

■ International conference in the framework of the "Reality Check Series"

Sources, Tools and Impact of External Non-EU-Engagement in Southeastern Europe – Part I: Russia

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□ Russia's emergence in the Balkans as a major power-player has been the topic of a two-day conference in the "Weltsaal" (World Room) of the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin. During those wintery cold days in January 2019, the somewhat under-heated location contrasted with the vitality and temperament of the discussion, which had been inspired by lectures and presentations from 20 distinguished scholars, analysts, and writers. The argumentations and deliberations had been overshadowed by the still fresh pictures of president Vladimir Putin's visit to Belgrade on 17 January 2019, showing him being celebrated by an impressive (and well organized?) crowd of Serbian citizens in front of the Saint Sava Cathedral, just recently restored with a Russian grant.

Are the Western Balkans – consisting of the EU candidates or aspirants Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo – "at the crossroads," as it was put by an official of the German Federal Foreign Office in his opening remarks? When Russia presumes the West to be in decline and conceives itself as a rising power in the multi-polar world order of the "post-West" era – as SOG president *Gernot Erlner* remarked in his opener – what does that mean for the Balkans? Does the EU's "enlargement fatigue," bemoaned by many speakers, constitute an invitation to Russia to meddle bluntly into the affairs of the Western Balkan states, going as far as a (failed) coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016? Many claimed, that the West must not relent in supporting, nurturing, integrating the countries of the region, since any inch relinquished there opens a space for outer actors, of whom Russia is not the only one. Hence, this conference

1 As the conference had been put under Chatham House Rule, only those speakers are mentioned by name in this report from whom the author obtained their consent.

had been designed as only the first one of a whole series, intended to also deal with Turkey, China, and the Arab Gulf states as emerging players in Southeast Europe.

Dimiter Bechev from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was not physically present in Berlin, but with a thought-provoking background paper distributed before the start of the conference, he put some markers on the map: "Moscow is growingly assertive in the Balkans but has no resources or long-term vision to match that of the West. Presented with a stark choice, the region's elites opt for the EU and NATO/U.S., but most of them would rather avoid picking a side. Russia has plenty of opportunities to exploit." After Montenegro's NATO accession in 2017, Russia will suffer another setback if Macedonia joins NATO in the not so distant future. "Yet, Russian influence will not simply wither away. So long as favorable local conditions persist – weak institutions and state capture, nationalism, resentment against the West – Russia will remain part and parcel of Balkan politics."

In his keynote speech, *Florian Bieber* from the University of Graz drew on Bechev's paper. "Russian engagement is multi-faceted and intransparent," he stated. "It lacks clarity, raises concerns. Assessing the scale of this engagement is difficult. The major problem is its intransparency, reinforcing polarizing politics." Many actors would have an interest in overstating Russia's influence, which is also in Russia's interest. For Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, it means the possibility of extracting concessions from Germany and the West. Bieber offered four more observations: 1) Russia's interest in the Western Balkans is recent. Moscow did not engage substantially in the post-Yugoslav space a couple of years ago; it rather came as a reaction to Kosovo's independence declaration in 2008 and the war in Georgia and Ukraine. For Russia, the Western Balkans is a subject, not a particular goal of interest. 2) Russia has little to offer; is not offering a model for others; and is not offering an alternative to the EU. 3) Many of the actors, like Russia, are acting for their own self-serving purposes. 4) Anxieties about Russia are rising in other populations of the Western Balkans – in Macedonia even the authoritarian right-wing VMRO-DPMNE is pro-NATO.

