption?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook.

¹³ "Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию," February 29, 2024, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73585>; Tatiana Stanovaya, "Putin's Six-Year Manifesto Sets Sights Beyond Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment *Politika*, March 1, 2024, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/02/putins-six-year-manifesto-sets-sights-beyond-ukraine?lang=en>.

¹⁴ Shannon Vavra, "Top Putin Aide Unveils Fantasy Map Of New Russian Borders," *The Daily Beast*, March 4, 2024, available at <https://www.thedailybeast.com/dmitry-medvedev-unveils-map-with-new-russian-borders-in-anti-ukraine-screed>.

¹⁵ Boris Nolde, *La Formation de L'Empire Russe: Etudes, Notes et Documents*, Tome Premier, Deuxieme Tome (Paris: Institut des Etudes Slavs, 1952).

¹⁶ Kent, *op. cit.*, pp. 331-334.

permanent presence in that state for its own pecuniary and security interests. It would then utilize its enduring presence across the targeted state's media, energy, economy, defense, and political domains to convert the state into a corrupt, anti-liberal, pro-Russian government that also resembles the Russian state. Russia's strategy weaponizes corruption as well as all the other classic kinds of weaponry of elite capture located in the Tsarist and Soviet arsenals to obtain that veto power.¹⁷ In conflict zones, it then uses that veto power to enhance that leverage and impede actual or final resolution of the conflict.¹⁸ Thus, to prevent the full integration of the Balkans, Russia appears ready even to entertain the option of inciting new, or at least stimulating existing, Balkan conflicts and even using force to further its interests.

This is hardly an inconceivable scenario. In the context of past and present Russian policies, the reports of an attempted plebiscite in Transnistria that was intended to occur under Russian auspices on February 28-29, 2024, were quite plausible.¹⁹ These reports of Russia inciting a plebiscite in Transnistria clearly replicated previous Russian Federation, Tsarist and Soviet tactics. Russia's initial military takeover of this territory in 1992 falsely based its legitimacy on ancient Tsarist, not to mention Stalinist, grounds that Russians were at risk of being oppressed. Then, in 2006, a referendum was staged approving incorporation into Russia, and beginning in 2022 Moscow evidently initiated moves leading to an attempted coup in neighboring Moldova in 2023.²⁰ Indeed, since 2022 Russia has subjected Moldova to intense pressure.²¹ When the 2023 coup failed due to public Moldovan-Ukrainian warnings of the Wagner Private Military Company's (PMC's) leadership of this coup that evoked earlier ones in Montenegro and Macedonia, Transnistria's leaders resumed the cry of their oppression calling for incorporation into Russia and intensified it in 2024, claiming a deteriorating crisis-like situation that was apparently intended to lead to the proclamation of Russia's takeover of the province on February 28, 2024.²² In the event, Ukrainian intelligence, which helped forestall the 2023 coup attempt, then reported correctly that no such coup was being planned.²³

Therefore, despite the primacy of the usually non-kinetic strategy of elite capture, there is always the real threat of Moscow using force majeure to capture Balkan states that have previously been attacked from within by Russian clients and influences, but which might

¹⁷ Murray, Vindman, Bustillos, op. cit.

¹⁸ David G. Lewis, "Russia As Peacebuilder? Russia's Coercive Mediation Strategy," *Security Insights*, George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies, 2020, available at <https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-06/SecurityInsights61.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Velvl Chernin, "Prospects For Conflict Settlement In Transnistria," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, PSCR-PBESA Reports, No. 33, February 7, 2024, available at <https://besacenter.org/conflict-settlement-in-transnistria/>.

²² Lewis; Thomas Escritt, "Fake bombs and Failed Coup: Moldova Smolders on Border Of Russia's War," *Reuters*, March 14, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/fake-bombs-failed-coup-moldova-smolders-border-russias-war-2023-03-10/>; "Russia is planning coup in Moldova, says President Maia Sandu," *Politico*, February 13, 2023, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/moldova-president-maia-sandu-russia-attack/>.

