Swaying the Pendulum:
Russia's Quest for Influence in the Western Balkans

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Introduction:

Russia in the Western Balkans[1]

In March of 2016, at the height of the migrant crisis in Western Europe, a European Council on Foreign Relations Policy brief suggested that the Western Balkans had become subject to increasing instability, and that amongst the factors threatening it, was the 'return' of great power politics (de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva, & Wesslau, 2016). Although the region was the center much attention in the 1990's and early 2000's, throughout the past decade, most of the Western Balkans appear to have fallen to the backdrop of international political attention. However, due to a developing rhetoric of an increasing geopolitical standoff between Russia and NATO and the EU[2], as of recent the Western Balkans, have increasingly acquired a 'greater strategic resonance'.

Although a completely different region from the era of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990's and early 2000's, the Western Balkans remain an extremely fragile and volatile region, struggling to proceed with democratization. For the past decade, the promise of EU membership for Western Balkan states managed to accelerate and promote substantial democratic reforms throughout the region. However, as domestic politics have increasingly prioritized frozen conflicts and issues of ethnicity, democratization processes have stagnated, with some states even starting to backslide towards more authoritarian forms of governance. Adding to this have been increasing suggestions of Russia's renewed geopolitical interest in the Western Balkans, with some headlines suggesting it is looking to "stealthily [take] control of the Slav and Christian Orthodox parts of the region" (IISS, 2017). While such claims may be rather over-exaggerated and aimed at making headlines, in the context of increasing geopolitical competition between the two fronts, studying the Western Balkans has become of increased academic relevance. Although the relevance of this topic can be found in its topical nature, so far, comparatively little academic attention has been given to the role of external actors in the Balkans. While think tanks[3] have increasingly paid attention to the role of Russia in the Western Balkans, it remains that few academically published works exist analyzing this topic[4].

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[1] The region consists of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo.
[2] Largely due to escalating tensions between Russia and NATO in Northern and Central Eastern Europe.
[3] Such as the IICC and ECFR, amongst several others.
[4] Two recent examples have the works of Blank & Kim, 2014; Nelaeva & Semenov, 2016.

Often labelled as a 'Black Knight' or a 'negative external actor', Russia's actions in Eastern European and Central Asian politics have often been perceived as being of malicious intent. While such a viewpoint can easily become subject to a bias, strong correlations often do exist between eastward manifestations of NATO and the EU, and sudden strengthening of Russian strategic interests in these respective areas. Whereas in its direct near abroad, the responses evoked have often been characterized by approaches more characteristic of 'hard power'[5], in the Western Balkans, Russia's approach has been more resembling of soft-power[6]. As Western Balkans states have increasingly become subject to EU 'enlargement fatigue', and processes of democratic consolidation have slowed down, a political vacuum has been opened up in the region. Correspondingly, throughout Putin's third term as president (2012-), Russia has increasingly strengthened relations with the Slav and Christian Orthodox parts of the region, while also establishing new linkages based on shared culture, religion, and economic ties.

Focusing on these developments, this thesis seeks to investigate the following question: to what extent has Russia capably established linkages in the Western Balkans, both historical and newly developed, allowing it to gain geopolitical influence in a region struggling to consolidate democracy and develop national identities? In order to find an answer to this question, the research has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter will provide theoretical considerations about the minimal conditions for democracy, hybrid regimes, as well as regarding the theory of linkage. Understanding these ideas will illustrate how inherently weak states are more prone to influences from external actors, providing the necessary framework for understanding how processes of democratization can either be stimulated or prevented by external actors of influence. The second chapter will be aimed at creating a better understanding of Russian foreign policy, specifically with regards to its strategic interests in the Western Balkans. Understanding Russian interests in the Western Balkans means gaining an understanding of its relationship with NATO and 'the West', as this relationship is fundamentally interlinked its interests in the region, as well as with the more general foreign policy approach taken under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The third and final chapter will investigate Russian linkage in the Western Balkans, focusing specifically on Montenegro, Macedonia, and Republika Srpska (RS), one of two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while

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[5] Such as the military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine, and signs of election meddling in Moldova.
[6] Originally a term coined by Joseph Nye, 2004

furthermore providing conclusions about the extent to which these linkages have allowed Russia to exert leverage, or the ways in which it could do so in the future.

While it is not the argument of this thesis that Russia is seeking to influence Western Balkan states at the cost of regional stability, it will argue that the increasing security threat posed to its own national interests by NATO and the EU have been the primary motivation for bolstering its efforts in the region. Fueled by the pronounced 'fatigue' of EU-enlargement, a window of opportunity has been opened in which it has increasingly exploited its favorable position with the Slavic and Eastern Orthodox communities of the Western Balkans.

Methodology and Limitations

As has become clear, in order to analyze the proposed research question, a cross-comparative analysis will be made of three different cases within the Western Balkans. In order to provide a foundation for the ideas throughout this thesis, within chapter one several concepts are developed, aimed at providing a better understanding regarding regime classification, linkage, and the role of external actors in influencing regime outcome. The choice of these specific cases chosen arises out of a balance of similarities and differences between the cases. All three cases are at different stages in their respective paths towards EU and NATO integration, ranging from being integrated into NATO and in a more advanced state of negotiations regarding EU accession (Montenegro), to currently having little to no concrete plans existing for its integration (Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole). All three, however, share inherent weaknesses that have continued to trouble their paths towards democratization. Most significant of these issues has been a notable ethnic cleavage in each case, an important factor plays a role in Russia's capability to reinforce historic linkages and foster new ones.

While the topical nature of the research in itself can be regarded as an argument for the relevance of the study performed, it also provides a responsibility regarding the reaching of an impartial conclusion of developments at hand. With the significance of certain related ongoing events still unclear as of yet, the final section of chapter 3 seeks to address this dilemma by considering the wider significance of Russia's increased actions, rather than conclusively saying it's interests are only served via one mechanism.

CHAPTER 1 – Theoretical Considerations: Classifying Regimes, Linkage, and the Promotion of Regime Types

Democracy and its 'Minimal' Qualifications

Within the academic field of international relations, the understanding of regimes, and whether their political systems qualify as a 'democracy' or not, is a debate that has been ongoing and been developing continuously throughout recent years. While it is unlikely a consensus regarding the complete definition of democracy will ever be reached, in its most basic form, democracy means rule by the people. Modern political democracy functions as a "system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens" (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, p. 76). Elections therefore, have arguably become the most crucial component of democracies, as Samuel Huntington has noted that democracy can only exist when "its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes", and "virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote" (Huntington, 1993, p. 7).

However, as Huntington stresses, elections cannot be the only indicator of democracy; "governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good" (Huntington, 1993, p. 10). It is in this context that questions have arisen regarding the legitimacy of many of the vast amount of 'democracies' to have surfaced since the end of the Cold War. Throughout this time period, as Larry Diamond (2002, p. 22) notes, "more regimes than ever before [adopted] the *form* of electoral democracy, with regular, competitive, multiparty elections", but in practice were failing "to meet the substantive test [of democracy], or [did] so only ambiguously" (Diamond, 2002, p. 22). From ideas such as these, within the literature on democracies, a new theme appeared. Literature began focusing on forming an understanding of regimes as being neither democratic nor authoritarian, thus moving beyond the more classical and binary definitions given by political scientists such as Samuel Huntington.

Understanding Regimes: The Political (Gray Zone) Spectrum

As the dramatic rise of post-Cold War electoral democracies drastically slowed down by the end of the 1990's, democratization literature began shifting its focus towards better understanding the nature of newly arisen democracies, looking at the reality of what happens *"after* the elections" (Zakaria, 1997, p. 23). With scholarly attention rising for analyzing "the varieties of nondemocratic regimes", as well as for the "rather astonishing frequency with which contemporary authoritarian regimes manifest (…) a number of democratic features", political scientists started writing about regimes that had come to exist in a theoretical 'middle-ground' (Diamond, 2002, p. 23). Neither democratic nor autocratic, this middle ground is something which Thomas Carothers (2002) most notably has come to refer to as the 'political gray zone'. Within it exists a spectrum inside which regimes can be placed either on one side (democracy) or another (autocracy), or in the middle.

On one side of the spectrum, closest to Huntington's (1993) 'minimal democracy', are the concepts of 'illiberal democracy', 'transitional country', and 'semi-democracy'. Regimes found on this side of the spectrum have usually experienced a significant progression towards democratic consolidation, and as such, are treated by scholars as incomplete or transitional forms of democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 51). While states considered to be an 'illiberal democracy' or 'transitional' may retain "some attributes of democratic political life"[7], they are generally stricken by serious democratic deficiencies[8], and as such are more often than not incapable of becoming "well-functioning democracies", no longer "deepening or advancing whatever democratic progress they have made" (Carothers, 2002, p. 9). If static in this condition, Larry Diamond (2008) has argued that the conditions characterizing illiberal democracies make them particularly susceptible to a 'democratic rollback'; a situation in which states progress back towards authoritarianism, rather than completing their 'transition' to a liberal democracy.

