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## Balkan Geostrategic Vector of the Russian Federation

### Balkański geostrategiczny wektor polityki Federacji Rosyjskiej

#### • Abstrakt •

Artykuł przedstawia politykę Rosji wobec krajów bałkańskich. Twierdzenie, że kraje południowo-wschodniej Europy od dawna stanowią jeden z kluczowych obszarów geostrategii rosyjskiej, jest poparte licznymi dowodami. Od lat 90. ubiegłego wieku Rosja stara się brać czynny udział w rozwiązywaniu kryzysu bałkańskiego, w szczególności w przygotowywaniu porozumień z Dayton jako mapy drogowej dla rozwiązania konfliktu etnicznego w Bośni i Hercegowinie. Jednakże niemożliwa okazała się stanowcza reakcja Rosji wobec zbombardowania Belgradu w 1999 roku przez koalicję NATO podczas wojny w Kosowie, ze względu na wewnętrzny kryzys polityczny oraz osłabienie jej pozycji geopolitycznej. Dzisiaj Rosja nie stawia na „miękką siłę”, ale przede wszystkim na destabilizację regionalnego systemu bezpieczeństwa i obecnego (przejściowego) światowego porządku. W samym regionie bałkańskim widoczne są dążenia do osłabienia stabilności poszczególnych krajów, które potencjalnie mogłyby stać się częścią struktur euroatlantyckich. W przypadku zaostrzenia sytuacji Rosja tradycyjnie będzie wspierać swoich sojuszników – przede

#### • Abstract •

Russia's policy concerning the Balkan countries is discussed in this article. It is substantiated that the countries of Southeastern Europe have long been one of the key places in Russian geostrategy. Since the 1990s Russia has been trying to take an active part in resolving the Balkan crisis, in particular in the preparation of the road map for resolving the ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, seriously confronting the bombing of Belgrade by the NATO coalition in 1999, during the Kosovo War, was impossible for Russia due to its intra-political crisis and the weakness of its geopolitical status. Today, Russia is betting not on “soft power”, but primarily on the destabilization of the regional security system and the transitory (transitional) world order in general. The Balkan region itself is one of those that seeks to undermine the stability of individual countries that could potentially become part of the Euro-Atlantic structures. In case of an aggravation of the situation, Russia will traditionally support its allies – first of all, Serbia and its ethnic population, who live compactly in the post-Yugoslav area. In general, countries such

wszystkim Serbię i jej ludność etniczną, która zamieszkuje terytorium post-jugosłowiańskie na zwartym obszarze. Nie jest wykluczone, że takie kraje jak Serbia, Macedonia, Albania i Czarnogóra mogą stać się polem konfrontacji geopolitycznej w Europie pomiędzy Rosją a Stanami Zjednoczonymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosja, kraje bałkańskie, Jugosławia, kryzys bałkański, destabilizacja, konfrontacja

as Serbia, Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro risk turning into a new field of geopolitical confrontation in Europe between Russia and the United States.

**Keywords:** Russia, Balkan countries, Yugoslavia, Balkan crisis, destabilization, confrontation

For a long period of time, the strategic vector of Russia has been directed toward the Balkans as an important geopolitical bridgehead for the great powers. It is known that although Russia did not take direct part in the two Balkan wars, it still appeared on the eve of World War I as a serious factor in the geopolitical transformations in Europe as a whole and in the Balkans in particular. For example, the Ottoman Empire began to lose its geopolitical influence on the Balkan Peninsula (as a result of the defeats in previous wars with Russia), which led to the activation of other powerful powers in their competition for this region, such as Austria-Hungary and Russia. In this situation, Austria tried to preserve its territorial integrity as an empire after the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. Russia, on its part, sought to protect the Orthodox Church and the brotherly orthodox population of the Balkans as a whole. For its part, it is Serbia as the stronghold of Orthodoxy in the Balkans from the beginning of the twentieth century actively sought support in Russia. With the onset of hostilities in 1912, two more Slavic states – Bulgaria and Montenegro – were added to Serbia, which agreed on plans for prospects for the Russian protectorate.