²³ Ella Bennett, "Transnistria Holds Off on Request to Join the Russian Federation," *MSN.com*, February 24, 2024.

nevertheless opt for membership and integration in the EU and NATO. Moscow has previously instigated attempted coups in Montenegro and what is now the Republic of North Macedonia (formerly Macedonia) and Montenegro to prevent the resolution of ethnic conflicts between the former and its neighbors and block the latter from joining NATO.²⁴ In those coups it exploited the efforts of intermediaries suborned by Russian intelligence and the businessmen Konstantin Malofeev and Ivan Savvidis, who bankrolled private armed groups, that is, forerunners of the notorious Wagner PMC, to incite uprisings in those countries.²⁵ But Russia also based its and Wagner's actions on their and Moscow's pre-existing media infiltration and economic influence within those countries. Since these previous attempts to capture Balkan states involved direct force, Russia has no reason to renounce that route to power in the future if it believes circumstances warrant it. Hence, the justified fear of a forceful attempt to annex Transnistria.

However, the plausibility of potentially violent Russian moves demonstrates the tense situation not only around Moldova, but also more broadly in the Balkans. If this annexation process had occurred, or occurs in the future, it would then represent a new military threat to Ukraine's rear, intensify the threats to Moldova and the Danubian basin that has become increasingly important for Ukraine's maritime commerce, and aggravate Serb-Kosovar tensions and intra-Bosnian rivalries. It would also validate Putin and Russia's use of surrogates, weaponized corruption, hybrid war tactics, and deployment of non-kinetic instruments of power to undermine the entire process of European integration.

Beyond obstructing the integration of Europe and of Ukraine, such a coup would have also realized a second critical Russian objective, namely the intensification of existing tensions in Moldova and potentially pro-Russian states like Bulgaria to create what amounts to a second, and not necessarily non-kinetic, front in what Russia views as the current pan-European war. The potential annexation of Transnistria also signals Russia's ambition for further territorial expansion as a potential third intermediary goal that comports with the overall objective of imperial restoration. Fourth, in this context would be the acquisition of permanent bases and a belt of pro-Russian governments, including Hungary and other Balkan states who can be suborned in this way. This would permit further projection of Russian power abroad not unlike what is now occurring in Africa.²⁶

²⁴ Stephen Blank, "Adding to the Russian Tool Set: The Role of Russian 'Private' Military Contractors," *SLDinfo.com*, August 4, 2018, available at <https://sldinfo.com/2018/08/adding-to-the-russian-tool-set-the-role-of-russian-private-military-contractors/>; Kent, op. cit., pp. 227-278.

²⁵ Paul Stronski, Aimee Hinds, "Russia's Game In the Balkans," Carnegie Endowment, 2019, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>; J. Lester Feder, "Macedonia Suspects A Greek-Russian Billionaire Paid For Violent Protests To Prevent It From Joining NATO," *Buzzfeed News*, July 18, 2018, available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/macedonia-russia-nato>.

²⁶ Stephen Blank, "Russia's Goals In Africa," forthcoming from *Trends*.

Additional “Front Lines”

Neither is Transnistria the only active “front” in this “theater.” For example, another minority in the Moldova area, the Gagauz people, a Turkic but Orthodox Christian minority, have also been a long-standing target of Russian tactics.²⁷ Indeed, Putin has just expressed his support for the Gagauz against Moldova. Allegedly they too suffer from oppression by Moldova due to their Orthodox religious affiliation. And this led Putin to promise their leader, Evghenia Gutul, that he would “extend support to Gagauzia and the Gagauz people in upholding our legal rights, our authority, and positions in the international arena.”²⁸ Similarly Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has now accused Moldova of following in Kyiv’s footsteps to oppress Russians and of wanting to join Romania, old propaganda charges that also clearly intimate threats against Moldova. In other words, Putin and his government want and promise to undermine Moldova’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Bosnia too exemplifies Russian tactics and strategy. For example, Russia’s ambassador to Bosnia made clear in 2018 that his government views the EU’s Peace Envoy to Bosnia as no longer being necessary and implicitly that the whole structure of the Dayton accords is outdated.²⁹ Russia still maintains this position and uses its influence there to block a resolution of Bosnia’s status and possible inclusion in NATO.³⁰ It also opposes Bosnian membership in the EU and with China has tried to block extension of the Dayton treaty mandate.³¹ The Bosnian Serb Republika Srpska embodies Russian tactics, is wholly penetrated by Russia, and exemplifies what happens to states or movements who succumb to those tactics. Here it is worth displaying the entire litany of fulsome praise and dependence on Russia stated by Bosnian Serb strongman and Russian client Milorad Dodik in his visit with Putin in Kazan to grasp the scope of the Bosnian Serbs’ dependence on Moscow. This address reads like a medieval presentation to the Grand Prince of Muscovy or the early Tsars, highlighting the continuity of Russian imperial practices and rituals:

