

Briefing Paper II:

EXTERNAL INFLUENCE IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

While the first briefing paper (read the [full version](#) or the [executive summary](#)) provided the historical and geo-strategic context of the project “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-democratic External Influence Activities,” the second briefing paper focuses on Russian, Chinese, Turkish and Gulf States’ influence and activities in the political arena of the Western Balkan countries.

Defining the political sphere is particularly difficult since it permeates all other spheres and to a certain extent, all influence activities have a political dimension. When specifically addressing the political, however, **the second briefing paper mainly focuses on foreign powers’ activities aiming to achieve political gains – to influence political decision-making and voting in international bodies.** It analyses elite capture, links to important political elites and political parties or ‘spoilerism’.

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Russia

Russian officials often build close links to particular influential political figures and provide support, although often just rhetorical, to pro-Russian or nationalist parties. When looking for allies, they draw on historical, cultural and religious links and often portray themselves as protectors of the Orthodox population, most importantly Serbs, and their interests.

Due to the popularity it enjoys as a ‘mighty alternative’ to the West, Moscow is able to sustain Russia’s image of a superpower and limit its efforts to a few impressive, but low-cost gestures that fit the anti-Western narrative of the local political elites. For instance, it rolls out lavish receptions for Balkan politicians in the Kremlin or hand out some outdated military equipment as a present.¹ These gestures enable Russia to strengthen its position within the region and establish deeper ties with the governing elites.

The Kremlin also capitalises on Russia’s seat in several international bodies, particularly in the UN Security Council. They give it significant leverage especially when disputed territories and inter-ethnic tensions come into question such as in Serbia-Kosovo relations and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though Moscow insists that its activities are not aiming at destabilising the Balkans, the Western governments perceive Russia’s interference in the Balkan countries as malicious.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

In recent years, Russian presence in and influence over BiH became dependent almost solely on the political marriage of Russian officials and diplomats with Milorad Dodik, the current president of Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska (RS), and the undisputed leader of RS's ruling party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD).

¹ Maxim Samorukov, “Russia’s Tactics in the Western Balkans,” Carnegie Europe, 03.11.2017.

As a result of Kremlin's bias towards Dodik, Dodik is among those politicians who meet Russian President Vladimir Putin most often. The latest such meeting took place on the margins of the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in June 2018, where Dodik has been a regular guest for the past several years. It was at least their sixth meeting in the last three years.² In most of these meetings, Dodik was given only very short time with Putin, and the meetings did not have much of a political impact. However, thanks to his complete control over RS media, Dodik³ has been able to capitalise on these events and present them to the local public as major happenings crucial for the future of RS.⁴

Some RS officials and experts believe that Kremlin's reliance on Dodik has been partially a result of Dodik's drive for the independence of RS. So far, Russia has appeared careful to block Dodik from pushing for full independence of RS - something which many experts thought would lead to a new conflict – as signalled through press communiqués issued after the meetings of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC)⁵ in December 2016 and in June 2018. In these statements, Russia joined other international actors in stressing that neither of Bosnia's two entities had a right of secession.⁶ However, Russia finds Dodik's calls for independence as a useful tool to intimidate the Western officials and its rhetorical support to Dodik is believed to have contributed to Dodik's gradual radicalisation.⁷

Russian officials have recently tried to also establish better relations with few other RS officials and opposition figures, including Mladen Ivanic, the Serb member of the presidency and former leader of Party of Democratic Progress (PDP). In 2016, they met the new leader

² Danijel Kovacevic, "Putin-Dodik Comradeship Causes Uncertainty for Bosnia," *Balkan Insight*, June 8, 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-dodik-comradeship-causes-uncertainty-for-bosnia-06-07-2017>.

³ Another example of Russian preference of Dodik was made back in 2007 when Russia's state oil company Zarubezhenft purchased majority stakes in several Bosnian oil companies worth 121.1 million euros. This investment made no real profit for Russia but rather served as a tool to strengthen both Dodik's position in RS and Russian influence in RS

⁴ Interviews with several senior RS officials 2016-2018.

⁵ The ad-hoc body made of countries and international organizations involved in the implementation of Bosnia's peace deal, which is overseeing the work of Bosnia's Office of the High Representative (OHR).

⁶ OHR press releases, <http://www.ohr.int/?cat=244>.

⁷ Ibid.



of the main RS opposition party, the Serb Democratic Party, Vukota Govedarica, but found him not to be politically relevant.⁸

On the other hand, throughout this period Russian officials had relatively decent, but generally cold and sporadic relations with Bosniak and Bosnian Croat officials. Bosniak officials see Russia as an exclusive partner and supporter of Bosnian Serbs and especially of Milorad Dodik. They have not tried to get any closer to Moscow but rather often criticised it - with or without merit - for its support to Dodik.

Bosnian Croat officials in the past mostly ignored Russia, but as Dodik and Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Covic grew closer together in the recent years, Covic moved to improve his relations with Russian officials. Despite that, Russia today has little or no interest in the Federation and accordingly has little or no political or economic influence there.

Overall, both the Kremlin and Milorad Dodik have significantly benefited from their political marriage. Russia has helped Dodik to stay in power in RS for almost 15 years, and it considers him as the most suitable and as the most usable figure for its own regional, global political position and exertion of its influence in the country, thus representing a major spoiler threat to Western powers.

Kosovo

Kosovo is considered as a highly pro-Western oriented country and compared to other Western Balkan countries, Russian influence within and over Kosovo's political sphere is limited. Russia continues to refuse the recognition of Kosovo's independence declared in 2008. To achieve a membership in the United Nations, a "green light" from Russia, which can only happen with a blessing from Serbia, is indispensable for Kosovo. Russian position in the UN Security Council and a strong Serbian minority in Kosovo, which historically shows positive sentiments for Moscow, therefore, give Russia significant leverage in Kosovo.

⁸ Interview with a senior Bosnian Serb official, 2017.