On the other side of the spectrum are regimes that exist as a 'diminished form' of authoritarianism. Levitsky and Way (2002; 2010) have labelled such regimes as 'competitive authoritarianism': while they retain the basic premonition of democratic regimes[9], competitive

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[7] Such as "limited political space for opposition parties and independent civil society", as well as "regular elections and democratic constitutions" (Carothers, 2002, p. 9).

[8] Such as "poor representation of citizens' interests", "low levels of political participation beyond voting", "frequent abuse of the law by government officials, elections of uncertain legitimacy", low levels of "public confidence in state institutions", as well as "persistently poor institutional performance by the state" (Carothers, 2002, pp. 9-10).

[9] The holding of elections.

authoritarian regimes are defined as "civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power", consisting of severe discrepancies in at "least one of three defining attributes of democracy: (1) free elections (2) broad protection of civil liberties, and (3) a reasonably level playing field" (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 7). Similar to illiberal and transitional regimes, Levitsky and Way (2002, p. 51) argue that these will either "remain hybrid" or eventually move towards an increased state of authoritarianism.

Linkage Theory

In order to better understand how external actors can influence the domestic politics of another state, it is imperative to understand the concept of linkage in international relations. Linkage politics, as an international relations theory, remained relatively unpopular during the Cold War era, given its limited explanatory capability. Early research in the field, associated with the works of James N. Rosenau (1969) and Arthur Stein (1980), focused on simple two by two relationships between states and their respective policies. Arthur Stein (1980, p. 62) specifically described linkage politics as "a state's policy of making its course of action concerning a given issue contingent upon another state's behavior in a different issue area". Hereby, linkage is described as a form of game theory, analyzing the 2x2 relationship between two states. Linkage in this form is identified as an "obvious response" to a country's own perceived "unbalanced or asymmetric decline" (Stein, 1980, p. 62). While the basic premonition made by Stein and Rosenau has remained valid, most significant of the works regarding linkage have been later works of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2005; 2010), with their notions of linkage and leverage.

Responding to the increasing academic attention for the role of external actors, Levitsky and Way's work lead the way in dissecting the poorly understood "relationship between the post-Cold War international environment and regime outcomes" (Levitsky & Way, 2005, p. 379). Linkage between one state and another is best defined as "the density" of economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational ties as well as "cross-border flows" of trade, investment, people and communication (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 23). These linkages are directed from an external actor towards a recipient state, and are needed in order to effectively provide leverage over the latter (Levitsky & Way, 2005). Leverage, most effective when in combination with linkage, primarily materializes in strategies "including political conditionality and punitive sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military intervention" (Levitsky

& Way, 2005, p. 21). Although their work predominantly focuses on the role of linkage in the promotion of democracy, later works have also utilized its ideas in identifying the influence of negative external actors.

Promoting Democracy

Prior to understanding how states effectively promote illiberal regimes, it is imperative to briefly elaborate upon how, in the past, states have promoted liberal regimes. While it wasn't until after the Cold War that democratization literature widely began focusing more widely on the idea of 'democracy promotion', philosophers as early as Emmanuel Kant had already suggested "that some of the causes of democracy [in fact] lie beyond a country's borders" (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006, p. 463). More recent works such as Rustow's 'Transition to Democracy' (1970), and perhaps most famously Huntington's *The Third Wave* (1993) affirmed the idea that democratization is not conclusively a domestic process. Within the collection of literature to arise since the Cold War, general focus is on three points of external influence: the role of foreign aid, EU conditionality, and the diffusion of democracy.

In its most basic form, democracy promotion involves the "offering [of] moral, political, diplomatic, and financial support to individuals and organizations that are struggling to open up authoritarian regimes" (Diamond, 1992, p. 27). While this depicts an ambitious vision for what democracy promotion should be, the reality of democracy promotion in the 1990's and early 2000's mainly consisted of foreign aid programs aimed at inciting or speeding up transition processes (Vanderhill, 2014, p. 257). Although early studies such as those led by Carothers (1999) and Burnell (2000) have pointed towards the potential of foreign aid in promoting democracy, they simultaneously warn against the challenges it faces when incorrectly implemented.

Arguably most effective in the promotion of democracy has been has been the role of EU conditionality. Focusing on Southern Europe, Laurence Whitehead (2001, p. 262) notes that the European Union has the capability to act "as a powerful catalyst both of democratization and of national redefinition". As an external actor, the EU has particularly managed to exercise "tremendous influence on domestic politics" through upholding the 'Copenhagen criteria' for neighborhood states seeking membership (Sedelmeier, 2010, p. 519), influencing the democratization process of post-Communist Europe (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Vachudova, 2005). Within Southeastern Europe, EU conditionality, in

combination with the provision of foreign aid, has been upheld as one of the primary methods of ensuring the transition towards democracy.

A last focus has been on the concept of diffusion, which features a strong emphasis on how the "geographic spread of ideas, policies, and institutions from one country to another" can take place by means of "demonstration effects, diffusion through mimicry or imitation, or [through] modular action" (Vanderhill, 2013, p. 5; Schmitter & Karl, 1991). Geography plays an extremely important role, and later works by Brinks and Coppedge (2006) and Berg-Schlosser (2008) have specifically looked at how the EU and its geographic proximity to its 'European Neighborhood' has resulted in the diffusion ideas towards these states.

While the optimism of post-Cold War democratization resulted in a substantial amount of `literature regarding such processes, stagnating democratization processes and the rise of increasingly powerful regional authoritarian actors resulted in the rise of an academic interest for the external promotion of less liberal forms of governance (Bader, Grävingholt, & Kästner, 2010, p. 84). As Jakob Tolstrup (2015, p. 674) has concluded, "external interventions need not only originate with democracy promoters attempting to weaken authoritarian rule", instead, "equally often, actors from the outside play a crucial role in protecting and sustaining [and promoting] authoritarianism".

Countering Democracy Promotion, Promoting and Diffusing Authoritarianism

Within the relatively new field of study of the promotion of authoritarianism, literature largely identifies three mechanisms capable of changing a regime outcome. The first of these mechanisms, and arguably the earliest, has been an 'emerging backlash' against the promotion of democracy. In 2006, suggested Thomas Carothers (2006, p. 55) first suggested that a "disturbing trend" had developed; "after two decades of steady expansion of democracy-building (…), a growing number of governments [were] starting to crack down on such activities within their borders". Authors such as Thomas Ambrosio (2009) and Neil Babayan (2015) later identified similar processes, particularly concerning Russia within its near-abroad, aimed at a number of former-Soviet Republics. This 'backlash' was led by assertive authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states, whom employ a variety of measures[10] aimed at countering the democracy promotion efforts. Analyzing Russia, Tolstrup (2009) has furthermore noted that external actors often prevent democracy through the external

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[10] See Carothers, 2010, p. 59.

management of 'instability', in weak democratic states. Preventing stability means preventing states from further democratizing, and thus falling further out of their sphere of influence (Tolstrup, 2009, pp. 932-933).

The second mechanism identified in authoritarianism literature has been the 'promotion' of authoritarianism, an underdeveloped area of study thus far. First suggesting the idea in 2006 (p. 2), Peter Burnell (2010, p. 5) concluded in 2010 that the promotion of autocracy involved external actors seeking to move a given "political regime away from democracy and towards semi or fully authoritarian rule", while attempting to "make the international environment more hospitable to authoritarian or would-be authoritarian rulers and regimes". In her seminal piece *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad,* Rachel Vanderhill (2013) echoes many of these ideas, arguing that mechanisms such as the 'changing of elite capabilities' and the influencing of civil society have been most influential in changing regime outcome. Despite the similarities, Vanderhill (2013, p. 13) notes that external efforts to promote authoritarianism "are not identical to those that promote democracy" given that, unlike democratic states, authoritarian states have greater freedom of action and are "not constrained by the norms of democracy at home or abroad".

The final mechanism identified has been the diffusion of authoritarianism within regions; a process similar to democratic diffusion. Regarding this topic, Thomas Ambrosio (2010, p. 375) noted that "rather than expecting the further spread of democracy, the potential for the diffusion of autocracy, or at least the diffusion of autocratic methods, looks increasingly likely". Building on Larry Diamonds (2008) concept of 'democratic rollback', Ambrosio observed that autocratic diffusion materializes through "self-coups and a proliferation of methods which undermine liberalism and strengthen pre-existing regimes" (2010, p. 377). Autocratic values are not only easily spread within a region, but individual agents of influence can easily become lured by the potential gains made possible through a more autocratic state. Most susceptible to these processes, are states that are inherently weak. Authoritarian values and governance, when combined with pressure from external – anti-democratic – actors, can easily result in regressing democratic trajectories for institutionally weak states (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 61).