²⁷ Paula Erizanu, “What danger does Transnistria pose to Ukraine, Moldova?,” *Kyiv Independent*, March 3, 2024, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/can-transnistria-pose-danger-to-moldova-and-ukraine/>; Paul Goble, “Russian Seeking Once Again To Use Gagauz in Blocking Moldova’s Turn To the West,” Jamestown Foundation, March 21, 2023, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-seeking-once-again-to-use-gagauz-in-blocking-moldovas-turn-to-the-west/>.

²⁸ Victor Jack, “Putin Vowed To Protect Pro-Russian Moldovan Region, Its Leader Says,” *Politico*, March 7, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-russia-moldova-gagauzia-evghenia-gutul/>.

²⁹ Stephen Blank, “Our Man in Belgrade: Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov Visits the Balkans,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 5, 2018, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/man-belgrade-russian-foreign-minister-lavrov-visits-balkans/>.

³⁰ Hamza Karcic, “NATO Needs To Welcome Bosnia Before It’s Too Late,” *Foreign Policy*, February 27, 2023, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/27/bosnia-nato-expansion-russia-putin/>; David Brennan, “Bosnia Must Join NATO ‘Soon as Possible’ Minister Says as Russia Looms Over Serb Crisis,” *Newsweek*, November 5, 2021, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/bosnia-join-nato-soon-possible-foreign-minister-bisera-turkovic-russia-looms-serb-crisis-balkans-1646250>.

³¹ “Russia Denounces EU for Granting Bosnia Candidacy Status,” *Reuters*, December 23, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-denounces-eu-granting-bosnia-candidacy-status-2022-12-23/>; Edith M. Lederer, “Russia and China Try To End Bosnia’s International Overseer,” *Associated Press*, July 14, 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-china-united-nations-0ca800a4fb55c22962415d64bc6ffa14>.

Indeed, I confirm the good relations that Republika Srpska is building and expanding with the Russian state, thanks primarily to you. We are certainly living through a difficult time, and we appreciate your understanding. You recently emphasized in your annual address that you understand where our relations are right now. They are complicated, they are not straightforward; they are indeed very complicated. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that we remain under Western supervision, and we are in the midst of an international, primarily Western intervention. They have now moved from Dayton to abuse, to imposing on us a German national as High Representative, one who has not been appointed by the UN Security Council. Thank you for your attention to this issue. If that individual had been given the authority, he would definitely have abolished Republika Srpska. In these circumstances, we are trying to fend off any calls to join the sanctions against Russia. They [the West] are trying hard enough, trying to persuade us to do this almost on a daily basis. It goes without saying that we also refuse to move towards NATO membership, even though we are being subjected to considerable pressure.³²

Thus enabled, Russia has periodically repeated its habitual, menacing, but ambiguous threat that it would have to react if NATO invited Bosnia to join.³³

To achieve these goals Moscow utilizes assets like the Republika Srpska to obstruct any moves towards integration. Likewise, there is good reason to believe that the long-standing tensions between Moldova and Transnistria originate in Russia's long-running plan to destabilize Moldova, Moldova's efforts in response to join the EU, and its corresponding gradual efforts to bring mounting pressures upon Transnistria.³⁴ These last two points, of course, are anathema to the Transnistrian authorities in Tiraspol and no less unwelcome in Moscow. But the former's failure to ask for incorporation into Russia reveals Russia's current incapacity to proceed by force in the Balkans. Instead, Russia continues to employ its tactics of elite capture to achieve by non-kinetic means the fragmentation of the Balkans, if not Europe. Consequently, these objectives of frustrating the full integration of the Balkans with Europe transcend Serbia and Bosnia to encompass the entire Balkan peninsula.

