

## Russia in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans have emerged as a front in Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the West. Building on close historical ties, Moscow is taking advantage of the political and economic difficulties to expand its influence, potentially undermining the region's stability.

*Disillusionment with the EU and economic stagnation create an opening for Russia*

Officially, the six Western Balkan countries are still on track for joining the EU. However, progress has faltered recently, and European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has made it clear that EU membership for these countries is only a [distant prospect](#). Meanwhile, the euro crisis, Brexit and the 2015 migration crisis (the latter having [severely affected](#) the Western Balkan transit countries) have tarnished the EU's image. Simmering ethnic tensions, chronically high unemployment (an average [25 %](#) for the region), and [shaky](#) constitutional arrangements in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) fuel resentment at the region's pro-Western course, thus creating an opportunity for Russia to leverage its already substantial influence.

### Russia's influence in the Western Balkans: assets and liabilities

*Cultural and historical ties give Russia considerable soft power, particularly among Serbs*

There are many cultural, linguistic and religious similarities between Russians and the Orthodox Slavs of the region. Historical ties go back at least to the pan-Slavic movement of the 19th century, and Russia's support for Serbian independence from the Ottoman Empire. Russia entered World War I on Serbia's side; in the Kosovo conflict, it condemned the NATO bombing of Serbia, and firmly [opposed](#) Kosovar independence.

*Russia uses its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council in Serbia's favour*

In [1994](#) and [2015](#), Russia vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions condemning violence by Bosnian Serbs, the latter resolution qualifying the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide. In [2007](#), a proposed resolution on Kosovar independence was dropped after Russian objections.

*Russia's economic influence is limited to the energy sector*

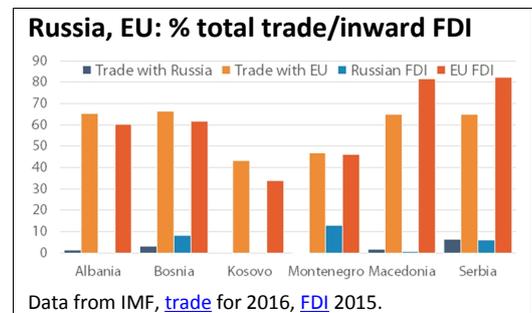
Russia's energy influence is biggest in Serbia, the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it supplies [close to 100 %](#) of gas needs. Russian Gazprom's [South Stream pipeline](#) would have consolidated Moscow's dominance of gas markets in south-east Europe, but was [abandoned](#) in December 2014 after the Commission ruled that it contravened EU energy legislation.

On the other hand, Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania currently consume little or no gas; future supplies are likely to come from Azerbaijan rather than Russia, via the [Trans-Adriatic Pipeline](#) (TAP), which is currently under construction; TAP is expected to start delivering to Albania in [2020](#), while Montenegro will probably have to wait several years for a connecting [Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline](#). In FYR Macedonia, Azeri gas is expected to start competing with Russian supplies from [2023](#).

Outside the energy sector, Russia's economic presence is dwarfed by that of the EU, even in Serbia and Montenegro. Since 2013, Russia's economy has shrunk by around [42 %](#) in US dollar terms, further reducing its economic clout. Compared to the EU, Russia is not a significant aid donor, nor a destination for migration.

*Russian influence supported by pro-Kremlin propaganda in Western Balkan media*

Western Balkan media outlets [lacking resources](#) to prepare their own material are becoming increasingly reliant on stories from pro-Kremlin sources. Sputnik news agency arrived in Belgrade in 2014, and since then it has become a [major supplier](#) of often highly anti-Western content to outlets in Serbia and its [neighbours](#).