The first panel of the conference was dealing with **the historical legacies of Russian engagement in Southeast Europe**, with the facts, myths, perceptions, narratives, and identity links shaping them. The panelists elaborated the deep historical ties between Russia and – respectively – Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece. From the 10th to the 18th century, Russia and Bulgaria had a common literary language. Until the 15th century, Bulgaria was influencing Russia more than the other way round. Four hundred monuments in Bulgaria are dedicated to the country's liberation from Ottoman rule by Russia. A statue of Czar Alexander II stands in front of the Bulgarian Parliament. The Alexander Newski Cathedrale in Sofia is the biggest church in Bulgaria. In the Middle Ages, it was also Serbia which exerted influence over Russia. Russia's wars against Turkey in the 19th century prompted Serbian independence from Ottoman rule. In 1914, Russia went to war with Austria-Hungary and Germany, when Austria declared war on Serbia. Speaking about Greece, Byzantine Orthodoxy had been a formative influence on Russia from the 10th to the 13th centuries. Russia's wars against Turkey in the 19th century also led to Greek independence. Ioannis Kapodistria, the first president of Greece, had worked beforehand in the Russian diplomatic service. Nowadays, Greek-Russian businessman Ivan Savvidis, the presumed financier of Macedonia's VMRO-DPMNE party, may stand for the close ties between Moscow and Athens. Contradicting the pattern, Constantinople's Patriarch Bartholomew I acted painfully against Moscow's interest when he recognized the autocephalic Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

From a Russian perspective, military cooperation with socialist Yugoslavia was important until its dissolution. Russia was the major supplier of arms for the Yugoslav army. Officers of the

Yugoslav Peoples' Army (JNA) studied in Russian military academies. In the 1990s, Russia's influence was minimal. There was a consensus in Russia, until 1997/98, that there is no interest in the region. That changed with the NATO bombings of Yugoslavia in 1999 when the war had been unilaterally waged against the Serbs. At that time, three opinions had been dominant in Russia: 1) It was a war, which reminded Russia of the dissolution of Yugoslavia; 2) it was an inevitable war (because it has not been in Russia's power to avoid it); 3) UN Security Council Resolution 1244, was the least bad outcome.

During the next session, speakers were asked – referring to a metaphor used by the EU's Foreign Affairs High Representative Federica Mogherini – whether **Southeast Europe** would be a **"chessboard" for the great powers**. Speaking about Russian foreign policy in the Balkans one speaker stated that this foreign policy would be primarily about maintaining Russia's status as a great power. It is about preserving the "South Slavic space" which would be "historically included in Russia's civilizational area." It is supposedly further about ensuring Russia's economic interests, especially in the energy sector. And it's about having a space to interact with the EU. There would be also other reasons why Russia engages in the Balkans; there is supposedly a demand for it. A demand, which comes from EU's enlargement fatigue and from the fact that Russia shows interest in strong leaders at the top of strong states. Finally, the panelist sketched two possible scenarios for the Europeans' dealing with Russia's Balkan presence: If they treat Russia as an enemy, they will not neutralize Russia's role in the Balkans, but to the contrary, they would only enable the erosion of a region, which is fragile anyway. If Europe allowed more of a role for Russia, this role would only be desirable – everybody would benefit – when Balkan stability is created together.

At first glance, it may seem strange, that Russia wields influence in the region, according to another speaker in this panel. It does not offer a long-term vision; its investments are marginal, and it is not at all a security provider in the way that NATO and the EU are. But Russia matters because it appeals to certain Balkan leaders. They travel to Russia to seek reputation, or they give lavish welcomes to Putin in their capitals, as recently seen in Belgrade. With a single phone call, Moscow can easily create or turn down tensions. And it is Russia's model of leadership, which appeals to Balkan leaders: Strong leader – strong state, with the perception: "We can have economic growth without democracy." Russia is important because today democracy is not the only game in town. There are new methods of social engineering, of reshaping peoples' minds. In the limelight of the current situation, in some EU countries like Hungary, Poland, or Austria, some Balkan countries seem even "more European" than before. Russia also works through the media to win peoples' hearts and minds. Pro-government media in certain Balkan countries promote pro-Russian and anti-Western ideas. Furthermore, Russia created local clientele networks – engulfing diplomats, intellectuals, oligarchs, extremists (like the Night Wolves), which are very wide, which are hard to dismember, and which can oppose any elected government, even Vučić, if Russia wanted to do so.