Russia's Goals and Objectives

Accordingly, one may postulate Russia's primary strategic objectives in the Balkans in the following manner. What Russia wants most of all is to arrest, fragment, and even reverse the process of European integration or what EU insiders used to call the "finalite" of integration with the rest of Europe. In turn, achieving those outcomes presupposes prior attainment of other Russian regional objectives. The first of these regional goals is the exacerbation of

³² "Meeting with President of the Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik," February 21, 2024, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73515>.

³³ Karcic; Brennan, op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.; Chernin, op. cit.

regional tensions because that hinders if not precludes the attainment of this “finalite” and gives Russia added levers of influence to protract these strugglers and to some degree regulate them. For example, a merely partial list of such goals means no resolution of the Serb-Kosovar tensions, or of the status of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and continued efforts to destabilize Bulgaria, Serbia, Moldova, etc. It also means no further EU or NATO enlargement to the Balkans because continuation of these conflicts impedes those enlargements and hands Russia more instruments with which to oppose further integration. This “wish list” entails no vision for the Balkans other than continuing instability, conflict, and backwardness while Russia engages in an equally unending quest for renewed imperial glory.

This goal of reversing European integration comprises a number of intermediary or subordinate objectives needed to reach this grand strategic objective. For example, a first intermediary outcome that must precede cessation of the integration process is the regression, corruption, and/or subversion of pro-Western, democratically oriented Balkan states to corrupt, autocratic pro-Russian states like Hungary or Republika Srpska. Achieving this objective also connects to a second intermediary objective of freezing or inciting conflict situations as needed in order to undermine pro-Western tendencies and enhance both Balkan instability and Russia’s regional presence. There are substantial Russian pressures being exercised simultaneously along many dimensions and across the board on virtually every Balkan state to effectuate such regressions and conflicts.³⁵ But at present, the process is most marked in countries like Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Moldova-Transnistria where Russia has long engaged in multi-dimensional campaigns of attempted state capture.³⁶ These efforts to exploit all existing cleavages in Balkan states to create and sustain reliable pro-Moscow parties (e.g., through subsidies, energy, media, and intelligence penetration, influence operations, arms sales, and active measures) are a direct legacy of first Tsarist and then Soviet policy.

So, the importance to Moscow of devising and then sustaining such levers through which it can frustrate integration and regional peace goes back centuries. Ultimately, gaining leverage over parties, movements, elite associations, and corruption of local political processes generates possibilities for replicating Russia’s own political system in these countries and creating a reliable anti-Western and anti-liberal bloc of states that can be trusted to advocate Russia’s line and frustrate integrationist processes, as does Hungary and Robert Fico’s government in Slovakia. These processes of state subversion also allow Moscow to recruit agents of influence and outright spies to penetrate the rest of Europe and execute missions on behalf of Russia that might not otherwise be possible for its own people to carry out. These missions include classic espionage and attacks on Balkan targets like

³⁵ Martin Vladimirov, “Reassessing Russian Influence: Economic and Governance Underpinning,” in *The Russian Economic Grip on Central and Eastern Europe*, Ognan Shentov, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov (eds.) (London and New York: Routledge, 2019); Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook, Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe, Vol. I* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2016); Heather A. Conley, Donatienne Ruy, Ruslan Stefanov, Martin Vladimirov *The Kremlin Playbook, Vol. 2: The Enablers* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019).

³⁶ Vladimirov, et al., op. cit.

ammunition storages earmarked for Ukraine or attacks, including assassinations of leading anti-Russian figures.³⁷ The ubiquity, frequency, and continuing scope of these particular operations highlight Russia's belief, like its Soviet predecessor, that it is engaged in a permanent war against the West.

A third intermediary goal is discernible with regard to the acquisition of Balkan military bases. Russia seeks to formalize these relationships with subverted and corrupted non-democratic states in an enduring if not permanent fashion by obtaining bases in the Balkans. Russia has sought a land base in Serbia and a naval base in the Adriatic from which it could then apparently serve to frustrate and deter NATO plans for integrating the Balkans more completely into Europe.³⁸ It then pressured Serbia to grant diplomatic recognition to this base on its territory presumably so it could then serve as Russia's "spy base" in the Balkans.³⁹ Similarly in 2022, the Russian Mediterranean Eskadra sought to forcibly block the passage of the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier in the Adriatic Sea.⁴⁰