Kosovo and Serbia have recently embarked on a final phase of political negotiations, which are expected to conclude with an agreement that both parties are seeing as a "painful compromise." On the one hand, Serbia insists on establishing the powerful Association of Serb municipalities as a unique organisation, with extended competencies. The Kosovar side, on the other hand, fears that this could pave the way to Kosovo's "Bosniaziation." Some experts argue that the creation of the Association of Serb municipalities could lead to greater Russian interference into internal matters or even that "Russian influence through the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities would pose a challenge for the normal functioning of the state of Kosovo, causing a blockade of the country's decision-making."⁹ Although Russia is officially supporting the political talks between Kosovo and Serbia, it does not hide its preference for Serbs gaining more leverage in the final agreement.¹⁰

Some of these Serb municipalities, in fact, have high esteem for Russia and President Vladimir Putin. For example, paintings of his portrait have appeared in different parts of towns of those municipalities. As part of a scenario of the establishment of a Community with extended competencies, Russia's influence in Kosovo is expected to grow.¹¹

Macedonia

As Macedonia's chances of becoming NATO's 30th member state have increased, so has Russia's political meddling. A major obstacle to Macedonia's Euro Atlantic integration has been its longstanding name dispute with Greece. On June 17, the Macedonian government agreed to change the country's name to "The Republic of North Macedonia," paving the

⁹ Pëllumb Kallaba, "Russian Interference in Kosovo: How and Why?" Kosovar Center for Security Studies (November 2017), <http://www.qkss.org/en/Occasional-Papers/Russian-Interference-in-Kosovo-How-and-Why-1011>.

¹⁰ "Moscow doesn't want "artificial deadlines" in Kosovo talks," *B92*, July 23, 2018, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2018&mm=07&dd=23&nav_id=104690.

¹¹ "Russia Challenges Kosovo's Pro-Western Orientation," *Radio Evropa e Lirë*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/rusia-sfidon-orientimin-properendimor-te-kosoves-/28833106.html>



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road for NATO's invitation for Macedonia to begin accession talks.¹² However, the invitation is conditioned on a name-change referendum in Macedonia, set for September 30, 2018.¹³

Both the Macedonian and the Greek government have identified efforts by Russian individuals to obstruct the name deal. Macedonia's PM Zaev recently divulged that Russian businessmen paid Macedonians to protest and "commit acts of violence" ahead of the momentous referendum.¹⁴ According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), one of Russia's richest businessmen, Ivan Savvidi, has given at least \$300,000 to Macedonian actors in the anti-NATO and anti-name change movement.¹⁵ The money has gone to Macedonian politicians, far-right nationalist organisations, and soccer hooligans.

The leader of the anti-referendum movement is Janko Bachev, the leader of *Edinstvena Makedonija*, a Russophile party whose name directly echoes the Kremlin's ruling party United Russia and which advocates for Macedonia's reorientation towards the Eurasian Economic Union. This party has organised panels and workshops with several of Moscow's ideologues like Alexander Dugin.¹⁶ In May this year, for example, 50 members of the party attended a training by the political strategist Leonid Savin.¹⁷

¹² "Macedonia and Greece Sign Historic Deal on Name Change," *New York Times*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/17/world/europe/greece-macedonia-name-dispute.html>.

¹³ Marc Jones, "Macedonia expects green light for NATO membership talks: foreign minister," Reuters, July 9, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-nato/macedonia-expects-green-light-for-nato-membership-talks-foreign-minister-idUSKBN1JZ1IV>.

¹⁴ Saska Cvetkovska, "Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Fatima Tlis, "Disinfo analysis: Macedonia – To Be or Not To Be... Russia's Satellite," *Polygraph.info*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.polygraph.info/a/macedonia-russia-meddling-disinformation/29278930.html>.

¹⁷ "Партијата на Јанко Бачев: Успешно ја минавме руската обука и подготвени сме за преземање на власта," *Fokus*, May 31, 2018.



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The Greek government, too, has discovered illicit activities by Russian diplomats, such as bribing officials to impede the name-change process. Last month, Greece expelled two diplomats over illicit meddling in the name-dispute agreement.¹⁸

Of course, Russia's fingerprints in Macedonian politics precede July's name-change agreement. The MP that has been most ostensibly pro-Russia is Ivan Stoilkovic from the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia, a small coalition partner in the previous government led by Nikola Gruevski. His pro-Russian inclinations were eventually somewhat embraced by the government as a whole. Rather than a genuine foreign policy shift towards Russia, it was, however, a result of opportunism after the government began to lose Western support following a major corruption scandal in 2015. In the aftermath of the corruption scandal, the Kremlin issued multiple press releases in support of Gruevski as it unsuccessfully tried to frame the growing anti-Gruevski sentiment in the country as "gross interference by the West".¹⁹

There is considerable evidence proving that Gruevski's flirtation with Russia was reciprocal. In recent years, Russia has established over 30 Russo-Macedonian cultural associations,²⁰ has funded the construction of Orthodox churches,²¹ and has increased the number of its embassy personnel by 25%.²² Furthermore, it has been funding local media outlets,²³ attempting to coerce government ministers,²⁴ and courting the aforementioned Russophile

¹⁸ Patrick Wintour, "Greece to expel Russian diplomats over alleged Macedonia interference," *The Guardian*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/greece-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-alleged-macedonia-interference>.

¹⁹ Rick Noack, "Russia blames the U.S. after protesters storm Macedonia's parliament," *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/28/russia-blames-the-u-s-after-protesters-storm-macedonias-parliament/?utm_term=.450b7efbb2ef.

²⁰ Aubrey Belford, Saska Cvetkovska, Biljana Sekulovska, and Stevan Dojčinović, "Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia", *OCCRP*, June 4, 2017, [hereinafter "Leaked Documents"] <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>.

²¹ "Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in Macedonia," Center for The Study of Democracy (2018): 12.

²² Vera Zakem, Bill Rosenau, and Danielle Johnson, "Shining a Light on the Western Balkans," *CNA* (2017): 16.

²³ "Leaked Documents."

²⁴ Bojan Pancevski, "Macedonia is told: switch loyalty to Russia or suffer," *The Times*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/macedonia-is-told-switch-loyalty-to-russia-or-suffer-5qzws373>.



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party Edinstvena Makedonija.²⁵ Russia had complemented these actions with symbolic ones, such as President Gjorgje Ivanov's visit to the Kremlin in 2017, when Putin famously declared that "the Cyrillic alphabet came from Macedonian soil."²⁶

The current Macedonian government, however, does little to ingratiate itself with Moscow. In direct contrast with Gruevski's refusal to join Western sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea,²⁷ the new government did not hesitate to show solidarity with the West after the Skripal incident and expelled one Russian diplomat.²⁸ At a rally organised by Edinstvena Makedonija in front of the Russian Embassy in Skopje, the Russian Ambassador lambasted this decision and promised that Moscow would retaliate.²⁹

Montenegro

The traditionally good relations between the two countries have become rather tense over the past 4-5 years, mainly due to several major events. Firstly, Montenegro joined the EU countries in sanctions against Russia in 2014 over its annexation of Crimea and decided to go in hand with other non-EU member states to expel Russian diplomat after the Skripal incident. Secondly, a coup attempt in which Russian nationals were involved took place at the 2016 election to prevent Montenegro from joining the NATO alliance, and thirdly, Montenegro accessed NATO in 2017.