A problem is also, according to the same speaker, that if the EU supports authoritarian leaders suffocating the civil societies in their countries, this way is creating the space, not only for Russia to mingle but also for any other foreign power to have influence. – But Russia's influence can be contained, the panelist stressed. By the means and methods: sticking to the EU and NATO accession process; strong local agreements like Prespa, ending the Greek-Macedonian name dispute; a final agreement between Serbia and Kosovo; expelling Russian diplomats, when necessary; defending election processes against meddling from outside by robust measures to counter fake-news. And at the end of the day, people in the Balkans are realistic: They are not expecting democracy from Russia, but gas for the winter.

The next panel shed some light **on diplomacy and security policy in the tool-kit of Russia's Southeast European policy.** *Veton Surroi*, a veteran publicist and founder of media network "Koha," brought the perspective from Kosovo, Europe's youngest – though incomplete – state. Twenty years after its liberation from oppressive Serbian rule through the NATO military campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999, which was heavily rejected by Russia, the Eastern power is still deeply involved. The Mitrovica Bridge over the river Ibar, separating the city of Mitrovica into a Serbian-populated North and an Albanian-populated South, Surroi reminded the audience, is "the point of friction between the West and Russia" from 1999 until today, a division line between Western and Russian influence.

"With the lowest possible investment, Moscow can reap the biggest possible reward. It has only to put a foot in the door to prevent it from being closed." The metaphor alludes to the fact that Kosovo's full recognition as a UN member state is determined by Russia's vote in the UN Security Council. But European misperceptions after the 1999 war culminated in the belief that by meddling through, by enabling a kind of development by default, Kosovo will become a functioning European democracy, Surroi stated. At the same time, Kosovo would be consistently behaving in a way to prove that it is not a functioning European democracy. Since 2011, the EU did misspend its capacities in a negotiation process aimed at the "normalization" of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Five years were spent discussing vehicle number-plates. In "Perpetual Peace" Kant stated, that for peace it would be instrumental to eliminate the causes for future wars though. "We don't have that in the Western Balkans, not in Bosnia, not in Kosovo," Surroi said. In fact, nobody would know, what a "legally binding agreement" should be, as it should be achieved by these EU-mediated negotiations.

The Russian understanding of this situation would be clear in Surroi's eyes: Here is a space not closed by a peace agreement. Moscow has its foot in the door through the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and by the Mitrovica Bridge. At the same time, Kosovo serves Russian foreign policy as a precedent – for the annexations of Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia, Crimea, for covert war in Donbass. "We have to leave the present path. It should be about sharing, not dividing the two countries (for example how to manage Lake Gazivoda together)." In that sense, Surroi rejected the idea of a land-swap decisively, as it is discussed between Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's President Hashim Thaçi since the summer of 2018. "It's the idea of getting as many Serbs from Kosovo as possible and as many Albanians from Serbia as possible. The land-swap will be inviting the re-drawing of borders. It may be strengthening the appetite of Russia."

Jelena Milić, the director of the Belgrade-based think-tank Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), drew the attention to the phenomenon that Putin may not be pleased with Serbia's ambition to reach a compromise over Kosovo. The country is also expanding and deepening its cooperation with NATO. The Serbian army is having more military exercises with NATO than with Russia as, otherwise, might have been expected. Putin's visit to Belgrade in January 2019 did not lead to an expansion of military and defense cooperation. There is still no diplomatic agreement for the Russian Humanitarian Center in Niš. Belgrade did react reasonably when Kosovo was announcing to create its own army, undermining UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

On the other hand, according to Milić, there are worrisome developments in Serbia around the street protests against the Vučić government. Recently, they were supported by the Serbian Army's Trade Union, the leadership of which is closely connected to Russian power circles, like the Veterans' Organization of KGB. This union has 8,000 members, in an army comprising 30,000 soldiers and staff. It is calling Vučić a "traitor" who would be "selling off" Kosovo. Besides that, Russia is seemingly forming its own Pretorian guard on Serbian soil in the form of a security

service for the company Gazprom, which owns the oil and gas industry in Serbia. The only way out from the Russian embrace would be a truly multi-lateral agreement on Kosovo. In the subsequent discussion, Milić argued against the use of the term "land-swap" for the border corrections, which might be part of such an agreement. "It is a nasty expression," she added. "We have to make some concessions. If it's an agreement, which the Serbian leadership can sell to the public, it's going to have democratic support."