As described elsewhere, Russia also exerts constant pressure on Serbia through its control of Serbian energy assets, its prominent role in the media, through the Orthodox Church, and through its contacts with the Serbian armed forces.⁴¹ Similarly, upon seizing Crimea and its off-shore energy facilities in 2014 and thus becoming a maritime neighbor to Romania and its critical off-shore energy installations, Moscow has engaged in regular and threatening overflights of those facilities, clearly to intimidate Romania.⁴² Russia's quest for influence, land, and maritime bases and ongoing threats validates its ambition to be a decisive player with a permanent veto power if not more over Balkan developments, especially given the many regional conflicts that it intends to exploit. Since "bases and power projection activities are an input into the world order," Russia's never-ending quest for foreign bases represents an important intermediate objective in the Balkans.⁴³ Then Russia

³⁷ Camut and Christian Nicholas, "Bulgarian PM: No More 'Eyes Wide Shut' On Russian Interference," *Politico*, July 5, 2023, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-nikolai-denkov-pm-russia-influence-rumen-radev/>; Christopher Nehring, "Bulgarian Cyberattack: Sabotage As a Cover For Spying?," *Deutsche Welle*, October 19, 2022, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgarian-cyberattack-sabotage-as-a-cover-for-spying-on-nato/a-63483887>; Michael Schwartz, "How a Poisoning Exposed Russian Assassins In Europe," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/22/world/europe/bulgaria-russia-assassination-squad.html>; Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgaria's Spy Affair Spreads To Other Countries," *Euractiv.com*, February 7, 2024, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarias-russian-spy-affair-spread-to-other-eu-countries/>.

³⁸ "Russia Opens 'Humanitarian' Base In Serbia," *Euractiv.com*, October 18, 2011, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-opens-humanitarian-base-in-serbia/>.

³⁹ Dusan Stojanovic, "Russia Pressures Serbia On Status Of Controversial Base," *Associated Press*, October 17, 2017, available at <https://apnews.com/general-news-824e3d69ffb049a784b4e462d40b14a8>.

⁴⁰ Maritime Security Forum, "Russian warships entered the Adriatic Sea, trying to block US aircraft carrier," *MS Daily Brief*, August 22, 2022, available at <https://www.forumulsecuritatiiamaritime.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/MS-Daily-Brief-22-August-2022-en.pdf>.

⁴¹ Stephen Blank, "Russia's Energy Influence Over Serbia," *Kremlin Influence Quarterly*, Vol. IV, 2022, pp. 24-34; "Russia's Quest For Military Influence in Serbia," *Kremlin Influence Quarterly*, Vol. IV, 2022, pp. 35-47.

⁴² Conversations with Romanian diplomats since 2014.

⁴³ Henk Houweling and Mehdi Parvizi Amineh, "Introduction," Mehdi Parvizi Amineh and Henk Houweling, eds., *Central Eurasia in Global Politics: Conflict, Security, and Development, International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), p. 15.

could employ its presence in those bases to transform the regional if not global order, especially during conflict situations.⁴⁴ As R. Craig Nation of the U.S. Army War College wrote in 2002,

Disappointments notwithstanding, the capacity to project forces into combat zones to enforce peace when diplomatic mechanisms fail, maintain peace in the wake of negotiated ceasefires, and ensure a safe and secure environment within which a process of post-conflict peacebuilding can go forward remain vital attributes of any effort to contain and reverse a proliferation of low and medium intensity conflicts in the Adriatic-Caspian corridor.⁴⁵

While he wrote about Western efforts to pacify the Balkans; these observations apply equally to Russia's pursuit of its own, rather different Balkan interests.

Russia's pursuit of these Balkan outcomes has acquired greater urgency due to the still incompletely resolved disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the war in Ukraine, itself a sign of the still ongoing disintegration of the Soviet empire as well as being an obvious war of imperial revanche as Putin's personal writings and rantings on TV make clear.⁴⁶ This imperial drive manifests itself in both Ukraine and the Balkans. Indeed, there is evidence that Moscow's original invasion of Crimea in 2014 was intended to culminate in a Russian seizure of Odessa, utilizing forces flown in from Moldova to suppress alleged Ukrainian uprisings triggered by Russia and thus create a unified "Novorossia" (new Russia) that would have amputated Ukraine's coastline and state economic viability. Indeed, Medvedev's map essentially restates those territorial objectives. Moscow can use Tiraspol's airport to receive IL-86 aircraft that give it a regional power projection capability. So, in 2014, and in conjunction with the seizure of Crimea, Moscow mobilized 2-3,000 Spetsnaz forces either to airlift them or have them march on Odessa once its supporters inside the city had seized power through rioting.⁴⁷ Therefore Moldova, even today, cannot be excluded as a target in order to capture Ukraine's entire coastline up to and including Moldova to create another Novorossia as Putin tried to do in 2014.⁴⁸ These points now possess a special significance given the recent reports that Putin wants to annex Russian-occupied Transnistria as part of the Russian Federation, thus threatening Ukraine from the rear, menacing the Danube's lower reaches, and gaining a new doorway into the Balkans.⁴⁹ In this light, the recent