Despite a clear Montenegro's pro-Western orientation, it is very probable that Russia will continue to diplomatically pressure the opposition pro-Serbian political parties through which it reinforces its influence in the country. One of the latest instances of such meddling

²⁵ "Leaked Documents."

²⁶ Mariya Cheresheva, "Putin's Homage to Cyrillic Makes Bulgarians See Red," *Balkan Insight*, May 25, 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kremlin-s-stance-on-cyrillic-origin-angers-sofia-05-25-2017>.

²⁷ Boris Georgievski, "Macedonia: A pawn in the Russian geopolitical game?" *Deutsche Welle*, May 26, 2015, <https://www.dw.com/en/macedonia-a-pawn-in-the-russian-geopolitical-game/a-18476013>.

²⁸ "Macedonia expels Russian diplomat, Russia calls the move hostile and unwarranted," *Meta.mk*, March 27, 2018, <http://meta.mk/en/macedonia-expels-a-russian-diplomat-russia-calls-the-move-hostile-and-unwarranted/>.

²⁹ "Macedonians protest against Russian diplomats' extradition," *Russkiy mir*, March 28, 2018, <https://ruskiymir.ru/en/news/239494/>.



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was with the help of an Honorary Consul of Russia in Montenegro, Boro Đukić (a Montenegrin citizen and Russian diplomat) who is one of the founders of the new political party in Montenegro called “Prava Crna Gora”³⁰ (*True Montenegro*), headed by Marko Milačić. The participation of the Russian diplomatic representative in the political party formation is contrary to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. The party stands for pro-Serbian and pro-Russian Montenegro, and says today’s Montenegro is “false and falsified”.³¹ Through Boro Đukić, Moscow also interfered in the 2018 presidential elections and supported the campaign of Marko Milačić, populist politician and former associate of Sputnik, who received 2.8% of the votes.

Another instance of Russia’s strong engagement in Montenegro’s decision-making structures was in 2013 when Russia offered Montenegro several billion dollars for building a naval base in the country. Although the plan eventually fell through, NATO was deeply concerned about the Russian influence and Montenegrin indecisiveness, while the country was deep in the process of achieving NATO membership.³²

The alleged coup attempt on the parliamentary election day on October 16, 2016, was the most evident sign of Russia’s meddling in Montenegro’s internal affairs. This alleged coup attempt is still under the judicial process with Montenegrin prosecutors claiming that a group of Serb nationalists and Russian agents plotted to kill Milo Đukanović, the current President, in order to sabotage the country’s plan to join NATO.³³ Two Russian citizens, Eduard Shishmakov and Alexander Popov, are being trialled in absentia³⁴ and Montenegrin

³⁰ “Ruski konzul Đukić osnivač Milačićeve Prave Crne Gore,” *CDM*, March 28, 2018,

<https://www.cdm.me/izbori-2018/predsjednicki/ruski-konzul-dukic-osnivac-milaciceve-prave-crne-gore/>.

³¹ “Nova stranka u Podgorici: Ne pristajemo na antisrpsku i antirusku Crnu Goru,” *Sputnik News*, January, 29, 2018, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/regioni/201801291114355426-nova-stranka-u-podgorici222/>.

³² Srdjan Jankovic, “Officials dismiss talk of Russian military base in Montenegro,” *Radio Free Europe*, February 10, 2015, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/officials-squash-talk-of-russian-military-base-in-montenegro/26839898.html>.

³³ “Russia plotted to overthrow Montenegro’s government by assassinating Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic last year, according to senior Whitehall sources,” *The Telegraph*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/18/russias-deadly-plot-overthrow-montenegros-government-assassinating/>.

³⁴ “Nikada gore između Crne Gore i Rusije,” *Radio Free Europe*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-rusija-odnosi/28846575.html>.



authorities have argued that the plot was financed and organised by Russian intelligence officers alongside local radicals.³⁵

Regardless of Montenegro's political orientation, its officials have recently tried to send positive messages towards Russia, but without any major feedback from the other side, as Montenegro's NATO membership³⁶ and the country's pro-Western orientation hinder the improvement of mutual relations.

Serbia

Bearing in mind that Kosovo's independence represents a central issue of Serbian politics, political leaders consider it important to foster good relations with countries that do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state. Russia has reaffirmed its support for Serbia over the Kosovo issue plus represents a major power, apart from China, that has the greatest potential to block Kosovo's path to UN membership. The issue of Kosovo's status thus gives the Russians direct the power to influence a political situation in Serbia. Besides, Russia is particularly eager to take advantage of the deep-rooted local problems, such as Kosovo, and position itself as an influential world power in the EU's neighbourhood.

Despite the strong opinion that Russia opts for a "frozen conflict," there are some signals from Kremlin lately that it could support the Kosovo partition scenario according to which Serbia would get the north of Kosovo and monasteries. For Moscow, the option of partitioning Kosovo would be more favourable than Pristina's membership in the United Nations, which "could pose a dangerous precedent for the status of territories such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia," diplomats said.³⁷

³⁵ Aleksandar Vasovic, "Frontrunner in Montenegro election wants better ties with both West and Russia," *Reuters*, April 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election/frontrunner-in-montenegro-election-wants-better-ties-with-both-west-and-russia-idUSKBN1HJ2LG>.

³⁶ Montenegro joined NATO on 5th June 2017.

³⁷ Marija Stojanović, "Putin ublažava odnos prema Kosovu i Crnoj Gori," *Danas*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/putin-ublazava-odnos-prema-kosovu-i-crnoj-gori/>.