An expert from the Western Balkans joined the ranks of those who warned against over-stating the Russian influence. "Russia has no visible strategy towards the Balkans, and it has no official objectives against EU-membership for the Western Balkan countries. It takes two for a tango: It is the leaders of the Balkans who are inviting Russia." Moscow would usually side with those rulers who conflict with the West: Vučić in Serbia, Milorad Dodik, the strongman of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia, former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. It uses mass media like 'Sputnik' and 'Russia Today' and local media-outlets filled with content from the former ones in order to dismantle EU-narratives. It exploits the existing conflicts, like those between Serbia and Kosovo or until recently between Macedonia and Greece. These media push for polarization: When in Macedonia after Zaev's election victory the Albanian party leader Talat Xhaferi had been nominated as Speaker of Parliament, 'RT/Sputnik' portrayed this as a trigger for an "ethnic dispute." "Russian influence is going to increase, as Western Balkan countries deviate from the path leading to EU membership," he said.

Another scholar stressed the fact that Russia's mix of soft and sharp power in wielding influence over the Balkans seems to be quite cost-effective. "Russians always find local actors to play their note," he said. The environment in the Balkans is often susceptible to Russian penetration: Lack of democratic capacities, corruption, ethnic tensions which may be exploited to drive in a wedge, the lack of a strong commitment by the EU to continue the process of expansion to the Western Balkans. "Since the EU is not as present anymore as it was ten years ago, there is Russia to fill in the gap." The speaker elaborated on the souring of the relations between Montenegro and Russia. In 2013, Podgorica had rejected a Russian request for a naval base in the bay of Kotor. After that, Moscow had started a media campaign against Montenegro, and it began to support the opposition against the rule of the long-term leader Milo Djukanović. At the beginning of 2016, Podgorica initiated the process to join NATO – leading to admission in 2017. Montenegro also took back the aluminum plant, which previously had been privatized for Russian oligarchs. In October 2016, on an election day, there was a serious coup attempt against the Djukanović government, presumably organized by operatives from the Russian military intelligence service GRU.

The second day of the conference opened with a panel looking deeper into the **economic, financial, and energy aspects of Russia's presence in the region**, starting with a view on Greece. There is a perception to localize Greece and the Balkans in the so-called "East," giving way to the assumption that Greece would be orientated towards Russia, according to one speaker. But this thought would be superficial, he stressed. There would never have been a rejection of the doctrine of "We belong to the West." At the heights of the economic and financial crisis, when Greece's remaining in the Eurozone had been at stake, Russia had stayed neutral and did not offer any support. Russia did not acquire Greek bonds, even in the secondary market, like China did. Russia gave no discount on Russian gas, as Iran did on its deliveries. When in 2015 the Syriza-ANEL-government took over, some people in Greece – having not learned earlier lessons – believed Russia would help. Others saw in Moscow a "counterweight" in the difficult negotiations with Western creditors. Today, things have changed significantly, the speaker explained: The government in Athens showed discipline in implementing EU decisions

and agreements with international financial institutions. Even the name issue with Macedonia has been resolved, in the process of which Greece expelled two Russian diplomats who had been working against it. Even Greece's energy dependence on Russia plays out today under much more favorable circumstances for Athens. Currently, Greece gets about 43.5 % of its crude oil from Russia. In natural gas, Greece reduced its dependency from 68-70 % ten years ago by about 10 % – though, this level still leaves it significantly above the EU average of about 40 %.