The USSR, as the successor of the Russian Empire, intensified its geopolitical role in the Balkans during the Second World War. J. Tito headed the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (PLAY) and won thanks to the Soviet Union in its confrontation with the anti-communist forces. Following World War II, Yugoslavia, as a federal republic, while adhering to the principles of socialism, initiated its political and economic course of development, which contributed to the formation of a special type of Yugoslav socialism. Such a policy of Yugoslavia soon naturally led to a conflict with the "elder brother" – the USSR. Despite the warming of relations between Belgrade and Moscow with the arrival of M. Khrushchev and the launch of the "Thaw" period, Yugoslavia still refused to go into the geopolitical flow of the USSR until the last years of its existence. It is noteworthy that Yugoslavia, as the only socialist state of Central and Eastern Europe, was not part of the Warsaw Treaty Organization

(WTO) and the Councils of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), which were the main instruments of Pax Sovietica control for the Soviet Union.

A peculiar existential shift in the Balkans was served by a wave of “velvet revolutions” in the countries of Eastern Europe, which ultimately led to irreversible disintegration processes in Yugoslavia. The disintegration of the federation, which was predetermined by a whole range of historical factors, eventually acquired the character of an armed confrontation caused by ethnic, religious, cultural, economic, and administrative-territorial contradictions. During the first and second Yugoslav crises, the Russian Federation as a successor to the USSR was in a very difficult economic and geopolitical position, and therefore could not assume the role of an active player in the Balkans. However, despite the lack of sufficient leverage of influence, Russia nevertheless tried to nominally design its geopolitical influence in this region. Thus, at the initial stage of the confrontation, Moscow followed the “lines of democratic solidarity” with the EU and the US, thereby supporting the formation of new independent states – Slovenia and Croatia, and later Bosnia and Macedonia. Also, in Moscow, new governments of these states were recognized through the establishment of diplomatic relations with them. At the same time, Russia’s refusal to support the central government in Belgrade in the struggle against the separatists of Croatia and Slovenia has become a kind of surprise for a number of Western politicians and diplomats (Bogaturov, 2007).

In general, at least somehow helping to resolve the Balkan crisis in the then international situation, Russia could not and would not stop NATO’s advance to the east against the backdrop of an intensification of the internal economic crisis. In September 1995, under the bombardment of the Bosnian Serb forces by NATO forces during the “Force Conceived” special operation, Boris Yeltsin only helplessly declared that “This is the first sign of what can happen when NATO approaches the borders of the Russian Federation... The center of the war can cover all of Europe” (Mearsheimer, 2014). Such a lack of elementary levers of influence in the RF on either side is due to: firstly, the actual logic of a one-vector foreign policy course; and secondly, Russia’s commitments to the United States to promote regional stability, which only served the narrowing of the field for diplomatic maneuvering. However, Russia nevertheless participated in the preparation of the Dayton Treaties<sup>1</sup> to resolve the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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<sup>1</sup> The Dayton agreement was aimed at resolving the ethnic conflict between the Serbs and Bosnians and Croats. As a result of the signing of the Dayton Accord, Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of two administrative units: the Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, the Serbs received 49% of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Bosnians and Croats accounted for 51% of the territory.

where the Serbian position was defended (Abashidze, 2010). Of course, due to the prevalence of the American vector in the foreign policy of Russia, its strategy in the Balkans could not take an anti-Western orientation. Russia actively supported the Dayton treaties regarding the delineation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In spite of everything, the Russian leadership has been trying to obtain from its Western counterparts more substantial incentive measures in relation to Serbia if it contributes to peaceful settlement plans in the region. The Russian Federation also came to the side of Britain and France in their disputes with the United States regarding the lifting of the embargo on arms supply by the Government of Bosnia in 1994. Thus, the Russian-NATO partnership scheme in Bosnia had serious problems. An example was the lack of a legal framework for the application of multinational forces to maintain order (Arbatova, 2005).

Russia sought to position itself as an active participant in the settlement of the Kosovo problem. Thus, Y. Primakov tried to persuade S. Milosevic to put forward an initiative to autonomize Kosovo with the further withdrawal of troops and the granting of consent to the arrival of OSCE representatives. On April 29, 1998, a package of stabilization measures was agreed upon during the Rome meeting. At the insistence of Russia, the final document condemned terrorism from the Kosovar Albanians, as well as contained the provisions on the territorial integrity of the states of the region. Russia also opposed economic sanctions against Belgrade, in particular the prohibition of foreign investment (Primakov, 1999).

The bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 by the NATO Alliance (“Allied Forces Operation”) during the Kosovo War<sup>2</sup> made it clear that the United States is no longer counting on Moscow’s objections to the military actions of the Alliance in the Balkans. The latter also proved that Russia, burdened by the war in Chechnya and the financial crisis, lost its traditional role of the rival of the West in world geopolitics (Haas, 2010). Despite the fact that B. Yeltsin sharply condemned NATO’s military action against Serbia in connection with the situation in Kosovo, Russia could not oppose NATO’s actions, except to appeal against the illegality of humanitarian intervention without a UN mandate (Averre, 2009). Russia’s existential fear of NATO actions in the zone of former Soviet interests was accumulated in the headline of the first page of the newspaper “Red Star”, one of its issues issued in 1999, entitled “Today they bomb Yugoslavia, but they are targeting Russia”. At that time, it became clear that Russia was no longer dominant in

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<sup>2</sup> The Kosovo War is understood as a conflict in the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia between 1998 and 1999 between the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army on the one hand and the Serbian police and the Yugoslav Army on the other.

the Balkans and had no effect on the situation in the region, and that it was also experiencing sharp intra-political problems associated with the Second Chechen War. In response to the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Moscow eventually terminated its relations with the Alliance, suspending its participation in “Partnership for Peace” (PFP), and the Balkan crisis provoked a sharp deterioration of Russian-American relations in general. Therefore, in these situations, there was a certain symbolism of Russia’s loss of a decisive role in European politics (Baranovskii, 1999).

After the surrender of S. Milosevich, the Russian troops sent a contingent to the international peacekeeping forces for the maintenance of peace in Kosovo – KFOR, which was in its composition in 1999–2003. It is noteworthy that in June 1999 the Russian combined battalion of airborne troops, which was deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, unexpectedly for the NATO command carried out the so-called “Throwing to Pristina” seizing the Slatina air base (located in the capital of the Serbian province of Kosovo – Pristina), ahead of the British KFOR units. The paratroopers tried to establish control over the region, which was a direct violation of the terms of the armistice. By that time, Yeltsin had not yet succeeded in securing for Russia a separate security sector in Kosovo (which was only the area of responsibility of Russian peacekeepers), which in 1999 was temporarily divided into the American, English, French, German, and Italian zones of security responsibility. Also V. Chernomyrdin, as a special envoy for the Kosovo issue, did not put forward any conditions on the basis of which the Russian Federation would have to mediate (Trukhachev, 2009).

Russia, which has undergone significant economic recovery due to rising energy prices and Putin’s coming to power at the beginning of the 2000s, took an even stronger position on Kosovo, while blocking all attempts of the West to give this region independence. Nevertheless, a NATO military contingent was introduced in Kosovo on July 3 1999, after which the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia lost control of the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija, and in February 2008, the proclamation of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo, now partly recognized by the state, took place. After the Kosovo crisis, as the well-known Russian political scientist N. Arbatova emphasized that “...the relations between Russia and NATO entered the stage of pragmatic minimalism and narrow selective cooperation on the background of the fact that Russia remained in the peacekeeping contingent” (Arbatova, 2005).

For its part, the Russian Federation opposed the operation of the Alliance forces in Kosovo and proposed the provision of humanitarian and economic assistance to Serbia. In turn, western politicians, to a greater extent the United States,

sharply criticized Russia for refusing to support NATO and demanded the imposition of sanctions against it. It is widely believed that the main motive for NATO intervention in Yugoslavia was to prevent human rights violations in Kosovo, but Russian experts regard this as a first step towards Belgrade as the first experience of implementing the doctrine of humanitarian intervention in the “change of regimes”. Assessing the situation from the position of the then Belgrade, the Serbian government at that time was fighting the separatism of the Albanian population of Kosovo and preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state (Bogaturov, 2007). However, Russia could not protect Yugoslavia as a former, albeit not quite, reliable partner in the socialist camp, confining itself to only acute statements. Thus, Russia no longer has a chance to influence the situation in the Balkans in any significant way, since this geopolitical niche has been taken since the beginning of the 1990s by the United States. Moreover, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia took action in line with NATO’s demands under the pressure of Moscow (the mission of V. Chernomyrdin; *Politika Rossii na Balkanakh*, 2012).

Nevertheless, one should admit that Russia is resorting to a more sophisticated – veiled/“hybrid” effect on the Balkan countries. After the deployment of the Ukrainian crisis and official statements about the “Russian World”, the United States, Germany and other countries drew attention to the latent instability in the Balkans, in which the spread of Russian influence on the Orthodox component of the region is taking place. One of the steps of the West to reduce the geopolitical influence of Russia in the Balkans was, first, the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia to the PFP program in 2006. Subsequently, the West was an obstacle to the ambitions of “Gazprom’s” implementation of the “South Stream”, and proposed in 2015 to join Montenegro in NATO. Against this backdrop, there is also an active contribution to the achievement of Serbia and Kosovo’s accession standards to the EU (Zadorozhnyi, 2015). In the end, such a situation was seen in Moscow as a step aimed at strengthening the West in the Balkans and weakening Russia’s positions until it was completely displaced from the region.