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Allegedly as compensation for Moscow's support of Belgrade's non-recognition of Kosovo, Russia's Gazprom in 2008 purchased Serbian oil monopoly. However, when the controversial Russian-led South Stream pipeline project in the Balkans was abandoned, it became clear to Serbian political leaders that Moscow was not going to lure them with new lucrative projects. Although Serbia matters to Moscow, the Kremlin shows no intention to commit itself to Serbia's economic or security problems but strives to sustain such an illusion.³⁸

Unlike the EU, "Russia is not ready to risk applying all-out pressure on Serbia, as it often does when dealing with the post-Soviet countries. Instead, Moscow has opted for a low-budget, opportunistic approach in the region, shifting most of the burden to local actors."³⁹ Moreover, Russia has developed a wide clientelistic network in Serbia that encompasses former and current politicians, ambassadors, Members of Parliament, opposition pro-Russian leaders and parties, tycoons, intellectuals, journalists, including local ultra-nationalist groups.⁴⁰

According to some policy analysts "Putin does not want Vučić to strengthen his position to the extent that he is perceived in the Western Balkans as a kind of new Tito, because if that were to happen, Moscow would greatly lose its power positions in this region. At the same time, Vučić is aware that in the event of a complete turning of Serbia towards Russia and the abandonment of the European road, he would lose power."⁴¹

The Russian influence is also effective because Serbian politicians are voluntarily eager to glorify Putin and promote Russia's image as a counterweight to the West when pursuing their interests. Some politicians, such as current President Aleksandar Vučić and former

³⁸ Maxim Samorukov, "Russia's Tactics in the Western Balkans," *Carnegie Europe*, November 11, 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/74612>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ For instance, former Serbian Minister of Finance and Economy Mladjan Dinkić is a member of the Board of Directors of Sberbank Serbia since 2014. Controversial businessman Bogoljub Karic that has spent almost 11 years in Russia due to Interpol arrest warrant and established the Strength of Serbia Movement that is part of ruling government coalition. According to investigative journalists of KRIK, current Minister in charge of innovations and technological development Nenad Popovic tripled his wealth in the last three years thanks to business in Russia.

⁴¹ Stojanovic, "Putin ublazava odnos prema Kosovu i Crnoj Gori."



President Nikolić, including Foreign Affairs Minister Dačić are aggerating the significance of Russian assistance and thus capitalising on pro-Russian sentiment ahead of the elections or when resolving some internal issues. Others take the opposite approach and portray themselves as the only force capable of stopping Russian influence in the country.

China

As elsewhere, China's activities in the Balkans often obscure the political with the economic. As non-members of the EU, the five former Yugoslav republics in Western Balkans are not bound by its regulatory framework. This makes it easier than in the other 16+1 countries for the PRC to pursue its opaque business practices. China's state-driven "economic diplomacy" typically supports (and conceals) its "political warfare" objectives; given the overall lack of transparency in the region, combined with the general opacity of China's business deals, the political aspects of its economic statecraft usually remain below the radar in local public discourse.

Compared with other regions, in Europe and elsewhere, we can see the same signature approaches to political interference, namely *elite capture*, including high-level corruption, and *discourse management* through the captured elites and various Belt and Road "think tanks" and friendship organisations. This could perhaps best be demonstrated in Serbia, where China's political influence permeates both the governing and opposition parties. In the other non-EU West Balkans countries, Chinese political influence is less pronounced.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

China is still a relatively new "player" in BiH, and so far there was no evidence that Chinese officials have established - or were trying to establish - any specific political activities, preferences or links on the overcrowded local political scene. The lack of transparency - which usually follows most if not all projects which involve Chinese firms in BiH - is another



reason why political or personal links between Chinese and specific local officials or businesspeople are still not visible in/to the local public.

Kosovo

The one country where China's political influence remains low is Kosovo, officially not recognised by the PRC. China and Kosovo have no mutual relations at the political level. As one of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China does not recognise Kosovo and represents as an obstacle in case Kosovo seeks membership of this important organisation.⁴² Recently, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met Chinese Ambassador to Belgrade, who assured Serbia that his country would support them during talks with Kosovo, which have moved to the final stage. On another occasion, the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia said Kosovo was important for Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and mentioned Hong Kong and Taiwan in this context.⁴³

Despite the lack of diplomatic recognition, there is the Office of the People's Republic of China in Priština. However, Kosovar media never mention its activities and statements on Kosovo by Chinese political representatives commonly come from Chinese envoys in Belgrade.

Macedonia

China's involvement in Macedonia is chiefly economic and appears to be in relatively nascent stages. The sole notable and direct instance of Chinese interference in Macedonia's political domain came in 1999 when Macedonia decided to grant Taiwan diplomatic recognition in exchange for a generous aid package by Taiwan. Macedonia's establishment of diplomatic ties with Taiwan was seen as a direct breach of the One-China policy. China

⁴² Edona Peci, "Kosovo Looking For New Paths Leading to UN Membership," *Gazeta*, November 25, 2013, <https://kallxo.com/gjnk/kosova-kerkon-shtigje-te-reja-per-anetaresim-ne-okb/>.

⁴³ "Chinese Ambassador "Consoles" Serbia about Kosovo: China Waited 100 Years to Return Hong Kong," *Telegrafi news-portal*, July 29, 2018, <https://telegrafi.com/ambasadori-kinez-e-ngushellon-serbine-per-kosoven-kina-ka-pritur-100-vjet-ta-ktheje-hong-kongun/>.

immediately cut diplomatic relations with Macedonia and vetoed the extension of the UN peacekeeping force in then-vulnerable Macedonia. After the following short and limited armed conflict between the Macedonian army and Albanian paramilitary units, Macedonia reversed its recognition of Taiwan and restored diplomatic relations with China.

Recently, the window for Chinese political influence in Macedonia has widened as a result of growing Chinese economic influence under Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 Initiative between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries.⁴⁴ A project of this magnitude carries two major risks for a fragile country such as Macedonia – an ample opportunity for corruption and economic unsustainability of most of the projects.

An interesting case emerged in which the former PM and transportation minister are accused of receiving large kickbacks from Sinohydro (Zhongguo Shuidian), a Chinese company contracted to build a highway. With the high perception of corruption in the country, and indeed throughout the Balkans, the incident is mostly viewed as an example of the downsides of economic relations with China. Local media do not seem to dwell on the implications of corrupting the PM for the integrity of the whole political system. Sinohydro remains active in other West Balkan countries.

Montenegro

The Chinese policy in the country, at least for the time being, has been mostly placed on pursuing economic interests, and not so much on interfering in the internal affairs or foreign policy. Despite the fact there are no ‘Silk Road’ or ‘Belt and Road’ institutes in Montenegro, China has involved in infrastructural projects such as highways, railways, and power plants.

⁴⁴ Anastas Vangeli, “China’s Engagement with the Sixteen Countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe under the Belt and Road Initiative,” *China & World Economy* Vol. 25, No 5 (2017): 101.