CHAPTER 2 – Russian Foreign Policy: Moscow and Brussels

Pragmatism under Putin: Domestic and Foreign Policy

In order to better understand Russian interests in the Western Balkans, it is crucial to first better understand Russian foreign and domestic policy under Vladimir Putin. Taking control of an inherently complex political structure at the turn of the century, Putin was charged with solving the severe political and economic crisis troubling the still young Russian Federation left behind by the Yeltsin administration. Throughout Yeltsin's time, the state had become "overgrown with powerful regional, oligarchic, bureaucratic interests" (Shevtsova, 2005, p. 59). Within his first year, Putin's resilience quickly became apparent. He recentralized regional power, actively began pressurizing powerful oligarchs to remove their grip on the economy, and initiated the restructuring of the central government[11] (Shevtsova, 2005). Tightening his grip over both society and the elites, he established what has become known as the 'power vertical'. Closely related to the Russian idea of statism, also known as *gosudarstvennichesvto*, Putin expressed that in Russia, "the state and its institutions have always played an exceptionally important role in the life of the country and its people"; it is therefore that "for Russians a strong state is not an anomaly that should be disposed of", but is rather seen as a "source of and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change" (as quoted in Tsygankov, 2016, p. 137).

From a theoretical standpoint, Vladimir Putin's approach very much places Russia on the authoritarian side of the Carothers' (2002) 'gray zone'. Although Putin himself continues to consider Russia to be a democratic regime, severe discrepancies exist in all three of Levitsky and Way's (2010, p. 7) three defining attributes of democracy. Elections under Putin have had consistently suspicious outcomes, civil liberties have been seriously restricted, and a reasonably level playing field is far from found in modern Russian politics.

Under Putin, Russian foreign policy has simultaneously been adapted in order to ensure its role as "a modern great power", capable of adapting "to a changing world under state leadership" (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 137). While foreign policy during the 1990's tended to be extremely statist and solely emphasize the external threats facing Russia, Putin's approach has regarded the international system as containing of both threats and opportunities.

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[11] For more on how this took place, see McFaul and Spector, 2010

As such, on one hand, under Putin Russia has focused on "strengthening economic and political positions", allowing it to compete in what it views as a multipolar system (Mankoff, 2009, p. 14). Russia's vision of its role in this multipolar order emphasizes "the economic nature of the contemporary world", and as such the growing need for "Russia to be successful in geo-economical" sense (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 138). This has meant that Russia uses its natural resources and economic potential to ensure its "broader integration into the world economy", thus allowing it to establish its power internationally (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000).

However, on the other hand, Russia's move towards multipolarity was being "offset" by "attempts to create structures of international relations by the developed countries of the West" (Mankoff, 2009, p. 15). Under the leadership of the U.S., these 'structures' predicated on unilateral resolutions of key problems in world politics, "circumventing the fundamental rules of international law" and sovereignty, undermining the development of a multipolar world order (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000). In this context, foreign policy under Putin has very much remained focused on the threats of the international system: predominantly NATO. The 2000 security concept illustrates this thought, stating that the most "fundamental threats" to have developed in the international sphere have been "the strengthening of military-political blocs and alliances", and above all, "NATO's eastward expansion"[12] (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000). These viewpoints vis-à-vis NATO, the US, and Europe in general find their ultimate resonance in a speech given by Putin at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy.

Multipolarity and the NATO Threat

Similar to the national security concept adopted in 2000, in his 2007 speech, Putin most clearly expressed Russia's opposition to Western policies since the end of the Cold War. The speech first and foremost aimed at condemning the United States' policy, noting that it had "overstepped its national borders in every way", as it has sought to impose "economic, political, cultural, and educational policies" on other nations across the world (Putin, 2007). However, it also aimed at delineating a similar message regarding Russia itself, noting that "the economic potential of the new centers of global economic growth will inevitably be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity" (Putin, 2007). Deducing

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[12] The Russian view of the NATO as a threat has remained unchanged: in its 2014 military doctrine, NATO is still listed at the top of its "main external military dangers" (Lo, 2015)

that the "unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world", Putin's speech furthermore extensively illustrates that, to Russia, the global security system is in need of reinvention. NATO's policy of expansion was heavily criticized in the speech, as Putin explained he did not see believe it "to have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe" (Putin, 2007). Rather, its expansion "represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust", and risks the "sincere partnership with all the members of the big European family", thereby threatening the stability of Europe (Putin, 2007).

While the foreign policy documents of 2000 were an early signal of discontent with developments in the international order, the Munich speech in 2007 illustrates one its most outspoken rejections of it. With that, becoming one of the strongest depictions of the modern-day tensions between NATO and Russia. Under Putin, it became increasingly evident that NATO and Russia were "pursuing two separate tracks of developing their security infrastructures" (Tsygankov, 2013, p. 179). His speech in Munich therefore marks the outspoken definition of Russian foreign policy, the publication of an approach to international politics which increasingly illustrates "an us-against-them model" (Casula, 2013, p. 7).

Russian Interests in the Western Balkans

Cultural Interests

Within the historical context of Russian interests in the Western Balkans, one can trace its ties with the region back to the 1800's. In the 19th century, Nicolas I of Russia focused his attention on the region, as he aimed to liberate the "Slavic and Orthodox nations in the Balkans and Southeastern Europe from the Ottoman Empire" (Wallander, 2007, p. 474). Russia later played a crucial role in helping Serbia and Montenegro gain *de jure* independence from the Ottoman empire during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, a conflict in which Slavic nationalist ideas played a role (Wallander, 2007, p. 477)[13]. While during the Soviet era, the intensity of ties was comparatively low - due to the split between Tito and Stalin – Russia became involved in the Balkans again during the later stages of the Yugoslav wars[14]. In the wake of NATO's heavy targeting of Serbian economic infrastructure from the air[15], Russia generally stood with the Serbs, sharing the viewpoint that the NATO campaign "was at best

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[13] Russia went to war in Austro-Hungary in 1914 over Serbia (Headley, 2008).
[14] Russia however failed to support the Serbs for most of 1992-1994 against the West (Glenny, 2012, p. 639).
[15] Which caused extensive 'collateral damage'.

inappropriate and at worst immoral" (Glenny, 2012, pp. 658-659). While it removed itself from regional peacekeeping operations in 2003, Russia has remained involved with Serbian matters concerning the Yugoslav wars, sharing the perspective that NATO violated Serbia's sovereignty and as such acted completely out of accord with international law (Glenny, 2012, p. 659).

Within the Western Balkans, Russians have remained predominantly popular with the Orthodox and Slavic populations, especially those that still believe in the idea Pan-Slavism[16] and with those that carry resentful sentiments against NATO (Headley, 2008). While Putin has somewhat separated church and state in his policy, he has been known to use the Orthodox Church as "an instrument" of foreign policy (Lo, 2015, p. 34). Although it is important to point out the Orthodox Church does in fact not 'drive' policy, under Putin the church - and its Patriarch Kirill – have been extremely useful "as a legitimating symbol", whose "chief value" has been "highlighting Russia's (and his own) virtues in contrast to a spiritually and morally bankrupt West" (Lo, 2015, p. 34). In the Western Balkans, Patriarch Kirill's increasingly frequent visits to Serbia have been used to strengthen rhetoric of ties between the Russian and the Slavic/Orthodox communities, and has been "an important consideration in countering pro-European tendencies in those countries" (Lo, 2015, p. 34). The emphasizing of shared values and culture has been a common element in Russian foreign policy, ever since the end of the Yugoslav wars. Highlighting the cruelty of the West has also been a common delineation which has provided Russia with much-needed support from the often-large Slavic and Eastern Orthodox communities across the Western Balkan states. For the purpose it serves, the question of ethnicity is a highly contentious issue in the Balkans, given the consistent fragmentation of ethnicity in almost each country[17].

Economic Interests

The development of the Russian economy has been one of the predominant drivers of foreign policy under Putin. Forming a 'gateway to Europe' in terms of the export of natural resources, the Western Balkans as of recent have become of particular strategic economic interest to Russia. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 highlights that the Balkan region specifically "is of great strategic importance to Russia", functioning as a "major transportation and infrastructure hub used for supplying gas and oil to European countries" (The Ministry of

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[16] The political ideology advancing the unity of Slavic people.
[17] Generally speaking, Montenegro is split between Serbs and Montenegrins, Macedonia between Slavic Macedonians and Albanian Macedonians, and Bosnia and Herzegovina between Serbs, Bosnians, and Croats.

Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). Its most notable attempt at advancing these interests have been through the development of the South Stream Pipeline, a proposed pipeline designed to link Russia's gas fields to Balkan markets, and on to Europe (Petrillo, 2013, p. 4). Having been proposed to stretch across Bulgaria and Serbia, with diversions towards Macedonia and Republika Srpska, the development of the pipeline was the most concrete signaling of its intent to gain a hand in the Balkan energy market. Much has been written about Russia's capability to use the 'energy weapon'; "the exploitation of energy exports and pipelines for geopolitical ends", a worthy consideration in the Balkans (Lo, 2015, p. 28).