It is worth noting that if the United States is at the mercy of the world order, Russia is attempting to undermine the transitive order of the world through the design of chaos and instability. In the end, one example of such a policy is the Balkan region. Under such circumstances, Russia intends to use the tried and true strategy of destabilization and undermining of the regional security system, already tested in the post-Soviet space. Obviously, Russia is positioning itself as a rival to the West in the soft “underbrush of Europe”, which is the Balkans. In an effort to preserve its nominal influence on the situation in Southeastern Europe, Russia tried to fuel the ethnic conflict between the Slavs and the Albanians, which

has been permanent since 2001. These actions capable of intensifying such confrontation by playing the Kosovo script, in which the Albanians would be able to achieve their full separateness (Trukhachev, 2012).

Meanwhile, the situation in Macedonia as one more Balkan country looked rather specific. In the end, in 2015, both Russian and Serbian media reported the artificiality of the crisis in this country created as if with the participation of the West and aimed at destabilizing the situation in Macedonia in order to prevent the project of the gas pipeline “South Stream”. A similar point of view was expressed by the head of the Russian Foreign Ministry, S. Lavrov, who noted that such actions of the West were motivated by the fact that Macedonia did not support Western anti-Russian sanctions (Bershidsky, 2015). During the meeting incidents in Skopje, connected with the support/resignation of the government of N. Gruevsky, Russia expressed its solidarity with the acting conservative government and the leader, who sympathizes with the Russian Federation and President V. Putin in particular. As a sign of support, Russia has sharply begun to complete its embassy in Skopje. During the protests, the Albanian national minority joined the Macedonian opposition, which in turn gave Russia new opportunities in the drawing of the “Balkan card” (Pop, 2015).

In addition, Russia immediately announced the position of the West about the next “coloured revolution” – the Macedonian Maydan, aimed at weakening the Serbs and other Orthodox peoples of the Balkans and their complete separation from Moscow. It is known that one of the scenarios for the further development of the Albanian-Macedonian confrontation is the creation of Greater Albania through the annexation to the republic of territories with a compact Albanian settlement in the north of Greece, Macedonia, southern Serbia, Montenegro (Gus’kova, 2015). Proceeding from the situation in the two million-dollar Macedonia, Russia is developing a strategy for drawing the Orthodox or “Pan-Slavic card”, thereby strengthening political, economic and religious influence in the Balkans, and simultaneously distracting the West from Ukrainian and Syrian issues. Russia is actively trying to invest in the energy sector and the construction of Orthodox churches in the Balkans (*Is Russia Showing Special*, 2015). Thus, Russia from the Macedonian crisis, as much as possible, makes its geopolitical dividends through consolidating its influence in the Balkans, as Macedonia’s leader N. Hrejewski is increasingly opposed to Russia in an attempt to pursue an independent geopolitical game in his foreign policy orientation.

Also, Moscow expressed its position regarding the inadmissibility of the prospect of Montenegro’s inclusion in NATO, stating that such a step would in no way add stability in the region, but would increase tension in the Balkans and the

entire European region (*V Kremle rasskazali o posledstviakh vstupleniia Chernogorii v NATO*, 2016). In the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, statements were issued regarding the “artificial pulling” of Montenegro into NATO, although it is well known that sociological polls showed that 46% of Montenegrin residents were ready to support the Alliance, while 42% were opposed to joining the Alliance. In 2016, 50.5% of the inhabitants of Montenegro expressed their support for NATO membership, while the remaining 49.5% expressed opposition to the country’s accession to the Alliance, and in May of that year, Montenegro actually became a member of NATO. As you can see, in Montenegro there is only a preference for adherents of NATO membership on what Russia is trying to play in one way or another. At the same time, according to the leadership of Montenegro, 75% of the citizens are ready to support NATO membership, and in 2015, 50 of the 79 deputies of the National Assembly voted in favor of joining the Alliance, 26 voted against, and the remaining 3 abstained (Torba, 2016; *Parlament Chornogorii pidtrimav vstup do NATO*, 2017). In 2017, 46 deputies of the National Assembly (46 from 81, since the opposition boycotted parliamentary elections) voted to join NATO, and on June 5 Montenegro officially became a member of NATO, which only confirms Russia’s gradual loss of its positions in the Balkans (*Chernogoriiiu ofitsial’no priniali v NATO*, 2017).