Very often, however, some such initiatives are not transparent, and it is unsure if the Chinese are interested in making investments, lending loans or giving grants. Critics worry that China could use “debt-trap diplomacy” in Montenegro, as it does in several other places around the world.⁴⁵ For instance, to pursue such ambitious infrastructural projects, the Montenegrin government had to raise taxes, partially freeze public sector wages and end a benefit for mothers.⁴⁶

Serbia

China is a Security Council member that also has the greatest potential to block Kosovo’s path to UN membership and its firm stance on Kosovo independence gives the leverage to China in Serbia. The Chinese government supports the ruling government coalition and political leaders from the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Serbian President Vučić, who is also President of SNS, is the only leader from the region that visited China in the past four years and for the third time since he was elected.

Apart from the close relationship with the incumbent President Vučić, China also supports through several nominally private companies⁴⁷ one of his main critics, the former FM and leader of the newly founded People’s Party Vuk Jeremić and his think tank called Center for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (CIRSD).

⁴⁵ “What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer>.

⁴⁶ Noah Barkin and Aleksandar Vasovic, “‘Chinese 'highway to nowhere' haunts Montenegro’,” *Reuters*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-europe-montenegro-insi/chinese-highway-to-nowhere-haunts-montenegro-idUSKBN1K60QX>.

⁴⁷ According to investigative journalists among the most significant donors to the CIRSD were the following companies from Hong Kong- “State Energy HK Limited”, “China Energy Fund Committee” Foundation and “Fei Ying International Limited”. Source: <https://www.anti.media/en/istrazivanje/files/trilogija-srpski-kum-kako-je-mladi-socijalista-vuk-jeremic-postao-multimilioner-nizom-prevara-i-kriminalnih-radnji-kao-u-stilu-uhvati-me-ako-mozes/>.



One of the Chinese companies offering financial support to CIRSD is CEFC, which also hired Jeremić as a consultant shortly after he left the post of UNGA President in 2013.⁴⁸ CEFC has meanwhile been formally indicted in the U.S. of bribing another UNGA President, Sam Kutesa, in 2015. In Central and Eastern Europe, CEFC is perhaps best known for its activities in the Czech Republic, where its Chairman Ye Jianming became the presidential advisor, before the company collapsed and Ye was himself disappeared in China in early 2018.⁴⁹ CEFC's involvement with Jeremić, who's now again active in Serbian domestic politics, suggests a connection between China's international and local/regional goals in the Balkans.

Serbia established in May 2017 a rather unique institution, the National Council for the Coordination of Cooperation with Russia and China. Run by the former President Tomislav Nikolić, the Council does not appear to coordinate any specific policies but is no doubt a useful networking platform. It is also the first official body in all of CEE combining a Russian and Chinese agenda.

The Socialist party in Serbia (SPS) likewise has links to a China project – a phantom think-tank under the name Silk Road Connectivity Research Center (COREC) run by former Yugoslav foreign minister in the Milošević government, Zivadin Jovanović. Activities of COREC are endorsed by SPS, having in mind that Jovanović is a member of the SPS and Dačić, the president of the SPS who is currently the foreign minister, fosters good cooperation with the PRC. COREC engages in the relentless promotion of the CCP propaganda narratives.

The infrastructural projects within the Silk and Road Initiative and foreign direct investments are the second biggest entry point for China to exercise its political influence. Since political leaders deliberately nurture illusion that Serbia and China cultivate a long tradition of friendship and mutual trust enjoying mutually beneficial cooperation, it is no wonder that the general public does not perceive China as a potential spoiler, but rather as a country that

⁴⁸ "Vuk Jeremic to Become Consultant for CEFC," *Inserbia*, October 2013, <https://inserbia.info/today/2013/10/vuk-jeremic-to-become-consultant-for-cefc/>.

⁴⁹ "Martin Hála on CEFC and CCP Influence in Eastern Europe," *China Digital Times*, February 8, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/02/martin-hala-cefc-ccp-influence-eastern-europe/>.



wants political and legal stability and predictability in order to protect its economic investments.

Turkey

After several centuries of the Ottoman rule over the large parts of the Western Balkans, Turkey perceives the region as its natural sphere of influence. Close cultural, historical and religious ties make Turkey a natural partner for Western Balkan countries with a sizeable Muslim population, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo. More surprising has recently been a blossoming trade and political relationship with Serbia, where anti-Turkish sentiment was widespread not long ago.⁵⁰ The common denominator of Turkish political presence in the region is close personal links of leading Western Balkan politicians and their Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Weakening of the US and EU presence in the Balkans and parallel strengthening of Russian and Turkish influence in the region combined with their rapprochement, have opened a space for Russia and Turkey - if their leaders decide so - to affect the situation on the ground in much greater extent than it is the case today - be it in positive or negative direction. However, just as the EU and US, Putin and Erdogan at the moment do not seem to keep the Balkans on the top of their agenda.⁵¹

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Besides all Turkish infrastructure, business, cultural and religious activities in BiH, Erdogan's influence in the country always relied mostly on its close personal links with Bosniak leaders, first with the late founder of the SDA party, Alija Izetbegović, and subsequently with his son and current Bosniak leader, Bakir Izetbegović. The AKP and Erdogan himself threw their full

⁵⁰ Zia Weise, "Turkey's Balkan comeback," *Politico*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-western-balkans-comeback-european-union-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>.

⁵¹ Interview, an international foreign policy expert, May 2018.



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political and even financial support behind Izetbegović's 2014 bid to become the new leader of the SDA, and then again in the same year when he ran for the Bosniak position in Bosnia's presidency. Izetbegović and the SDA returned the favour by supporting Erdogan in the controversial 2017 referendum and snap elections in June 2018 and by allowing him, among other things, to hold a rally in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo on May 20, 2018, after several EU countries banned similar campaigning on their soil.⁵²

However, ever since the failed coup in 2016 and subsequent repression against Erdogan's political opponents and critics in Turkey and abroad, there has also been growing criticism against his politics in Bosnia, especially among independent media and experts. Also relations between Izetbegovic and Erdogan seemed to grow somewhat colder on occasions, as Bosnian officials failed to close down organisations considered by Turkish officials as being associated with Turkish self-exiled preacher Fethullah Gulen, whom they claimed to be behind the failed coup.