Bobo Lo (2015, p. 28) illustrates that the "use of economic tools to project power" is not strictly "limited to energy". Under Putin, investments by Russian companies in "banking, finance, manufacturing, and transport industries" have grown across Eastern Europe, and the Western Balkans are no exception to this. James Headley (2008, 466) points out that, "indisputably, Putin believes that Russian interests are served by economic penetration of the Balkans". Russian state-owned energy companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft, Transneft, and - the privately owned - Lukoil have increasingly penetrated the Balkan energy market through extensive investments (Smith, 2008). In 2009 for example, Gazprom Neft acquired a majority stake in the Serbian oil and gas company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), one of the region's largest oil and gas companies (Gazprom, n.d.). Extending beyond energy, privatizations across the region have allowed Russian companies to get a foothold in many crucial Balkan industries, amongst which the tourism sector, its heavy industry, and also the banking and real estate industries (Headley, 2008, p. 463).

While the region-wide investments by Russian companies are without a doubt also the outcome of commercial motivations, it would be "naïve to disregard [their] geopolitical dividend", as Bobo Lo (2015, p. 28) points out. Given that a vague line often exists between 'private' and 'state' controlled firms, it is to no surprise that many analysts conclude that companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom, and Sberbank often act as "representatives of Russian national interests"[18] (Headley, 2008, p. 465). While it is important to note that Russian companies cannot solely be considered as "mere instruments of the Kremlin", their frequent participation in "often-fragile economies" can, and often does serve wider purposes (Headley, 2008, p. 465). As such, the increasing of its economic footprint in the region, can be considered as a Russian tool of 'soft power'. While as of yet far from capable of overtaking the European Union in economic terms, Russia has "tried to present itself as a credible and promising

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[18] Rather than directly to their own shareholders.

economic and political counterpart for the Balkan countries" in light of the weakening European Union footprint in the region (Petrillo, 2013, p. 2).

Geopolitical Interests

Within Russian foreign policy, its primary strategical security interests predominantly lie in its direct 'near abroad': its former Soviet Republics (with the exception of the Baltic states). While outside of this sphere, there are those that argue that the Balkans in general have an impact on the security of the Russian Federation in more classical geostrategic terms (Headley, 2008; Petrillo, 2013). Most rational of arguments have been the claims that Russia has historically had an interest in securing access to the Montenegrin port of Bar and to the Bay of Kotor, as its deep-sea port could be strategically valuable as a naval base with access to 'warmer waters' (Vlahovic, 2017).

More significant within the framework of geopolitics, however, have been Russia's relations vis-à-vis the Western led organizations of NATO and the European Union. While Russia considers the EU to be an enormously important trading bloc, it has little respect for its political stature. As such, Russia has increasingly challenged the assumptions of the EU, its values, rules, and institutions, and it furthermore views the aim to include Eastern European states as intrusive and "congenitally anti-Russian" (Lo, 2015, pp. 180-182). Central to its geopolitical concerns however, remains "the scope and the role of NATO" going eastward, and thus also in the Western Balkans. Serbia, a former adversary of NATO, remains Russia's only true 'ally' due to its distancing from NATO, while simultaneously retaining an observing member position in the CSTO. With NATO membership an irreversible fact for Montenegro, Russia is seeing its window for military cooperation and the providing of influence within the region closing. It is in the context of NATO's "thrust" eastward, as well as the lingering prospect of European Union enlargement in the Balkans, that a *Kto Kogo* (Lo, 2002) foreign policy has returned. While far from the Cold War mentality of 'zero-sum equations' and 'for every winner there must be a loser', Russia's increased strategical resonance in the region as of recent does signal it has acknowledged that European integration would take place at the cost of Russian influence in a region of geopolitical, historical, and economic significance.

CHAPTER 3 – The Western Balkans: EU Enlargement Fatigue, Russian Linkage, To What End?

EU Enlargement 'Fatigue' and the Political Vacuum

Since the end of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990's, the European Union has adopted a policy towards the Western Balkans aimed at promoting "peace, stability and economic development", as well as opening up the prospect of EU integration (De Munter, 2017). While reaffirmations made at Thessaloniki (2003) regarding potential candidates for EU membership for all SAP[19] countries seemed like a promising future for Western Balkan states, the EU's engagement has proven itself as being "uneven and unsatisfactory"[20] (Đurović, Bigović, & Milović, 2017, p. 246). As Corina Stratulat (2012, p. 2) of the European Policy Center already suggested as early as 2012, enlargement towards the Balkans will struggle "to remain at the heart of member states' concerns", as EU states have increasingly caught up with their "own economic, political and institutional uncertainties". The EU's reputation has become considerably tarnished, as the increasing sentiment of 'enlargement fatigue' - a simple "unwillingness to grant EU membership to new states"- as well as the damaging legacy of the Eurozone crisis has harmed Europe's solidarity with the Western Balkan states (Đurović, Bigović, & Milović, 2017, p. 246). To no surprise, "the previously successful 'external incentives model' has run aground on the rocks", as negotiation chapters are frozen and candidate states fail to implement new reforms (Đurović, Bigović, & Milović, 2017, p. 246). While it would be far removed from the truth to say the Western Balkans are no longer on the path to EU accession, events over the past few years have discerned the EU's attention away from the region, leaving its vulnerable and fundamentally weak states without a certain future. There is a danger to the putting on hold of enlargement, as Dimitar Bechev (2012, p. 7) points out: it "allows other actors to seize on business opportunities, score political points and carve out niches of influence", allowing them to free ride "on the tremendous investment into stability already made by the EU". The political vacuum that is arising out of this complex situation has opened the possibility for external actors to exert political and economic influence, at the cost of further Western integration.

Amongst Balkan citizens, these trends have also been reflected in the declining public

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[19] The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), launched in 1999 by the EU (De Munter, 2017).
[20] With the exception of Croatia.

opinion regarding EU integration, and by the more frequently emerging 'pro-Kremlin' constituencies in the Balkan countries. Often regarded as the "fifth column in a Kremlin strategy to undermine European unity, discredit democratic liberalism, and diminish Europe's regional and international weight", such constituencies may side with Russia on the basis of a hostility towards "an EU-centered wider Europe", but may also do so on the basis of a "deeper foundation": the foundation of shared "historical pan-Slavism" or "shared Orthodox faith" (Lo, 2015, p. 192). While historically, support for EU membership has been relatively high amongst Balkan citizens, support for the EU and their integration paths have declined accordingly. As the old "promise of modernization and convergence with the rich and well- governed countries of old Europe" is fading, "pro-Moscow" attitudes may in fact increase (Bechev, 2012, p. 6).

Montenegro

One of the smallest and newest states[21] in the Balkans, of the three states in question Montenegro has undergone one of the most promising transformations towards democratization. Under the leadership of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and its charismatic leader Milo Đukanović, institutions have been transformed, a liberal economy has been introduced, and civil liberties have accordingly undergone improvement (Komar & Živković, 2016, p. 785). Considering it to be their foreign policy priority to join the European Union, Montenegro applied for accession in 2008 and began negotiations in June of 2012 (Montenegro & EU, 2017). Given that accession negotiations have dramatically slowed down, enlargement fatigue also appears to have affected Montenegro. As of early 2017, Montenegro stands to be the latest state to join NATO, which it believes will "guarantee stability and security for pursuing other strategic goals", amongst which, EU integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Montenegro, 2017). Ethnically speaking, the country is composed of 44.98% ethnic Montenegrins, 28.73% ethnic Serbs, as well as of 8.65% and 4.91% ethnic Bosniaks and Albanians respectively, with a majority (72.07%) of the population being of Christian Orthodox background, an important consideration when studying it in this context (Government of Montenegro - Public Relations Bureau, 2013, pp. 8-9).

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[21] Montenegro only formally became independent from Serbia in 2006, following referendum in which a 55.5% vote in favor of independence was recorded (Government of Montenegro - Public Relations Bureau, 2013, p. 11)

With the first transition towards pluralism having taken place in 1990, Montenegro has spent that past two decades working on transitioning into a fully consolidated democracy. While of all the Western Balkan states, it has made longest strides towards doing democratic consolidation, issues of governance continue to pervade the state. According to Freedom House's 'Nations in Transit' report (2016), the pace of reforms has increasingly slowed down in Montenegro, and as a result, its democracy score has dropped from 3.79 to 3.93 between 2010 and 2016. While it is hard to conclude whether the slowing down of reforms is to be blamed on the supposed 'enlargement fatigue' of the EU, or the result of internal factors in Montenegro, institutions remain too weak to cope with widespread corruption, tackle "abuse of power" and the "misuse of public resources for party purposes", as well as suffering from a notable lack of transparency (Marović, 2016, p. 1).

Another notable issue in Montenegro has been the repetitive election of a single party. In Montenegro, polls have shown citizens generally do not believe their voice is of importance, and rather repeatedly vote for the DPS simply based on "nationality, habitual patterns of political behavior, and the image of invincibility[22]" (Komar & Živković, 2016, p. 799). The nationalist/ethnic issue deriving from this, is that the DPS has consistently been the only major party to 'monopolize' the Montenegrin side, subsequently making it almost "impossible for the opposition to unite and build a coalition strong enough to jeopardize its rule" (Komar & Živković, 2016, p. 795). Serb interests, therefore, are often completely marginalized, undoubtedly creating a sentiment of resistance within the Serbian factions for the DPS' European course, working to the advantage of Russian interests in Montenegro.