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵ R. Craig Nation, "Military Contributions to Regional Stability," Stefano Bianchini and Susan L. Woodward, eds., *From the Adriatic to the Caucasus: Viable Dynamics of Stabilization* (Ravenna, Italy: A. Longo Editore, 2003), p. 33.

⁴⁶ "The Vladimir Putin Interview," February 6, 2024, available at <https://tuckercarlson.com/putin/>; "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,'" July 12, 2021, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁴⁷ Conversations with Ostap Kryvdyk, Washington, D.C., June 19, 2014; LTG (Ret.) Ben Hodges (U.S. Army), Janusz Bugajski, Col. (Ret.) Ray Wojcik (U.S. Army), Carsten Schmiedl, *One Flank, One Threat One Presence: A Strategy For NATO's Eastern Flank*, Center for European Policy Analysis, 2020, pp. 17-21, available at <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/one-flank-one-threat-one-presence/>; Chernin, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Brendan Cole, "Russia May Annex Another European Country," *Newsweek*, February 23, 2024, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/moldova-transnistria-annex-russia-1872699>; George Barros, Frederick W. Kagan, Christina

reorganization of the GRU (military intelligence), the vanguard of Russian influence operations and subversion abroad, with an intensification of its rigorous and long-standing subversive activities in Moldova and the Balkans more generally suggests attempts to open a second, albeit, non-kinetic front in Europe.⁵⁰ The apparent effort to instigate a Transnistrian plebiscite would corroborate this argument that the Balkans represent a kind of second front in Europe for Moscow. Certainly, the talk of such a plebiscite in Transnistria evokes Soviet and Russian precedents like many of Putin's earlier policies.⁵¹ And it would likely have inflamed the entire Balkan region thereby creating a second front with which to distract and threaten the West.

Implications For European Security

Since Balkan and overall European security are inextricable and indivisible, progress in one theater requires progress in the other to achieve lasting security. Any serious aggravation of Balkan tensions would engender serious repercussions for both the EU and NATO and not only in the Balkans. It would certainly accelerate pressures to derail the entire integration project for both the EU and NATO in and beyond the Balkans. By calling the EU and NATO enlargement processes into question it would expose these organizations' unwillingness to defend those processes or the European status quo and trigger trends encouraging a stronger Russian push to restore the empire and further consolidate it and the Putinist autocracy indefinitely.⁵² Any such restoration will also rejuvenate Russia's non-military and military influence campaigns in and beyond the Balkans.

Therefore, the first requirement of a successful integrationist policy in the Balkans mandates a genuine commitment to Ukraine's victory, that is, restoring its sovereignty, integrity, and integration with European security organizations. Second, that policy must coincide with the concurrent intensification of programs to bring about Balkan membership in those organizations and admit Ukraine to regional and sub-regional institutions, e.g., the Three Seas Initiative. Only under such conditions can we even conceive of, let alone bring about improved governance and resolution of ethnic agendas that will deprive Russia of many of the pretexts it now utilizes for leverage in the Balkans. Logically, this entails a coordinated Western program of multi-dimensional support: economic, military, and political for both Ukraine and the neighboring Balkans.

Harvard, Angelica Evans, "Warning: Transnistria May Organize a Referendum On Annexation To Russia To Support Russian Hybrid Operation Against Moldova," Institute For the Study Of War, February 22, 2024, available at <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/warning-transnistria-may-organize-referendum-annexation-russia-support-russian-hybrid>.