At the same time, as Izetbegovic faced more and more criticism from his party colleagues, Turkey established communication with several other senior Bosniak officials, which some analysts said was their search for possible Izetbegovic's replacement. As the struggle for a new/old Bosniak leader is expected to intensify immediately after Bosnia's October elections, Turkey and Erdogan are expected to play an increasingly important role in that race, which some experts believe will ultimately further increase Erdogan's influence among Bosniaks.

As Erdogan's relations with the West grew sour and as he started moving more and more towards (re)establishing Turkey as a separate regional power, Turkey increasingly strengthened its relations with Serbia and Republika Srpska, which somewhat confused and frustrated Bosniak representatives. Its influence among Serbs and Bosnian Serbs is, nonetheless, limited, almost exclusively economically related and dependent on the delivery

⁵² Turkey indirectly financially and politically supported SDA's pre-election activities in the elections in 2014 as well as Izetbegovic's own race for the re-election as SDA leader at party congress in 2015, interviews with Bosniak and Turkish officials, 2015-2017.

of Erdogan's promise of major investments into infrastructure and business projects in Serbia and BiH.

The recent rapprochement between Turkey and Russia at the moment still has no concrete impact on the ground in BiH. However, it continues having a somewhat confusing effect on the local actors who were accustomed to the situation where Russian and Turkish conflicting relations were also reflected in the fact that they were supporting parties and leaders who were at odds with each other in the Balkans (Serbs and Bosniaks respectively).

Kosovo

Turkey and Kosovo have developed solid relations at the political level. When Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, Turkey was among the first to recognise the new state. Kosovo President, Hashim Thaci, who has been in power since 2007, has a close relationship with Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.⁵³ The two have met on a number of occasions while Thaci also attended Erdogan's inauguration ceremony among only a handful of other European leaders.⁵⁴

However, the closeness between the two leaders has quite often raised eyebrows of some in Kosovo. For instance, in October 2013, during a visit to Kosovo, Erdogan stated that "Turkey is Kosovo and Kosovo is Turkey." Given Turkish tendencies towards the region of the Balkans, the statement triggered negative reactions in Kosovo, mainly by political commentators, historians and different civil society organisations. Political leaders, however, remained silent. Perhaps due to the ongoing election campaign at that time.⁵⁵ Former

⁵³ "Thaci Firms up Kosovo's Alliance With Turkey," *Balkan Insight*, December 30, 2016, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/thaci-in-turkey-12-30-2016>.

⁵⁴ "Balkan Leaders Flock to Erdogan Inauguration," *Balkan Insight*, July 9, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/balkan-leaders-flock-to-erdogan-inauguration-07-09-2018>.

⁵⁵ "The 'Provocative' Speech," *Radio Evropa e Lire*, October 25, 2013, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/25147851.html>.



Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, said that Erdogan's statement had been misinterpreted in Kosovo.⁵⁶

The main concern for the relations between the two countries happened in April 2018 when the six Turkish citizens residing in Kosovo were deported to Turkey in a quite suspicious manner.⁵⁷

The Turkish citizens who were believed to be close to cleric Fethullah Gulen were arrested and then deported to Turkey without prior notice, during an operation that is said to have been carried out in violation of legislation in effect in Kosovo. Erdogan applauded the joint operation of Turkish Intelligence Agency and Kosovo authorities, but not so the Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradina who said the deportation happened without his knowledge.⁵⁸ However, a few months following this incident, no signs of strain in Kosovo-Turkey relations can be seen. In July 2018, Thaci attended the inauguration ceremony of Erdogan in Ankara.

Although the deportation and the Turkish interference triggered harsh reactions in Kosovo, this development was eventually overshadowed by other regional and global developments. Kosovo has not taken any measures even against the Turkish company that is believed to have deceived the Kosovo authorities when getting a permit to carry out a commercial flight from Pristina Airport while being involved in the deportation of the Turks. Overall, Kosovo authorities' reaction could be considered as a weak response to this incident.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ "Erdogan 'Misunderstood' Over 'Turkey is Kosovo' Claim," *Balkan Insight*, October 28, 2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/davutoglu-erdogan-s-kosovo-statement-misinterpreted/2027/2>.

⁵⁷ See „Briefing paper I: East vs. West," *PSSI*, <https://www.balkancrossroads.com/bp-i-east-vs-west>. See also "Turkey's Erdogan Slams Kosovo Criticism Of Deportation Of Gulen-Linked Turks," *Radio Free Europe*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-investigation-arrest-deportation-turkey-teachers-gulen/29137309.html>.

⁵⁸ "Kosovo PM Denies Knowing About Turks' Deportation," *Balkan Insight*, March 29, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/turks-arrested-in-kosovo-deported-to-turkey-03-29-2018>.

⁵⁹ Nektar Zogjani, "Kosovo Has Forgiven Turkey's Interference Too Easily," *Balkan Insight*, July 23, 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/kosovo-has-forgiven-turkey-s-interference-too-easily-07-19-2018>.



Macedonia

Turkey has been exercising clear influence over Macedonian politics, which is not particularly odd, having in mind both its history under the Ottoman Empire and the fact that around 4 % of the population identifies as ethnic Turks.

There are three active Turkish political parties in Macedonia (Türk Demokratik Partisi, Makedonya Türk Demokratik Partisi Tarihçesi, Makedonya'da Türklerin Ulusal Birlik Hareketi). Makedonya Türk Demokratik Partisi Tarihçesi's honorary president, Adnan Qahil, currently serves as the Minister without Portfolio in the Government of Macedonia in charge of foreign investments. TDP has one member of the Parliament (Enes Ibrahim), and he is in coalition with the governing party SDSM.⁶⁰ TDP's current affiliation with the centre-left SDSM, however, reveals little about the party's ideology, as they have also been in government coalitions with the conservative VMRO-DPMNE in the past.⁶¹ The party appears to have close relations with the AKP and Turkish President Erdogan as high AKP officials often attend TDP's summits.⁶² Furthermore, Minister Qahil seems personally well-connected with Turkish politicians; recently, he was photographed with the Turkish President on Erdogan's private jet.⁶³

Another photograph of Erdogan is conspicuously displayed in the office of the longest-serving mayor in Macedonia, Ismail Jahovski,⁶⁴ who is a member of the Albanian party DUI. Jahovski's family business, the oil company Pucko Petrol, has been the top beneficiary of government contracts.⁶⁵ His municipality Plasnica where virtually everyone identifies as

⁶⁰ "Министерот Ќахил во посета на Анкара," *Makfax*, August 29, 2017, <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/министерот-за-странски-инвестиции-ад/>.