The next speaker dealt with Russia's economic footprint in the Western Balkans. He mainly focused on the impact of the interplay between existing governance gaps and the inflow of authoritarian resp. oligarchical capital in the region. When identifying persisting governance gaps in Southeast Europe, the speaker mentioned the unfinished transformation from centrally-planned economies to market economies, lack of transparency, competition and the separation of powers, corruption pressure, the lack of trust between business partners. Although in absolute numbers, Russian investment in the region has increased by more than 3 billion Euros, Russia's economic footprint as a share of the total economy in the Western Balkans has shrunk or stagnated in the wake of international sanctions over the annexation of Crimea. But because Russian businesses are concentrated in a small number of strategic sectors – such as banking, energy, metallurgy and real estate – relatively small, energy-dependent countries like Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina remain vulnerable to Russian pressure. Russia's meddling in the region has widened the space for political opportunists in the respective countries to try to avoid necessary reforms, especially those reforms related to strengthening of the rule of law and the curbing of authoritarian tendencies, resulting in undermining the civil society and the media and leading to democratic backsliding. Besides that, an overreliance on Russian imports, coupled with an expansion of Russian capital, has made the governments of the Western Balkan countries particularly susceptible to pressures on strategic decisions. Those decisions would not only relate to the questions of energy market diversification and liberalization, but also to questions about Russian sanctions and NATO and EU expansion.

How Southeast European countries should shape and develop their energy infrastructure and markets in order to achieve energy safety, to avoid singular dependencies, and also to cope with the international requirements of mitigating and stopping man-made climate change, these were questions addressed by another expert. According to him, there is no shortage of oil and gas pipelines, railways and ports in Southeast Europe to transport and distribute oil and gas. An increase of the utilization rate of the existing infrastructure would ensure economic growth potential, which is the nine-fold more than constructing new infrastructure. The announcement of the construction of new pipelines would often serve the sole purpose of jeopardizing earlier launched construction plans by a competing power, by – as the speaker called it – "strategic deception." So, Russia's canceled South Stream Project never had been intended to become a reality, but it was good enough to kill the EU's Nabucco Project. One may ask what the intentions behind Russia's Turkish Stream 2 might be ... What should be done: There is a need for sound and efficient investment vehicles for energy investments in the Balkans; there should be investment to improve and maintain the existing infrastructure; an economic mechanism should be created to award Western Balkan countries for contributions to the de-carbonization process; transparent fiscal practices should be consistently promoted by all relevant international players – IMF, World Bank, EIB, EBRD, EU – and donors; and finally, there should be an open architecture platform to facilitate the engagement of non-EU parties, including China, Middle East investors, the USA, South Korea, Japan.

The last panel of the conference shed light on the **soft power instruments of Russian influence** projection. *Jasmin Mujanović* from the Elon University spoke about the activities of

NGOs – or in Russia's case, rather: GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) – in the Western Balkans. Media outlets, which spread Russian-themed disinformation (conspiracy theories, nationalist topics from the 19th century, war crime apologetics), militia-like organizations (Balkan Kossack Army, local chapters of biker-gang Night Wolves, football ultras), the think-tank Katehon as a platform for spreading ideas of Euro-Asianism, book-stores: All these would be tools that not only help in "colonizing the public space," but also help to create an alternative framework for explaining the world in the "*ruski mir*" (Russian World). Russia appeals to local elites. In Bosnia, it courts the nationalist autocratic Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik, but also the Croatian nationalists. Russia promotes patriotism, strong leaders and military strength rather than expressing an overall commitment to good governance, Mujanović stated. It builds on political or populist mobilization without substantial participation, still painting the result of this kind of mobilization as the "will of the people." Russia's activities are driven by the understanding that "this is a strategically vulnerable area where the weakness of local governance and democracy makes it a cheap and fertile place to create problems for the international community, primarily the United States and the European Union." Over time, Russia has outgrown its role as a spoiler in the Balkans and became indeed "a coherent adversary of the EU and the West," Mujanović concluded.

A mostly marginalized youth, vulnerable to the risks of poverty, including "working" poverty, would find stimuli for their sense of adventurism in certain Russian offers, according to another speaker. Social media campaigns are cheap; "truths" are created emotionally, evoking the illusion of a shared culture with Russia. Also, the fault-lines of ethnic tensions in a given society may be played on. Unfortunately, the West would tend to work with the local "stabilocrats" – autocratic strongmen who are offering themselves as the sole guarantors of stability in their respective countries – and not with those who would drive change. "If Russia is the main competitor in the Western Balkans, then we are not good at this competition," the speaker explained.