Heavily dependent on European imports and exports, the Montenegrin economy drastically suffered from the lasting effects of Euro-crisis. As a result of the crisis, Montenegro's economy experienced a serious drop in exports to the Euro area: over 50 percent (Bartlett & Prica, 2013, p. 371). Burdened with "high levels of public debt, sizeable budget deficits and large current account deficits", the Montenegrin government has been struggling to regain traction since the end of the Euro-crisis (O'Brennan, 2014, p. 232). These "structural imbalances" have domestically only been worsened by inefficient and "high government spending", and an all-round "political inability to curb it" (Bartlett & Prica, 2013, p. 372). Resulting in high unemployment rates - doubling from under 12% to over 24% (2012-2017) – the Euro-crisis has thus-far had a dismal effect on the Montenegrin economy, inducing anti-

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[22] For more on *Image of Invincibility, see* Komar & Živković, 2016

EU sentiments amongst a portion of its citizens (Trading Economics, 2017).

While it remains quite clear that the political direction for Montenegro, as outlined by its foreign policy, is geared towards accession in both NATO and the EU, public opinion polls published by CEDEM in December, 2016 exposed troubling figures. In the survey, when asked if regardless of their opinion, "Montenegro will become a NATO member state", respondents answered with an overwhelming 53.8% that they believed their opinion would be disregarded (CEDEM (B), 2016). When asked whether they supported Montenegro's accession to NATO, results showed a sharp divide in opinion: at that time, 39.5% would answer *yes*, 39.7% would answer *no*, while the remaining 20.8% did not want to commit (CEDEM (B), 2016). Considering there has been an unwillingness of the Đukanović[23] administration to hold a referendum, as well as that public support of Montenegro's foreign policy has never exceeded 47%, these figures illustrate a concerning trend (CEDEM (A), 2016). While support for the EU in general is higher (63%) than that of NATO, its drop from 76% (2009-2016) highlights the effect of the Euro-Crisis and the decreasing optimism about an EU future (CEDEM (B), 2016).

Linkages

While the West retains strong influence over Montenegro, Russia has managed to emphasize historical linkages as well as build new ones between 2012 and 2016. Over the past few years, the Montenegrin Metropolitanate, part of the Serbian Orthodox Church, has often aligned itself with its Serb and Russian counterparts, increasingly fueling opposition towards the European integration path set out by the DPS and its allies (Tomovic, 2016). The Russian Orthodox Church often denounces NATO, describing its presence in the Balkans as a "crusade against the Christian Orthodox faith" while also critiquing "national Orthodox churches whose countries were members of the EAPC and Partnership for Peace" (Evans, 2002, p. 40). As Russia's rhetoric has become increasingly hostile regarding Montenegro's 'European choice', its Orthodox Church has often backed these expressions. In January of 2016, the Montenegrin Metropolitanate – part of the Serbian Church – called its followers to an anti-NATO protest in the capital city of Podgorica, where pro-Russian parties were simultaneously celebrating the traditional Orthodox beginning of the year, also known as the 'Serb New Year' (Tomovic, 2016). Occurrences such as these highlight the increasing influence of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro regarding political matters, fueling division between pro-Western and anti-Western citizens, a line often drawn between two ethnicities (Montenegrin and Serb).

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[23] And now, Marković.

More recent Russian linkages have centered on Montenegro's economy. While Russian businessmen were already active in Montenegro since the early 1990's, following its independence in 2006, Montenegro became a favorite target for foreign investors in real estate, all predominantly of Russian descent[24] (Violante, 2017, pp. 90-91). Underlying these investments, was the fact that Montenegro law dictated that foreign investors "could not own real estate property without being part of a registered business company", leading to a boom of newly created business associations following 2006 (Violante, 2017, p. 91). From this, Russian businessmen gradually gained a hold over a multitude of national assets. While the 2008 global financial crisis had serious implications for the economy of Russia, amongst which Putin's "curb on property ownership abroad in 2013", economic ties between the two states remained remarkably strong "in real estate, tourism and industry" (Violante, 2017, p. 93). This relationship has remained so strong, that by 2014 reports estimated that as much as 32% of Montenegrin enterprises were under Russian ownership, making Russia Montenegro's largest inward investor (Violante, 2017, p. 93; Clark & Foxall, 2014, p. 10). The concentration of trade flows with Russia has managed to extend beyond just tourism and real estate, as Russian investments have also entered other sectors, such as its aluminum industry[25] (World Bank, 2016, p. 44). In addition to Montenegrin businesses increasingly relying upon Russian capital, currently around a third of the vital tourist industry has come to depend on Russian nationals (Clark & Foxall, 2014, p. 10). While Russian capital has gained a strong hand in some of Montenegro's domestic industries, as a trading partner, it remains relatively weak. For Montenegro, its primary export partners are Serbia ($77.2M), Italy ($50.1M), Pakistan ($34.2M), as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina ($32.7M), while its primary import partners consist of Serbia ($638M), China ($231M), Bosnia and Herzegovina ($144M), and Croatia ($134M), with Russia being much further down this list (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2015). These figures illustrate that, Russia does not command strong bilateral economic relations with Montenegro. As such, its only position of leverage going forward, can originate from its provision of tourism and capital. Thus far, Russia has only threatened to take advantage of this position, as it did when it threatened to end visa-free travel in the wake of Montenegro's joining in on Western Sanctions over Crimea (Clark & Foxall, 2014, p. 10).

Politically speaking, Russia has few direct ties to the current leadership of Montenegro, although it has showed a desire to connect to Serb opposition parties. Despite Russia's efforts

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[24] Leading to the beginning of a real estate boom.
[25] One of its leading export products.

at preventing the DPS's pursuit of European integration, Montenegro has seen its way through to NATO membership. While not few relations exist with the DPS, there have been converging relationships between Russia and Serb opposition parties: a trend which has emulated throughout the Balkans. Specifically, considerable ties exist with the Democratic Front (DF), who at the latest elections in 2016 provided a "trident anti-NATO voice" (Darmanović, 2017, p. 124). During these elections, Russian funds were reported to have gone to the DF and its campaign, as well as "to media outlets and NGOs that ardently opposed NATO membership" (Darmanović, 2017)[26]. In 2016, United Russia -Putin's party- signed a non-binding agreement of 'military neutrality' agreement with multiple far-right, Pro-Russian, and Anti-NATO parties from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Bulgaria (BIRN, 2016). Although the agreement itself does not represent much more than a willingness to cooperate on a "regional strategic doctrine" which can later be "incorporated into pan-European considerations of a new continental security architecture", it illustrates the growing collaboration between the Russian government and anti-Western parties (BIRN, 2016). Though imminent, the topic of NATO membership has furthermore become increasingly contentious between Serb and Montenegrin political parties. It's funding schemes in the 2016 elections illustrates Russia's attempt to expose weaknesses relating to one of the core dividing factors in Montenegro, the much-disputed question of ethnicity.

Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)

Of all the former Yugoslav republics that gained independence in the 1990's, Macedonia has arguably been the most fragile of the new states to emerge (Glenny, 2012, pp. 655-656). Marred by economic and political strife, Macedonia has been subject to some of the most significant ethnic tensions in the Balkans in the past decade. With a population of approximately 2,1 million people, the country is ethnically composed of approximately 64% Macedonians, 25% Albanians, 4% Turkish, and only 1.8% Serb (Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office, 2016)[27]. The main dividing line of ethnicity stands between (often Slavic) Macedonians and Albanians. During the communist era, the Albanians of Macedonia had suffered from extremely brutal treatment at the hands of the Macedonian communist authorities, worse than Kosovo Albanians in Serbia (Glenny, 2012, p. 656). As a result, ever

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[26] The 2016 elections furthermore gained significant attention, as reports arose regarding a Serb/Russian-backed plot aimed at overthrowing the government. This issue, discussed in the final section of this chapter, remains evidentially unfounded, and can therefore not yet be considered as a credible case of attempted leverage.
[27] 2002 estimates.

since its independence, Macedonian Albanians have expected the government to demonstrate greater respects for their rights, something Macedonian politicians for a long time have promised to "find a modus vivendi for" (Glenny, 2012, p. 656). In terms of foreign policy, Macedonia declares its 'strategic' and 'long-term' goal to be "full-fledged EU and NATO membership for Macedonia". (Republic of Macedonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). While it remains a priority to commence the pre-accession negotiations "as soon as possible", the negotiations, as of yet, have not been scheduled (Republic of Macedonia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). Its NATO accession furthermore remains highly controversial, given that NATO-member state Greece has blocked its accession over a naming dispute. While a Membership Action Plan (MAP) has been extended, Greece continues to veto any decisions regarding Macedonia's entrance into NATO, as well as the EU, regardless of the fact that both organizations find it unacceptable that a naming dispute is used as 'obstacle' (Geddes & Taylor, 2016, p. 942).