⁶¹ "Избрана новата Влада на Република Македонија," *Sitel*, June 1, 2017, <https://sitel.com.mk/izbrana-novata-vlada-na-republika-makedonija>.

⁶² "TDP Genel Başkanlığına Enes İbrahim Seçildi," *Yeni Balkan*, November 19, 2017, <http://www.yenibalkan.com/gundem/thp-genel-baskanligina-enes-ibrahim-secildi-h11459.html>.

⁶³ "Министерот за странски инвестиции, Аднан Ќахил, славел историска битка со Ердоган," *Makfax*, August 29, 2017, <https://makfax.com.mk/daily-news/министерот-за-странски-инвестиции-ад/>.

⁶⁴ "ДУИ ја претстави изборната програма во општина Пласница," *24*, September 26, 2017, <https://www.24.mk/dui-ja-pretstavi-izbornata-programa-vo-opshtina-pplasnica>.

⁶⁵ Vasko Maglešov, "Пуцко петрол" и "Бауер БГ" ги добиле највредните договори за јавни набавки со општините," *Makfax*, July 18, 2018, <https://makfax.com.mk/ekonomija/пуцко-петрол-и-бауер-бг-ги-добил/>.



ethnically Turk is, however, the poorest municipality in Macedonia with an unemployment rate of approximately 90 %.⁶⁶ The Turkish flag is found everywhere, including outside the new municipal building, the construction of which was funded by the Turkish government through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). TIKA also funded the reconstruction of the municipality's school.

The Turkish political influence in Macedonia is amplified by the presence of several Turkish media, including Zaman Makedonya, Yeni Balkan, and the Ankara-run Anadolu Agency, as well as six Yahya Kemal high schools and the newly opened Maarif school funded by the Turkish government.⁶⁷

Finally, there have been two recent attempts for dramatically scaling up Turkish influence in Macedonian politics, but both seem to have failed, and one has never been definitively proven. The latter refers to the emergence of the Albanian party BESA, which came second among the ethnic Albanian parties in the last parliamentary elections in December 2016.⁶⁸ BESA has a strong religious component and has been widely rumoured to be financed directly by the Turkish government, which BESA leaders have persistently denied.⁶⁹ The party has meanwhile split into two factions, one of which has joined the ruling coalition and the other has stayed in opposition.

The second attempt relates to the increasing references to Macedonia in the rhetoric of Erdogan himself, especially with regards to the name dispute. Given Turkey's strained relations with Greece, Turkey's firm opposition to Macedonia's name change comes as no

⁶⁶ „Проверено“: Бизнисот на државни тендери врви, менаџирањето со општина Пласница оди тешко“, 24, July 1, 2018, <https://www.24.mk/%E2%80%9Eprovereno%E2%80%9C-biznisot-na-drzhavni-tenderi-vrvi-menadziranjeto-so-opshтина-plasnica-odi-teshko>; Vlado Apostolov, „Тивко и сиромашно предизборие во Пласница,“ *Prizma*, September 29, 2017, <http://prizma.mk/tivko-siromashno-predizborie-vo-plasnitsa/>.

⁶⁷ „Turkish ambassador implies Gülen schools in Macedonia raise terrorists,“ *Turkish Minute*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2018/05/09/turkish-ambassador-implies-gulen-schools-in-macedonia-raise-terrorists/>.

⁶⁸ Ivana Sekularac and Kole Casule, „Macedonia's nationalists win election: official results,“ *Reuters*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-election-result-idUSKBN1412L2>.

⁶⁹ „Касами: Беса ќе ја рedefинира Македонија,“ *Republika Online*, December 12, 2016, <https://republika.mk/703894>.



surprise. Erdogan has stated that “Turkey will never leave its [Macedonian] brothers alone.”⁷⁰

Montenegro

Montenegro’s President Milo Đukanović keeps very friendly relationships with high Turkish officials mainly because of Turkish business-people and companies that have started investing in the country. He has recently described the political relations between the two countries as excellent. In addition, Montenegro’s Muslim community and the Bosniak party, as well as other minority parties, such as ethnically Albanian ones, are also on good terms with their Turkish counterparts. For instance, this year’s Erdoğan’s presidential inauguration was attended by the head of the Montenegrin Islamic Community Rifat Fejzić. He also congratulated Erdoğan on the controversial results of 2017 referendum due to which the Turkish President significantly expanded his powers.⁷¹

Serbia

As for the Turkish political relations with Serbia, economic interests have led both countries to overcome historical animosities. Erdogan has in recent years established very close links with the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, whom he occasionally invites to various events. Rapprochement has also been readily visible in Vučić’s actions. During his visit to Ankara in May 2018, where he discussed infrastructure projects and other issues with Erdogan, Vučić proclaimed that Turkey is “the biggest power, the strongest country in the Balkans.”⁷² Another telling sign was his presence during the Erdogan’s presidential inauguration ceremony in July 2018.

⁷⁰ “Erdogan: Macedonia Will Always Remain Macedonia,” *World Macedonian Congress*, February 6, 2018, <http://www.wmc-a.com/erdogan-macedonia-will-always-remain-macedonia/>.

⁷¹ “Fejzić: Erdogan dao svijetu lekciju iz demokratije,” *Vijesti online*, accessed September 6, 2018, <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/fejzic-erdogan-dao-svijetu-lekciju-iz-demokratije-934355>.

⁷² Weise, “Turkey’s Balkan comeback.”



If we take into account that in the recent period European officials discreetly or less discreetly distance themselves from the Turkish “sultan” wherever they can, it is worrying to see President Vučić publicly showcasing his worshipping towards Erdogan and his „one-man regime.“ Despite the government and the President swear in the “European path” and “European values,” they strategically turn to illiberal political systems in which one knows “who the boss is.”

In return, Serbia gets something much more than potential trade benefits, and that is a strong partnership between rulers in breaking down and abusing all democratic standards. That is why Serbian President Vučić is wholeheartedly invited to participate in lavish ceremonies, such as Erdogan’s inauguration or opening ceremony of gas pipeline TANAP that bypasses Serbia.