Montenegro’s accession to NATO, taking into account its population of 600 thousands, will not have much effect on the strengthening of the European security system, but will have a symbolic gesture from Washington and Brussels towards Moscow that its opinions in the Balkan affairs no longer have a special role (Koval’, 2015). At the same time, the Russian Federation is trying to destabilize the situation in the Balkans through interference in the internal political process involving the special services. In particular, there is a certain suspicion that the Russian Federation was involved in attempts to disrupt the parliamentary elections on October 16, 2016 (where the pro-Western powers were defeated) and the coup by introducing mass riots up to the seizure of parliament in the same Montenegro with the participation of pro-Russian oppositional-sponsored Moscow right-wing forces (Erman, 2016). An additional proof of non-linear Russian intervention in the internal political processes in Montenegro was the testimony of one of the Serbian mercenaries about a trip to Moscow to discuss the plan of a coup and receiving 200 thousands dollars for these measures (Board, 2016). Such actions of Russia can be seen as a reaction to the intentions of Podgorica to join NATO and support to M. Djukanovich of western anti-russian sanctions in March 2014.

In parallel, Russia establishes close relations with the leadership of the Serbian Republic, which expresses its readiness to hold a referendum on independence



in the event of increased pressure from Bosnia. On the agenda the definition of bilateral relations appeared, characterized by experts as follows: “The Republic Serbian is a state, and Russia is its ally” (Bechev, 2016). Indeed, the referendum itself can lead to the resumption of hostilities in which Russia will traditionally support its allies, first of all, Serbia and its ethnic population living in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. It can not be ruled out that Russia can help Serbia regain its control over Kosovo, which, according to its constitution, is still considered a territorial unit of the Republic of Serbia (*Balkanskim stranam grozit vozobnovlenie boevykh deistvii*, 2016). The direct evidence of this were the joint manoeuvres of Russia, Belarus and Serbia in November 2016. Russia based on its own geopolitical logic will try to support the separatism of the Republic Serbian, which could be a threat to the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In such actions of Moscow western experts see the transfer of the point of tension from the Eurasian space to the European space. In addition, the relations between Serbia and Albania are quite tense, and in confrontation with Russia and the West, Belgrade took the side of Moscow (Krastev, 2015). In this situation, countries such as Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro risk becoming a new field of geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Another important instrument of Russia’s geopolitical influence in this region is Russian business, which is one of the key instruments of Russia’s “soft influence” in Europe as a whole. In addition, the Balkan region is heavily dependent on Russian energy resources (Krastev, 2015).

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In general, starting from the 1990s, despite the difficult intra-political situation, Russia sought to preserve its influence in the Balkans through participation in optimizing the security situation in Yugoslavia. At one time, Moscow sharply opposed the bombing of the Alliance of Bosnian Serbs in 1995 and Belgrade in 1999. However, if in the first case Russia took part in the preparation of the Dayton agreements for the settlement of the ethnic conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, then in the other Russia condemned the proclamation of the independence of Kosovo in 2008. In particular, the Russian Federation tried to play the “Balkan card” in Macedonia, supporting the pro-Russian forces there and opposing them to the pro-Western elites. Russia also actively opposed the NATO membership of Montenegro, taking into account that the number of supporters and opponents of the North Atlantic Alliance in this country was divided practically equally. In order to close Montenegro’s path to NATO, Russia was planning to destabilize the situation in this country, evidence of which is the attempt to break the parliamentary elections of October 16, 2016 with the participation of pro-Russian forces.

Meanwhile Russia establishes close ties with the leadership of the Serbian Republic, which expresses its readiness to hold a referendum on independence in the event of an increase in the pressure from Bosnia, which may lead to the resumption of hostilities. In general, Russia can significantly affect the situation in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina by playing the so-called “Orthodox card”, as well as through manipulation of the local political forces, interfering in the electoral processes or provoking political crises with the use of special services in order to prevent the integration of these countries into Euro-Atlantic structures. Recently Moscow has been trying to provide support to Orthodox Serbia, while condemning the sovereignty of Kosovo. However, providing Montenegro with the status of a full member of NATO in June 2017 only confirms the gradual loss of its position in the Balkans. For all in the geopolitical risk zone, there are such Balkan countries as Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which may find themselves at the epicenter of the confrontation between Russia and the West in the Balkans.

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