⁵⁰ John Paul Rathbone, "Russia Revamps GRU Spy Network To 'Disrupt Adversaries'," *Financial Times*, February 20, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/5b1b88d3-de43-4a5e-8446-e4339848b156>.

⁵¹ Barrows; Kagan; Harvard; Evans, op. cit.

⁵² Sven Biscop, "If Russia 'Protects' Transnistria Will the EU Defend Moldova and Georgia," Egmont Institute, March 5, 2024, available at <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/if-russia-protects-transnistria-will-the-eu-defend-moldova-and-georgia/>.

Although space considerations preclude an extensive review of the requirements incumbent upon all these states and European organizations to bring about multi-dimensional improvements in regional governance, it seems that focusing on taking on Balkan energy agendas makes a lot of sense here. Using Western resources and policy instruments in the energy field strikes at Russia's declining and now threatened energy presence in Europe and the revenues it has accrued thereby because those funds and presence comprise the fiscal foundation of Russia's many-sided presence across the Balkans. For example, leaked documents have again confirmed Russia's concealed Kremlin control over the Turk Stream pipeline from Turkey to Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary.⁵³ Sanctions have provided a great opportunity to increase the energy (specifically gas) connections between countries like Azerbaijan and Balkan states like Serbia and Bulgaria.⁵⁴ However, failure in Ukraine or the tangible signs of security institutions' weakness will disrupt if not reverse those trends and regenerate Moscow's opportunities to establish energy connections throughout not only the Balkans but even neighboring Central European states like Austria.⁵⁵

Not only would such deals help move Bulgaria, Serbia, and Austria who, despite widespread Russian economic-political influence there, strongly favor inclusion of the Balkans in the EU, further out of Russia's orbit and facilitate European integration, such agreements also expand the integrationist ties between Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.⁵⁶ Serbia has even signed a defense deal with Azerbaijan that will also expand its discretion on that agenda.⁵⁷ Enhancing the Balkans' energy and subsequent economic-political connections to Europe would also undermine Russia's unceasing efforts to subordinate both Central Asia and the Caucasus through control of pipelines and energy infrastructure. Given what Russian imperialist programs mean to all these regions, attenuating Moscow's capabilities should be a high priority and justifies programs to enlarge the EU to these areas, at least in terms of its influence if not membership. While it is necessary to press on with fortifying front-line states in both the Northern European area like Finland, the Baltic States, and Poland, it is an equal priority to move forward to achieve

⁵³ Georgi Gotev and Krassen Nikolov, "Leaked Documents Reveal Kremlin Control Over Turkish Stream Pipeline Construction Through Bulgaria," *Euractiv.com*, March 14, 2024, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/leaked-documents-reveal-kremlin-control-over-turkish-stream-pipeline-construction-through-bulgaria/>.

⁵⁴ Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgaria Negotiates With Azerbaijan To Boost Gas Supplies To Balkans, Ukraine," *Euractiv.com*, March 5, 2024, available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgaria-negotiates-with-azerbaijan-to-boost-gas-supplies-to-balkans-ukraine/>; Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia Signs Natural Gas Deal With Azerbaijan," *Balkan Insight*, November 15, 2023, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/15/serbia-signs-natural-gas-deal-with-azerbaijan/>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Federal Ministry Republic of Austria, European and International Affairs, "The Future of the Western Balkans Lies in the EU," October 6, 2023, available at <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/ministerium/presse/aktuelles/2023/10/the-future-of-the-western-balkans-lies-in-the-eu>.

⁵⁷ "Serbia, Azerbaijan Sign Military Cooperation Plan," *N1*, February 2, 2024, available at <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbia-azerbaijan-sign-military-cooperation-plan/>.

both a resolute defense of the Balkan-Black Sea zones and the aforementioned finalization of EU integration.