## Russian influence in individual Western Balkan countries

### *Serbia – steering a course between Russia and the West*

Traditional Serbian closeness to Russia was highlighted by the warm welcome given to Russian President, Vladimir Putin, during his [2014](#) visit to Belgrade. Russia is Serbia's [biggest arms supplier](#). In 2013, the two countries signed a [defence cooperation agreement](#), and [joint military exercises](#) have been held since. A joint humanitarian centre opened in 2011 in the southern city of Niš was [suspected](#) by some observers of being a cover for military activities. Public opinion is supportive of closer ties with Russia: a [poll](#) carried out in mid-2016 by NSPM magazine showed that 72 % were in favour of an alliance with Russia, compared to just 8 % for NATO. Although an EU candidate country, Serbia has not followed EU sanctions against Russia.

Nevertheless, a narrow majority (in December 2016, [44 %](#) for, compared to 42 % against) remains in favour of EU membership, and the country has been in [accession talks](#) since 2014. Serbia is a NATO partner and, with the Serbian Progressive Party holding onto power in the April 2016 [elections](#), the country is likely to maintain its current course over the next few years, maintaining ties with [both the West and Russia](#).

### *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Russia is a close ally of Serbian nationalists in Republika Srpska*

Although Russia has not openly called for the predominantly Serbian constitutional entity Republika Srpska (RS) to secede from BiH, it has backed RS government efforts to undermine national unity: in September 2016, Russia's ambassador to BiH [openly endorsed](#) a controversial referendum to introduce an RS national day, which the EU and the USA condemned and even Serbia distanced itself from. Investigative network Bellingcat [alleges](#) that in 2014 Russia gave undercover support to Serbian nationalist Milorad Dodik (after he had [blocked](#) BiH participation in EU Ukraine-related sanctions) to secure his re-election as RS president.

### *FYR Macedonia and Montenegro divided between pro-Russian, pro-Western camps*

In FYR Macedonia, a recently leaked [intelligence report](#) accuses Russia of 'strong subversive propaganda and intelligence activity'. Russia's activities were directed in support of long-standing Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, through a prolonged crisis which began in 2015 with a [wiretapping scandal](#) and [protests](#), described by Moscow as a Western-engineered attempt at a '[colourful revolution](#)'. After Gruevski's December 2016 electoral defeat, the Kremlin [warned](#) that the new governing coalition 'imposed' by the West including three ethnic Albanian parties would open the door to a 'Greater Albania' at the expense of Macedonian statehood.

For its part, Montenegro has maintained a pro-Western course; it is one of three Western Balkan countries (alongside Albania and Kosovo) to follow EU sanctions against Russia, and on 5 June 2017 it [joined NATO](#). Russian politicians are [suspected](#) of involvement in a failed October 2016 coup, possibly intended to thwart NATO membership. Whether or not the Kremlin was implicated, it has certainly taken a hostile line towards Podgorica since; state media [portray](#) the country (a popular holiday destination for Russians) as corrupt and backward; the Foreign Ministry has [warned](#) of the dangers of travelling there; and in April 2016, Russia decided to [ban](#) Montenegrin wines over alleged hygiene concerns.

Not all Montenegrins support their government's pro-Western stance. Public opinion remains divided, with a June 2016 [poll](#) showing a clear majority against NATO membership and the Democratic Front opposition coalition calling for a [referendum](#) on the issue.

### *Little Russian influence in Albania or Kosovo*

Russia's anti-Albanian line in Macedonia and its opposition to Kosovar independence give it little traction in Tirana or Pristina, and its economic presence is minimal. Albania's Foreign Minister has [described](#) his country as 'a bastion against Russia's influence' in the Western Balkans.

## Implications of Russian involvement in the Western Balkans

EU High Representative Federica Mogherini has [warned](#) that the Western Balkans could become a chessboard in the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Recent worrying events in the Balkans (such as the Macedonian political crisis; secessionist tendencies in BiH) are undermining the region's progress towards stability and prosperity, potentially turning it back into the [tinderbox of Europe](#). While Russian influence is not the only factor driving these developments, it has certainly contributed by playing on ethnic tensions and discontent with the post-Yugoslavia political order.

**EP position:** in its 2017 resolutions on the Commission's annual progress reports on the Western Balkan countries, the European Parliament is [worried](#) about the potential of Russian influence to destabilise the region. It also calls on countries such as [Serbia](#) to align their policies on Russia with the EU's position.