Thomas Brey, the former correspondent for Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) in Belgrade, described the suffocating dominance of government-controlled outlets in Serbia's media landscape. TV stations, daily papers, and yellow-press-products, including their online appearances, are either directly controlled by the Vučić government or owned by shady oligarchs with ties to organized crime and to the deep state with its intelligence service structures. Generally, the media are under-capitalized, the journalists working there are lacking professional training, and, anyway, journalistic standards and media ethics are widely ignored. With its news agency 'Sputnik', operating in Serbian language, Russia would give tremendous input to the Serbian media, which they are using free of charge. The intense interaction between 'Sputnik' and its Serbian beneficiaries seemingly generates content celebrating Russia as "a friend and ally of Serbia." Content is also generated by 'Sputnik': It is quoting certain pro-Russian Serbian experts; then Serbian media quote them.

This situation would obviously contribute to shaping public opinion according to pro-Russian, anti-Western narratives, Brey explained. The Russian state, its society, and economy are portrayed as being superior to the Western system. These narratives have the purpose of stirring up hatred and conflicts between the Western Balkan countries, deterring them from becoming members of NATO. As a tangible result of the permanent showering with disinformation, Brey mentioned, that a majority of Serbs share the perception that Serbia would get the most financial help from Russia. The fact though is, that the EU and the U.S. donated 4 billion Euros to Serbia between 2001 and 2016; Russia would have given close to zero during the same time. If the West continued not to counter dominant Russian narratives

in Serbian media, populations will turn even more vigorously towards Russia. The West, Brey concluded, should engage in social media to address Serbian citizens directly, it should invest in the training and education of local journalists, and it should show an active ownership presence in the Southeast European media landscapes.

Srećko Latal, a Sarajevo-based editor of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), explained how Russia uses its leverage over Republika Srpska's strongman Milorad Dodik to contribute to the complete dysfunctionality of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian state: "The Russians understand that they can count on Dodik, and Dodik gives them all they want. For them, he became the most trusted ruler in the Balkans." They trust him even more than Vučić. There is now a Russian Cultural Center in Banja Luka. Since 2016, Russia is training a new brand of special police who answer only to Dodik. The RS government has forbidden school partnerships with EU countries; exchange programs should be realized with Russian schools. The reason for Russia's growing influence, Latal said, has to do with the slow, but persistent disengagement of the EU in the region. "The messages from the (2018) summits in Sofia (EU) and London (Western Balkans-EU) had been that EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans has been put far away." But the more the EU moves away from the Balkans, the more space will open up for other actors, who will take this space almost for free. "The EU is losing the Balkans, and that's not good news," he concluded.

Péter Krekó, executive director of the Budapest think-tank Political Capital, presented a vivid description of how the Russian nationalist biker gang Night Wolves established a foothold in Slovakia. The organization, headed by President Putin's personal friend Alexander Zaldostanov, nicknamed "The Surgeon," became known in recent years by its annual bike tours from Moscow to Berlin, which – since anti-Russian Poland bans their transit – goes through Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Some members participated in the Crimean invasion and the war in Donbass on the side of pro-Russian militants. The Night Wolves "base of operation in Europe" has been created in the Slovakian village of Dolná Krupa on a site owned by Jozef Hambálek, an entrepreneur with ties to a right-wing Slovak militia, the so-called Slovakian Conscript. They allegedly received military training from Russian SpetsNats-instructors, and some of them were sent as volunteers to the Ukrainian Donbass. Aerial footage, published in the Slovak press, showed not just motorcycles, but also tanks and armored personnel carriers, which Hambálek had borrowed from the Slovak Institute of Military History on the pretext of establishing a military history museum. The vehicles turned out to be decommissioned and have since been returned to the Slovak Ministry of Defense. But the episode was, nonetheless, disturbing, as Krekó explained. Though Slovakia seems firmly anchored in NATO, the incident was a reminder that there are significant elements in the country's military with strong ties to Russia. Pseudo-NGOs like the Night Wolves are expanding their activities into NATO member states, which also shows us, according to Krekó, that "Russia can exploit the dilemmas of open society within democratic societies."

