

SÜDOSTEUROPA

Mitteilungen

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Russia & Southeast Europe

Dear Reader,

the articles in the Main Focus section entitled "Russia & Southeast Europe" are based on contributions to an international conference of the Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG) on 22 and 23 January 2019, which took place at the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin. In the context of the SOG's so-called 'Reality Check Series', "sources, tools and impact of external, non-EU-engagement in Southeastern Europe" are analyzed. Part I started with Russia. The conference series is supported by the German Federal Foreign Office through funds from the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. The overall aim of the conference was to take stock of Russia's strategy and influence in the region of Southeast Europe as well as the response by local actors, especially from the countries of the Western Balkans.

The following articles represent a sample taken from a more extensive collection of contributions to the above-mentioned conference. The Southeast Europe Association will publish the entire collection in an appropriate format – edited by Johanna Deimel. She has elaborated the concept of the conference series and we are grateful for her initial editing work. Most of our selected articles focus on Russian influences in Kosovo and in Serbia. For a comprehensive overview of the issues and debates of the international conference in January 2019, see the report by Gregor Mayer on pages 93-101 of this journal's edition.

The Main Focus in English is supplemented by an analysis of Nenad Stefanov in German that – while not based on a contribution to the conference – fits smoothly into the topic of this compilation of articles.

With best wishes for an interesting reading experience,
Your team of editors

Hansjörg Brey and Claudia Hopf

Jasmin Mujanović

Russia's Toxification of Civil Society in the Western Balkans

From an ideological perspective, Russia's activities in Southeast Europe, and especially in the Western Balkans, are geared towards creating alternative frameworks of political legitimacy for Moscow's partner governments in the region. Through such efforts Russia seeks to entice these and other local actors to shift their political, economic, and security allegiances towards Moscow, and away from Brussels and Washington.

Even if Russia does not – and cannot – offer the kinds of cohesive institutional linkages and socio-economic benefits the EU (and the Atlantic community more broadly) can, the strategy is nevertheless effective because it concentrates on the venal and personal interests of local elites, not the well-being of citizens in the countries. Rather than trying and failing to advance the principles of good governance, this is an entirely parallel approach that actively privileges the interests of elites over those of the public at large.

In short, Moscow invests in strongman regimes to advance its strategic aims in the region – above all, disrupting EU and NATO enlargement and cohesion within the Western Balkans.

Maxim Samorukov

Why is Russia Hooked on the Kosovo Conflict?

The Kosovo crisis was a pivotal moment for Russian foreign policy. In the late 1990s, Moscow decisively switched from cooperation to confrontation with the West. Frustrated by the West's bypassing of the UN Security Council, Moscow began to use developments in Kosovo as a precedent for pursuing its own interests in separatist conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Russia repeatedly referred to Kosovo as legal grounds for its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

When Kosovo proclaimed independence in 2008, Moscow stood firmly in favour of Serbia's territorial integrity. Since then Russia has cultivated its image as the main protector of Serbia's

interests in the international arena. This has allowed Moscow to acquire an unprecedented degree of influence in the Serbian energy sector and domestic politics.

Moscow now largely controls Belgrade's position on Kosovo and can subvert the authority of any Serbian politician if he or she is seen as being too soft on Pristina. Russia is reluctant to accept any final settlement of the Kosovo status, fearing this would lead to Serbia's accession to NATO and the elimination of Russia's security role in the region. The Kosovo conflict does not affect any of Russia's vital strategic and economic interests. But Moscow views the dispute as an integral part of its relations with the West. European leaders could appease its hostility to any settlement by displaying greater willingness to take Russian concerns into account.

Veton Surroi

EU and Russia: Kosovo–Serbia Negotiations

Disunity between the EU member states (with five member states not recognizing the independence of Kosovo) has weakened the position of the EU's foreign policy regarding Kosovo–Serbia relations. This disunity has opened further space for Russia to successfully disrupt an attempt by the West to establish consolidated liberal democracies in the territory of former Yugoslavia. The policy of disruption was undertaken by supporting the Serbian position of obstructing state-building in Kosovo. It was also carried out through a successful disregard of the International Court of Justice's opinion in July 2010 recognizing that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not contravene international law.

The EU was given a mandate by the UN General Assembly to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Its External Action Service had undertaken a long and rather unsuccessful attempt to reach something resembling "normalization". But it got bogged down in micromanaging details while not establishing viable principles of negotiation. The logical consequence of such an approach is an anti-European idea of swapping land and people, entertained throughout 2018 by the Presidents Vučić and Taçi of Serbia and Kosovo, respectively. With the failure of such an approach, there is now an opportunity to return to European values defining bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

Ekaterina Entina

Southeast Europe in Russia's Current Foreign Policy A Focus on Security Trends and Challenges

The region of Southeast Europe is currently in a turbulent phase of its history. It is trying to finally put an end to the problems that arose after the collapse of communism almost 30 years ago. For a long time, the international community and the Balkan states themselves gave integration into the European Union top priority in the hope of achieving stability and prosperity in this part of the continent.

Today, with the increasing influence of various international actors in the region – China, Turkey, Russia, and Arab countries – and problems within the EU itself, internal problems have also arisen within the region. The twin issue of internal security and external challenges became acute again.

There is a trend to overestimate the Russian foreign interest and its presence in the region from the Western side. The article is devoted to the analysis and description of how Russia can be understood as an external actor in the Western Balkans. It equally focuses on the question what the most constructive ways are to stabilize the Balkan region and solve its current problems.