Turkish influence in the internal affairs has been quite effective recently and has most visibly manifested itself in the successful pressure of Turkish Embassy in Belgrade on the central and local self-government in Sandzak region to close all Gülen institutions. For instance, it led the local government in Novi Pazar to announce that it would not provide any support to Gülen’s “terrorist organisation.”⁷³ Moreover, indirect influence on Serbian judiciary led to the extradition of an asylum-seeking Kurdish political activist to Turkey in December 2017, despite the UN Committee Against Torture urging Serbian authorities not to do so.⁷⁴

Last but not least, Erdogan received honorary citizenship from Novi Pazar, the cultural centre of the Sandzak region in Serbia. According to the Mayor of Novi Pazar, Nihat Bisevac, “the implementation of many projects, investments, and the protection of cultural and historical heritage are just a few of the reasons for this symbolic gesture for Erdogan”.⁷⁵ Erdogan supports various political and religious leaders in the Sandzak region, and he also visited the

⁷³ See “Briefing paper I: East vs. West,” *PSSI*, <https://www.balkancrossroads.com/bp-i-east-vs-west>.

⁷⁴ Maja Zivanovic, “Serbia Ignores UN and Extradites Kurd to Turkey,” *Balkan Insight*, December 26, 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-extradited-kurdish-political-activist-to-turkey-12-26-2017>.

⁷⁵ “Erdogan to receive honorary citizenship from Novi Pazar,” *AA.com*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/erdogan-to-receive-honorary-citizenship-from-novi-pazar/1123869>.



region during pre-election campaigns. For such an extensive involvement in Sandzak and its support of some political leaders and parties that advocate for a secession from Serbia, Turkey is perceived as a potential spoiler in Serbia.

Iran and the Gulf States

Historically, Iran and the Gulf States have not been politically involved in the Western Balkan countries in any significant manner. The only exception was Bosnia and Herzegovina during and after the war in the 1990s when Muslim countries were providing financial and political support to the Bosnian government led by Alija Izetbegovic.

Involvement of Islamic countries decreased significantly following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on New York and the subsequent global war on terrorism which saw many Islamic NGOs being shut down or reducing their activities in BiH. Presence of Islamic countries started increasing again in recent years, especially in BiH and Serbia, as a result of the weakening of EU and US presence in the Balkans. Yet, it never amounted to any significant political involvement or influence and remained limited to personal and business links with key Bosniak and Serbian officials.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Iran as well as the most Gulf states have very limited political involvement and influence in BiH. Their presence is mostly reflected through personal or business links with key Bosniak officials as well as cultural and religious cooperation and links.

Islamic countries' presence in BiH was much more obvious during and immediately after BiH's 1992-5 war when Bosniak leadership relied on financial support from any Islamic country willing to help. The money was mostly used for the purchase of weapons for the Bosnian army.



Majority of Bosnian Muslims, who are traditionally adherent to moderate Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and who were historically oriented towards Europe, find versions of Islam practiced in the Gulf countries, let alone Shia Islam which is in majority practiced in Iran, to be strange and unfamiliar. Therefore, these versions of Islam often cause confusion or even frustrations and rejection in the local community. Nevertheless, Bosniaks who were at the time fighting for bare survival were more than happy to accept any assistance offered.⁷⁶

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Kosovo

Kosovo has a Muslim majority population, but this fact has had no impact in gaining recognition of its independence by a big number of Muslim countries, including Iran and Iraq, the main reason being political ties with Russia via Serbia or the U.S.'s direct support to Kosovo's breaking away from Serbia.⁷⁷ As a consequence, Kosovo has almost no cooperation and communication at the political level with Iran.

⁷⁶ "Bosnia's Dangerous Tango: Islam and Nationalism," *International Crisis Group report*, February 26, 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/bosnia-and-herzegovina/bosnia-s-dangerous-tango-islam-and-nationalism>.

⁷⁷ "Turkey urges Muslim countries to recognize Kosovo," *AA Agency*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-urges-muslim-countries-to-recognize-kosovo/559724>.



Kosovo Government officials have admitted that Gulf money advocating Wahabi brand of Islam permeated Kosovo in the recent past,⁷⁸ there is, however, no broader involvement of the Gulf states on the political level.

Macedonia

There are no clear signs of influence by the Gulf states and Iran in Macedonian politics. The Gulf States have chiefly been linked to radicalisation efforts and activities, which in turn affect the political and voting behaviour of certain segments of the population. However, there have been no signs of direct meddling in Macedonian politics.

Montenegro

The Gulf States and Iran are not largely politically or economically involved in Montenegro. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have been the most significant investors in the country. Saudi Arabia has little investments currently but there are talks about future developments, mainly in the area of elite tourism.

Serbia

The Serbian-Arabic fairy tale began in 2013, when Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed of the UAE first visited Serbia and decided to buy a hotel on Mt. Kopaonik in the property of Jugobanka (ex YU bank), making it the first of many controversial UAE “investments” in Serbia in the years to come.⁷⁹

Despite UAE’s strong support to Kosovo’s independence, provision of two low-interest \$1 billion loans to Serbian government to avoid bankruptcy in 2013 and then to plug its public

⁷⁸ “Kosovo: The Collateral Damage of Saudi’s Funding Extremist Ideology,” *Huffington Post*, May 31, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/hiam-nawas-/kosovo-the-collateral-dam_b_10156972.html.

⁷⁹ “Hotel Jugobanka prodat,” *Kopaonik*, August 22, 2013, <https://kopaonik.travel/novosti/hotel-jugobanka-prodat>.

deficit in 2016, ensured a privileged position to UAE as one of the most important investors in Serbia.

All business with the UAE is based on the agreement on cooperation between the Government of Serbia and the Government of UAE and personal ties between former Serbian Prime Minister/current President Aleksandar Vučić and Prince Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. The exclusive and secret agreements with high-level Serbian politicians enabled Arab companies to buy below the price the agriculture land and the most attractive urbanistic land and properties in Belgrade (hotel, railway station, post office, buildings etc.) and AP Vojvodina (The Zobnatica stable), reach profitable arm deals and numerous other privileges. Worrying is that it remains unknown who exactly is behind all the deals.

Media has drawn the public's attention to the UEA investments pointing out that some of their investments, such as the Belgrade Waterfront project, are worth only a few hundred million dollars and not a few billion dollars, as the government wants to present.

As for Iran, political relations were re-established in 2015 and Iran has so far benefited more from bilateral agreements than Serbia. The relationship between Serbia and Iran, which led to the abolition of visas for Iranian citizens in 2017, hasn't brought any benefits to Serbia, apart from supporting its policy towards Kosovo as Iran is one of many Islamic countries that did not recognise Kosovo. However, except for that and occasional meetings between Serbian and Iranian ministers and parliamentary delegations, the impression is that the political relations between Serbia and Iran have not significantly developed.