Weaknesses

Similar to Montenegro, the most inherent weakness prone to external pressure has been its ethnic diversity. Since its independence, issues of group rights have consistently placed the Albanian minority at odds with Macedonian politics. The resulting "ethnification of politics has kept questions of democratic accountability and corruption permanently in the background" (Dolonec, 2013, p. 89). These issues date back to the 1990's, when Macedonian and Albanian political elites clashed about issues such as the most basic ideas "behind the concept of state", elements of the constitution, laws on education, as well about public administration (Daskalovski, 2004, p. 52). While a fragile peace was maintained between the two ethnic parties during this period, violence erupted between Macedonians and Albanians in 2001 as the crisis in Kosovo escalated and a flood of refugees spilled over into Macedonia (Glenny, 2012, p. 658; Dolonec, 2013, p. 89). The resolution of this conflict found itself in the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), whose basic purpose was to secure the "future of Macedonia's democracy", as well as to promote the peaceful development of civil society while "respecting the ethnic identity and the interests of all Macedonian citizens" (OFA, 2001). While the agreement appeared promising in its capability to address issues between the two ethnicities, the agreement has been argued as having created a 'bi-national state' (Dolonec, 2013, p. 89). The OFA therefor appears to "have institutionalized a lasting challenge" to the development of the state, as the issue of ethnic group rights has come to "permanently [dominate] the political agenda at the expense of further democratization"

(Dolonec, 2013, p. 89). With Macedonians, generally being of Slavic ethnicity, Russian pressure on these groups can expose unresolved fears vis-à-vis their Albanian counterparts.

While democratic institutions do exist, and manage to "perform their basic functions", factors of governance have been a consistent issue in Macedonia, undermining these democratic institutions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016a, p. 13). Up until the resignation of the Prime-Minister, Nikolas Gruevski, in January of 2016, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE maintained a "firm grip over key democratic institutions", being able to rule without many without much accountability to parliament (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016a). Largely of a nationalist orientation, the rule of VMRO-DPMNE has been labeled by the smaller opposition parties (SDSM and BDI/DUI) as operating along authoritarian lines (MacDowall, 2015). While VMRO-DPMNE disputes this, reforms since 2006 have given it increasing – significant even – influence over the judiciary, as well as over the public broadcasting (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016a, p. 13). In 2016, an EC report noted that the judicial situation had been "backsliding since 2014", and that "achievements of the previous decade's reform process have been undermined by recurrent political interference in the work of the judiciary" (European Commission, 2016a, p. 5). The World Press Freedom Index dropped Macedonia from 34th place in 2006 to 118th in 2016, placing it amongst countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Afghanistan (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). Revelations such as the "large-scale and illegal government wiretapping of journalists, corrupt ties between officials and media owners, and an increase in threats and attacks on media workers", are cited as being the most concerning developments (Freedom House, 2016b). Reporters are often forced to either adopt "a pro-government viewpoint or lose their job", resulting in significant self-censorship (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016a). To no surprise, Freedom House constituted (another) year over year decline in democratic indicators in 2016[28], subsequently labelling Macedonia as a 'hybrid regime' (Freedom House, 2016a). Reports such as these have emphasized the institutional weakness of Macedonia, and are arguably illustrative of a backward progression towards a more authoritarian form of governance.

While Macedonia has a "good level of preparation in developing into a functioning market economy", indicators show its economy has a long way yet to go (European Commission, 2016a, p. 25). Troubling remains its unemployment rate (24%) and the poor macroeconomic stability – on a downward progression – in the wake of the political crisis that developed between the Macedonian and Albanian political parties (European Commission,

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[28] A downward trajectory which Macedonia has been on since 2011.

2016a). Nevertheless, as the next section will illustrate, it is seeking to diversify its economy in the wake of an unsure future with its European partners.

While within Macedonia, there is general support for integration into Western organizations, as per the regional trend, there has been growing skepticism, as captured by public opinion indices. While above the numbers witnessed in Montenegro, public opinion polls measured by the International Republican Institute (2016, p. 31) reported a drop from 87% support for NATO integration to 73%, between 2012 and 2016. In a similar trend, support for accession to the EU dropped from 84% to 71% during the same measured time period. While still showing relative support for the European path of integration, these figures illustrate the growing skepticism in Macedonian public opinion regarding Western-led institutions, a point which can be used to the advantage of Russia as it seeks to gain influence.

Linkage

In terms of linkage, Macedonia has arguably only recently become of more interest to Russia. This intensification of ties has coincided with the development of a political crisis in Macedonia (2014-2016) between the Macedonian and Albanian Parties. Throughout this period, two general discourses have developed regarding the involvement of external influences in Macedonia. One the one hand, Western news outputs have argued that Russia seeks to take advantage of a political conflict, arguing that it seeks to stimulate the political crisis in order to further "diminish prospects for Macedonia's entry into NATO and the EU" (Bugajski, 2017). Discourse from Russian outputs[29], on the other hand, have tapped into the fears of nationalist-Macedonians, stressing that under NATO and EU –all predominantly American-led- patronage, "the foundations for a greater Albania have begun to take shape" (Papadopoulos, 2017). Russia itself has furthermore stressed that Western powers in fact seek to threaten regime stability, and has 'warned' the West about inciting regime protests, voicing concerns that it seeks to stimulate a color revolution there (Bouchet, 2016, p. 1). Through this discourse, Russia has gradually been presented as the backer of the majority Slav-Orthodox Macedonian side, while the United States and Europe are framed as the supporters of the Muslim Albanian population.

The historical linkages Russia shares with Macedonia are subsequently also based on a shared Slav background and Eastern Orthodox values. Within Macedonia, Slavism and the Orthodox church have long been of importance to its culture. While during the communist era,

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[29] Largely shared via media outputs such as RT and Sputnik

most communist governments sought to remove much of the religious tendencies in their countries, the communist government in Macedonia 'eagerly' promoted the "acceptance of a distinct Macedonian Slavic nationality" and the "establishment of an autonomous Orthodox church (Petrovich, 2000, p. 1375). Following independence, Slavic and Orthodox traditions have remained a strong conception within Macedonia, fundamentally fueling the differences Macedonians have with Albanians. While up until 2011, relatively little emphasis was placed on shared history, increasing interaction between the Russian and Macedonian government in the period 2012-2016 have led to the emphasizing of a 'shared history' between the two sides. This first became apparent when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov chose to visit Ohrid[30], instead of Skopje, in April of 2011: a visit aimed out discussing cultural and humanitarian links[31] (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2011; Marusic, 2011). These links were further reinforced in 2014 as construction began on the first Russian Orthodox Church in Skopje; largely considered as a significant step towards rapprochement between Russia and Macedonia, and their respective churches (Braw, 2015). Russia furthermore established a cultural influence center at the University in Skopje, arranged by the Russkiy Mir Foundation[32] (independent.mk, 2016). While Western outputs tend to overemphasize the significance of such events; the building of a single church and a cultural center must not be overemphasized. It does however represent the gradual strengthening of ties between Russia and Macedonia in a variety of areas, characteristic of Russia's soft power approach in the Western Balkans. Given Russia's strong emphasis on 'history' and shared values in its discourse towards other countries, consideration must be given to the emphasizing of spiritual and cultural linkage.

Economically speaking, ties have also only really begun developing since 2011. While Macedonian imports and exports are centered around Western European countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom, and more closely to countries such as Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, Macedonia has been diversifying its economy. As a result of the failure to "make progress in NATO and EU integration, the government has tried to diversify international cooperation by reaching out to Russia, China and India" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016a, p. 34). While its imports from (2.1%) and exports to (1%) Russia remain fairly scarce compared to its major partners such as Germany (13% import, 38% export) and Serbia (7.9% import, 6.9%

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[30] Which is considered as one of the 'centers of Orthodox Christianity and Slavic literature'.
[31] Such as holding 'Days of Macedonian Spiritual Culture' in Russia, as well as the discussing the prospects of establishing information and cultural centers in Moscow and Skopje.
[32] A foundation established by presidential decree in 2007 aimed at "enhancing and encouraging the appreciation of Russian language, heritage and culture (Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2017)

export), Russia has signaled a clear intent to increase its share in the energy industry. Most notable have been efforts to become part of the Russian led pipeline projects, of which two have been proposed to involve Macedonia. Within a year of Lavrov's visit to Ohrid in 2011, the Macedonian and Russian government, in collaboration with Gazprom, reached an agreement on the inclusion of Macedonia on the South Stream pipeline, an agreement signed in 2013 (Republic Of Macedonia Ministry of Finance, 2012). While the pipeline was originally not planned to include Macedonia, Russia's willingness to divert the proposed pipeline signaled a clear interest in gaining economic influence in Macedonia. While the 50-billion-dollar project eventually fell apart, South Stream has been replaced by the prospect of 'Turkish Stream', a project in which both Macedonia and Russia have expressed interest for. While no concrete plans have been made as of yet, options remain open for Russia to enter the Macedonian economy, a consideration worthy of attention considering the willingness of the Macedonian government to present itself with alternatives to the fading hopes of Western integration.