Moreover, a major program to reduce Balkan dependence on coal and oil while simultaneously transitioning to both natural gas and ultimately green energy sources, although very difficult, will facilitate Ukrainian integration to Europe. Ukraine has the means not only to supply its own energy needs if it reconstructs after victory, but it also has a substantial gas export capability, as does Romania. As a 2023 report observed,

Ukraine's ambition of becoming a natural gas exporter may be ambitious, but the country's political elites are serious about these plans. In June 2023, during a conference in London on Ukraine's post-war recovery, Deputy Head of the Office of Ukrainian President Rostyslav Shurma announced that, apart from providing 10 bcm [billion cubic meters] of biomethane to Europe, Ukraine will be able to export 15 bcm of natural gas in the future. Some steps are being made in this direction. Even in war time, Ukrainian extractive industries are trying to develop further. Ukrainian public and private companies are building their expertise in unconventional extraction methods, such as natural gas extraction from coal beds and horizontal drilling, or in new ways of exploration, like focused magnetic resonance.⁵⁸

Ukraine is also, despite the war, exporting record amounts of electricity to Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Moldova, and Hungary.⁵⁹ If Ukrainian, Middle Eastern, American, and African gas and green energy can be transported to the Balkans with a modernized infrastructure then it will be possible not only reduce Russian opportunities for regional subversion but also dramatically improve regional governance over time, sponsor European investment and integration trends within the Balkans, dramatically enhance regional environmental quality, and thus achieve lasting progress on Balkan security.⁶⁰ Indeed, the sheer scope of the investments needed here could act as a major spark by which the overall European economy could experience a much-needed transformation along with those of Ukraine and the Balkans. A perfect institutional vehicle for such energy and infrastructure-driven reconstruction could be the Three Seas Initiative, which could, thereby, also achieve a much-needed reinvigoration as a powerful engine of regional development and integration. Likewise, EU agreements on energy with Serbia offer possibilities for reducing conflicts with

⁵⁸ Thomas Lafitte and Igor Moshenets, "Synchronized: The Impact Of the War on Ukraine's Energy Landscape," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 5, 2023, available at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/12/the-impact-of-the-war-on-ukraines-energy-landscape/>.

⁵⁹ Ella Bennett, "Ukraine Set to Achieve Historic High in Electricity Exports to Multiple European Nations," March 4, 2024, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/ukraine-set-to-achieve-historic-high-in-electricity-exports-to-multiple-european-nations/ar-BB1jiqfX>.

⁶⁰ Stephen Blank, "The Balkans and Euro-Atlantic Energy Security," *Orbis*, Vol. LXVI, No. 1, Winter, 2022, pp. 58-77, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438721000661>.

Kosovo that do so much to facilitate Russian influence in Belgrade.⁶¹ And these programs should occur in conformity with the expansion of the pipeline infrastructure needed to diversify the sources of Balkan energy imports from abroad.⁶² Experience also shows that concurrent processes of conflict-reduction with this economic revitalization would reduce chances for Russian meddling because they would occur in tandem with the precondition needed for this outcome. That precondition takes place when European security structures actively manage the conflict-reduction processes in the Balkans as NATO's experience shows in Kosovo.⁶³

Conclusions

This article began with well-founded warnings that Putin will not stop at Ukraine. And the evidence of ongoing Russian machinations in Moldova, Bosnia and across the Balkans is enormous and continuing. While this region is undergoing a crisis even without the war in Ukraine, crisis, as the Chinese character says, also denotes opportunity. Indeed, Putin's war on Ukraine and efforts to generate a second front do not only represent a serious challenge to the West they also present an immense once in a generation opportunity to make dramatic and positive moves in European if not international security in both the Ukraine and the Balkans. But for that to happen Western governments must stop wringing their hands and instead demonstrate will and proceed to the achievement of victory that alone will open dynamic vistas for all of Europe.

Victory alone will stop Putin and his endless war on the West. Moreover, the West has the resources to enable it. Failure to seize this opportunity will inevitably generate more conflicts in the Balkans and globally, and the results are already plainly visible and frightful. Today, as in earlier generations, the Balkans and its adjoining regions confront the challenge of rising to the occasion and advancing peace, security, and democracy or descending even further into Putin's frightful world. Can the West afford not to rise to that challenge and instead seize the opportunity it presents?

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⁶¹ European Union External Action, "EU-facilitated Dialogue: Parties agreed on the Energy Agreements' Implementation Roadmap," June 21, 2022, available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-facilitated-dialogue-parties-agreed-energy-agreements%E2%80%99-implementation-roadmap_en.

⁶² Blank, "The Balkans and Euro-Atlantic Energy Security," op. cit.

⁶³ Edward Newman and Gezim Visoka, "NATO In Kosovo and the Logic Of Successful Security Practices," *International Affairs*, Vol. 100, Issue 2, March 2024, pp. 631-653.