The conference closed with a final panel discussion devoted to **the dichotomy of competing vs. common interests of Russia, Southeast Europe, and the EU**. One expert described the stages of Russia's estrangement from the West. The NATO-war against Yugoslavia in 1999 became a watershed in Russian perception. Before, Moscow behaved ambivalent towards NATO. Afterwards, an anti-NATO stance firmly took root. With Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Russia resisted the West strongly. Before, the West could negotiate with Russia, afterwards not anymore. In 2012, after the suppression of protests in Moscow, which had been heavily criticized by the West, it became clear that there won't be a turn back to the West, that there won't be democracy in Russia. As Putin put it: "They have all ganged up against me."

It became clear: The EU, with its emphasis on human rights and democracy, and Russia have become locked in an open battle over the norms of international conduct, amounting to a clash between the liberal international order and *Realpolitik*. With the intervention in Syria 2014, "Russia executed its vision of a world order: You support a strong-man – you support his state; so it was with Assad in Syria." At the same time, the speaker said, the Balkans would not be the focus of Russian foreign policy: "The Russians try to build up leverage, to use it for whatever fits them – it's not about a sphere of influence, it's about leverage creation."

Maksim Samorukov from the Carnegie Moscow Center sketched Russia's role in the Balkans in the light of its own power decline. "For Moscow, the Balkans are not an attractive place," he said. "It wants to defend at all costs its presence which it has already there." Russia believes, that any changes in the Western Balkan region would lead to the diminishing of its power in the Balkans. Moscow would support Dodik in order to preserve Bosnia as a failed state. It opposes a genuine settlement of the Kosovo issue, because with it Serbia would not need any more of Russia's veto power on the UN Security Council. In that case, Serbia could join the EU sanctions against Russia and introduce visas for Russians. Russia would lose all its positions in Serbia. But Moscow would also disapprove of changes in a "too pro-Russian way." So, it is against the separation of the Republika Srpska from Bosnia. "As a declining power, Russia is clinging to the status quo to forestall this decline," Samorukov concluded. With a good number of different domestic players, Russia would not be that unified as it is often perceived from the outside. The Foreign Ministry, the intelligence communities, and other state actors often would not follow the same agenda: "Russian power is getting atomized; the center of that power is getting dispersed."

Dejan Jović, a political scientist from the University of Zagreb, focused on the question whether the West is serious with its stated intention to include all the Western Balkan states into its system of alliances, especially the EU. He called this approach 'Plan A'. Currently there are doubts about 'Plan A' being taken seriously by the EU. Countries are finding themselves in a permanent waiting position, and there is a lack of clear initiatives to drive the process. "But if there is no further enlargement, we should be honest: If it's not going to happen, then we enter 'Plan B.'" That would be the point when we would need outer actors to stabilize the Balkans. 'Plan B' would involve the EU – especially Germany –, the United Kingdom, Russia, the U.S., and Turkey. Jović also questioned the main principle for joining, as it is being put forward by the EU: democracy before accession: "Cyprus is more divided than Bosnia-Herzegovina; Orbán is not more democratic than Zaev," he tried to emphasize the presumed contradiction in this principle.

"We are now in a post-liberal age, and we have to behave as in a post-liberal age," Jović concluded. – Samorukov somehow opposed this view in the ensuing discussion: "You can't have cooperation between the EU and Russia, as long as there is Ukraine," he said. The situation in the Western Balkans would be a consequence of the Ukrainian situation. Mistrust is prevalent, and this fact cannot be forgotten just for the Balkans' sake. Jović replied that he advocated 'Plan B' in order to be prepared for an alternative balance of power, to be able to prevent a war, in – let's say – the framework of a "Yalta-2". This outcome would be derived from what Jović called "the realistic school of foreign policy thinking."