Political ties have also increasingly strengthened between Macedonia and Russia. As has been mentioned, Russia's tapping into nationalist fears has given it a point of contention against the more Western-oriented Albanian parties. However, notable has also been the decision of Macedonia, together with Serbia, to be amongst the only Western Balkan states not to join EU sanctions against Russia over the Crimea (IANS, 2014). While the implications of this must not be over exaggerated, it does place Macedonia in a relatively select group of states that haven't unconditionally supported the EU in its divergence with Russia over Ukraine and Crimea. In a trend taking place across the Western Balkans, a small Serb party, the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (DPSM), signed a military neutrality agreement with Putin's party, United Russia in 2016. While most parties signing the agreement represented opposition parties, in Macedonia the DPSM -until 2016- was in fact part of the leading coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE. The agreement signed was received by Albanian parties in Macedonia with much opposition, who believed it to be a sign that Macedonian Serb interests were diverging away from Euro-Atlantic integration (Marusic, 2016).

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS)

In 1995, following four years of heavy conflict, the Dayton agreement was signed by Slobodan Milošević (FR Yugoslavia), Alija Izetbegović (BIH) and Franjo Tuđman (Croatia),

marking the beginning of democratization in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). While the Dayton agreements were designed to unite the state under international supervision, the country that emerged from it was divided into two major zones, each "a de facto para-state" "dominated by largely illiberal wartime ethno-national elites" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016b, p. 4) . In the Dayton accords, lines were drawn in order to divide the states according to two identities, "roughly one half to a Muslim–Croat federation and the other to Serbs (in Republika Srpska)" (Robinson, Engelsoft, & Pobric, 2001, p. 958). Within the 'post-Dayton' constitution of BiH, the Serbian-dominated, Republika Srpska (RS), has become a "well-centralized 'state within a state', with its own president, government and ministries, parliament and constitutional court (Marciacq, 2015, p. 330). Since the end of the war in 1995, BiH has been overseen by a "U.N.-mandated High Representative exercising executive powers", whose task, in addition to overseeing its democratization, has been "to remove individuals accused of impeding peace implementation" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016b, p. 4). While in theory the international community's participation in Bosnia's democratization process should have overseen the reconciliation of the competing Bosniak, Serb, and Croat interests, nationalist rhetoric has gained significant traction and democratization has come to a standstill. At this point in time, given its protectorate status, integration into the European Union and into NATO remain a very distant prospect for the small and vulnerable state.

Weaknesses

Ethnically speaking, the Bosnian state, with its two separate entities, constitute an extremely fragile balancing act between three different ethnicities. In 2013, for the first time since the early 1990's, a census was carried out to outline the demographics of the entire state. While it took almost three years to publish the results[33], the survey outlined the divided demographics of the state (Toe, 2016a). Its shows that BiH in its entirety is composed of 50.1% Bosniaks, 15.4% Croats, and 30.7% Serbs (BHAS, 2016, p. 54). In RS however, the composure of ethnicity constitutes of 81.5% Serb and only 13.9% Bosniak, with a mere 2.4% being Croat (BHAS, 2016, p. 54). This final figure highlights the stark contrast in ethnic composures, and how the balancing of ethnic relations in has long been forgone in the modern Bosnian state. In the context of Russian interests, this ethnic cleavage is important to note due to Russia's strong appeal to individuals of Serb ethnicity. The most vulnerable area in recent years prone to external influence has been the continuous discourse coming from Banja Luka[34] regarding the

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[33] The results remain widely disputed by Bosnian Serb officials.
[34] The Administrative capital of RS

right to self-determination, as well as the holding of a referendum on the independence of Republika Srpska. Its president, Milorad Dodik, is widely perceived by the West as being a disruptive force, using an increasingly nationalist rhetoric targeted at the Muslim majority in BiH[35] (Toal, 2013, p. 199). RS leadership has often used its veto-right in foreign policy, blocking votes regarding the recognizing of the Kosovo's self-proclaimed independence (Marciacq, 2015, p. 333). Politicization of ethnicity as such has continued to marginalize "the EU agenda, as well as other democratizing/liberalizing agendas more generally" (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016b, p. 5).

Another pronounced weakness of RS, and BiH, as a whole, has been its weak economy and its subsequent dependency on external forces. Following the war, BiH and its two entities were left "economically devastated", beginning the long road towards mending damage done to their respective economies (Marciacq, 2015, p. 329). While BiH as a whole has been making a transition towards a market economy, it has a long way to go. In 2016, the European Commission noted that Bosnia is very much still "at an early stage in developing a functioning market economy", and that its economic growth, although progressing, has remained too low for its citizens to experience a "noticeable improvement" (European Commission, 2016b). While a strengthened commitment to reforms has been observed by the EC, political issues continue to hamper any significant progression in the right direction. In RS, just as in much of BiH, social conditions remain extremely strained: unemployment subsists around 25%, and the average monthly wage has not exceeded 425€ (Republic of Srpska Government, 2016, p. 6). Blaming the BiH leadership for its predicament, the poor state of the economy in RS has been used by Dodik as a nationalist rhetoric, arguing it's secession from BiH. In a paper called "Your Srpska, Your Vote", Dodik noted in 2010 that "sovereignty was the goal and that only an independent RS could reach its full economic potential" (Toal, 2013, p. 192). While talk of secession are mostly perceived as hollow threats, Dodik's mobilizing of a nationalist rhetoric remains an inherent weakness troubling the institutionally weak state.

In terms of support for the future integration of the EU and NATO, public opinion remains fairly cynical about the prospects. Although intricate public opinions polls are fairly rare occurrences in Bosnia, the Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in BiH published a report in 2015, amongst which were questions regarding EU membership. In it, when asked how they felt about BiH and the EU, 27.6% of respondents (Serb) believed EU membership is the only way for BiH to survive, 13.4% of respondents (Serb) felt membership was preferable,

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[35] All the while he seeks support for this cause from external actors, amongst which Russia and Serbia.

but not 'critical for the survival of the country', while 24.2% of respondents (Serb) noted they are not interested in the EU and 17% (Serb) noting that the EU will fall apart before BiH becomes a member (UNRCO BiH, 2015, p. 70). Though following along the wider lines of the general sentiment regarding the EU in BiH, Serb respondents in this public opinion poll represent rather notably weak support for the EU. Considered a weakness with regard to the EU, these sentiments can, similar to the previous two case studies, work to the advantage of Russian interests.

Linkages

Since the establishment of Republika Srpska as a separate entity of BiH, Russia has reinforced many of its linkages with its Serb population, as well as aligning with a multitude of contentious issues in favor of the Serb majority. Its historical linkage to RS dates back to the 1990's when Russia made up part of the Contact Group[36] tasked with finding a solution to the Bosnian conflict. While most international actors in this group preferred outcomes more favorable for the Muslim Bosniaks and Croats, the Russians stood strong with the Serbs in these negotiations, as they did for much of the later days of the Yugoslav wars. It petitioned that "Republika Srpska should have identical rights to the Muslim-Croat Federation", including the right to "confederation relations with Serbia" (Headley, 2008, p. 199). Russia has furthermore strongly emphasized its shared Slavic and Orthodox traditions with RS. Not only has it emphasized the role of NATO in the Yugoslav wars, Russia has supported Serb outcomes in a number of decisions regarding the Bosnian war, such as the UN resolution condemning the mass killing of men and boys in Srebrenica as a genocide. Having vetoed the decision in 2015, Sergey Lavrov noted that in the UN Security Council, "certain forces are attempting to promote an absolutely anti-Serb resolution", one that "provides an incorrect–even legally incorrect–interpretation of what had occurred" (Lavrov, 2015). Although the exact sequence of events in the Bosnian war remains highly debated, Russia's support for its Serb counterparts in Bosnia has been one of the clearest illustrations of it within the Western Balkan ethnic divides.

More recently, Russia has established extensive economic linkages with Republika Srpska, creating somewhat of a dependency. Most notable of the ties has been the creation of a Russian energy dependence by RS. While exports from RS to the Russian Federation have centered on agricultural products, Russia has been the largest partner for imports to RS with

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[36] The Contact Group was composed of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy, with observers from the EC and EU also often being present at negotiations as observers.

annual turnovers of around 1 million to 600,000 tons, mostly centered in the energy sector, given Russia a near-monopoly over it (Toe, 2016b; Republika Srpska Institute of Statistics, 2016). The gradually increasing presence of Russian energy firms, amongst which Lukoil Neftochim, Gazprom Neft and Zarubezhneft, have confirmed the increasing bilateral links between Banja-Luka and Moscow (Bechev, 2015). These energy firms have increasingly invested their control into Bosnian oil refineries, which through "a joint venture with Russian majority shareholders holds the exclusive rights in gas and oil extraction" in most of RS (Bieri, 2015, p. 2). As has been the case with Macedonia and Serbia, up until the cancellation of the project in 2014, the RS was furthermore widely regarded as an important link in the chain of the South Stream project as a diversion from the Serbian section was planned to supply RS (Fatić, 2010, pp. 447-449). While the plans for the South Stream project will likely never be realized, Russia's grip on RS's energy market has become substantial throughout the past 7 years, giving it a position of leverage over RS politics.

Throughout Putin's third term as president, Russia has established thorough contacts with the government in Banja-Luka. Milorad Dodik, president of RS and leader of the Alliance of Social Democrats[37] (SNSD) consistently stands at the opposite side of the central government Sarajevo, and with Western governments. While the Dayton Agreement and the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina dictate that foreign policy and foreign trade policy "are the responsibility of central institutions", RS has often acted on its own accord in bilateral relations with other states (Marciacq, 2015, pp. 333-334). As such, RS has aimed its foreign policy at strengthening relations with two states; Serbia and Russia (Marciacq, 2015, p. 334). Political relations between Russia and RS have centered around the common stance on Western institutions, and on mutual support in international diplomatic matters (Marciacq, 2015). One notable instance of such support, has been the RS's blocking of Bosnia's participation in the sanctions against Russia over Crimea and Ukraine (Hellquist, 2016, p. 1012). Russia has furthermore shown support for the controversial referendum regarding RS's national day, standing strong with the opinion that Bosnia and its entities have the right to dictate their own internal affairs, without the need for intervention of the High Representative, largely backing Russia's worldview on sovereignty and non-intervention (Kovacevic, 2016; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2011).

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[37] Whose viewpoints are generally Socialism, Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Populism (Stojarová, 2010)

To What End? Understanding the Russian Approach

So far, this thesis has shown how, over time, Russia has managed to manifest various linkages in the Western Balkans. It has however, so far, largely left the question unanswered regarding to what end these linkages do in fact serve. Based on the theory of Levitsky and Way, the linkages established by Russia should provide it with the capability to exert leverages, amongst which are political conditionality, punitive sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and in the most serious of instances, military intervention (2005, p. 21). However, despite the gradual reinforcement of Russian linkages, leverage on the case studies in question has thus far been notably limited. While in the period between 2012-2017 there have been several instances of alleged acts of 'leverage', due to their widely disputed and still-ongoing nature, it would be irresponsible to draw conclusions from them. Two of such instances have been the reports about a Russian-backed coup and assassination plot to overthrow the Montenegrin government during the 2016 elections (IISS, 2017), as well as claims - based on 'leaked documents' - that Russian agents in Skopje are actively attempting to influence Macedonian media outlets and as well as its political elite (Belford, Cvetkovska, Sekulovska, & Dojčinović, 2017). While media outlets are often quick to jump on such headline-making stories, until conclusive evidence is provided, these claims have so far been unfounded, and can therefore not (yet) be regarded as credible attempts at providing leverage. While Montenegro's recent joining of NATO has occurred in relative peace, Russia's 'intimidating' rhetoric in response to it suggest that future endeavors eastward may spark a more serious reaction, similar to what has recently been observed in Moldova[38] (Vlahovic, 2017).

There are, however, also alternative considerations which must be taken into account in light of these increased linkages. With the EU future of the Western Balkans remaining ever-so uncertain in the wake of the EU's enlargement fatigue, the danger of an anti-Western rhetoric is at its strongest. While a few years ago, the Russian view of the EU as an institution that is "overlarge" and "crippled by process" had little substance for many of the Western Balkan states, many of these "perceptions and prejudices" have gained a credible foundation in the wake of the global financial crash and the subsequent Euro-crisis (Lo, 2015, p. 182). Considering that the distribution of information via various pro-Russian media outlets remains a tool of influence for Russia, its capability for spreading its anti-European (NATO and EU) views can help stimulate the development of more anti-European factions in the region (IISS,

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[38] For more on this see Beyer & Wolff, 2016

2017). As has become clear, its position vis-à-vis populations of Eastern Orthodox and/or Slavic background can increase the credibility of the messages spread, working to the disadvantage of European institutions.

A final important consideration, is the significance of the regional ethnic disputes in relation to Russia's linkages with the Slavic and Eastern Orthodox communities of the Western Balkans. While it is extremely unlikely that Russia is seeking to disrupt a fragile regional stability, based on unconsolidated identities, theories do exist regarding the benefits that the maintenance of a "fragile status quo" can provide (Lebanidze, 2014). A form of countering democracy promotion, employing such a mechanism is not new for Russia, as Jakob Tolstrup (2009) and Bidzina Lebanidze (2014) have both identified similar mechanisms in former Soviet Republics, where Russia has actively sought to counter Western influences. With states such as Bosnia, Macedonia, and Montenegro remaining heavily politically divided along the different ethnic identities that make up their constituencies, Russia can retain a position of influence through the support of opposition parties. By empowering these groups, Russia contributes to maintaining a "fragile status quo", which subsequently can work to its advantage in two ways: first, political instability, such as that in Macedonia, makes "democratization a secondary issue for political elites as well as for the public, who typically opt to solve security issues first" (Lebanidze, 2014, p. 212); and secondly, Western actors involved in these states "are forced to focus more on stabilization and state-building measures" rather than on developing democratization and thus progress towards 'Europeanization' (Lebanidze, 2014, p. 212).

Conclusion

As this thesis has come to illustrate, in the period of Putin's most recent presidency, Russia has managed to extensively reinforce historical linkages while also fostering new ones in the Western Balkans. A volatile region, the Western Balkans have gained strategic resonance for Russia in the wake of NATO and the EU's intended eastward expansion. Whereas eastward expansion gives the region strategic resonance, it has been Europe's 'enlargement fatigue' that has in fact exposed a political vacuum, leaving space for other external actors to increasing their regional influence. While Russia's tactic has thus far been characteristic of a 'soft power' approach, outside several unfounded claims of substantial influence, it has yet to engage in more significant application of leverage to openly challenge NATO, and the EU. Its substantial reinforcement of historical linkages with the Slavic and Eastern Orthodox populations has however have shown its intent at preventing the complete Westernization of the Western Balkans, leaving the possibility of a harder approach open to the future. The case studies chosen, Montenegro, the Republic of Macedonia (FYR), and the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, have each presented an example of Russia's increasing linkages, while also representing a clear illustration of the ethnic divisions that characterize this region.

Montenegro, though arguably the furthest in its path towards becoming a consolidated democracy and a part of Europe, continues to struggle with issues of governance, of political participation, and without a doubt remains divided along ethnic lines. Although Russian linkages are arguably fairly strong in Montenegro (with special regards to its economy), its NATO integration, other than an increasingly aggressive rhetoric and a thus far unfounded claim of a Russian-backed plot to overthrow the government, Montenegro's integration seems to have taken place without an overwhelming application of leverage. However, given the growing tensions between Montenegrin and Serb factions, in addition to the increasingly skeptical public opinion of its citizens, Russia's strong grip over the Montenegrin economy must be taken seriously going forward, as its capabilities for exerting leverage remain comparatively strong in the small Balkan state.

Macedonia has presented itself as a more complex case. Historically not a particular area of Russian interests, increased linkages with Russia as of recent have made Macedonia increasingly vulnerable to Russian influence. Specifically, the highly contentious topic of the Macedonian identity has shown itself as an issue susceptible to such influence. Its institutional

weakness, and notable backtracking toward more authoritarian ways are important considerations in this matter as well. If for example it's NATO integration prospects were to be realized, the likelihood that Russia will step up its efforts to block these processes remains fairly substantial. The linkages established so far can provide it with a reasonable position of leverage with the Slavic Macedonians, although the strength of these ties, in comparison to the influence of the EU, remains to be seen.

The third and final case, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and its entity, Republika Srpska (RS), is arguably the most complex case of the three. Highlighting a broader division within the Balkans, the strong division in the Bosnian state between those of Muslim and Croat ethnicity with the Slavic and Serbs remains one most fundamental issues preventing its development toward becoming a functioning democracy, and a toward becoming a part of Europe. Boasting close ties, Russia's unique position with Republika Srpska could prove to be a tremendous challenge to overcome for Western European states. Republika Srpska, with its Serb majority, has been illustrative of the continuing emphasis of Russia on a common history of Eastern Orthodox and Slavic traditions, and with that, Russian interests are arguably best served by the fragile separation of ethnicity in Bosnia. As long as Republika Srpska can provide a trident anti-European voice, and Serbs continue to look towards Russia as its most important ally, the future integration of Bosnia will remain but a faint hope, much to the advantage of Russia's interests.

Future Research

While this thesis has sought to create a more general overview of Russian linkages in the Western Balkans, future research could build upon the ideas presented here in a number of ways. While this study has been conducted based on three cases, a possibility exists for a more intricate analysis of a single case; allowing for a more in-depth analysis based on the ideas presented here, given that outside of Serbia, very little research has been done regarding the role of Russia in the Western Balkans. Another possibility for future research would be to look more closely at the factor of ethnicity alone, and it interrelate with Russia's interests. As this thesis has shown, Slavism and Eastern Orthodoxy play an important role in Russia's connection to the region. Each case presented here has represented a national division of ethnicity, and further investigation regarding the political and/or preferences of these groups could give better insight regarding the extent to which Russia can appeal to their interests, at the benefit of its own.

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