

**The influence of revisionist powers in the Balkans:  
the cases of the Russian Federation and Türkiye**

**Alexandros Zyka**

**December 2025,  
Athens, Greece**

## **Abstract**

In the modern era, the rise of revisionist powers on the planet is not an exception to the rule of democratic nations. Given that new reality, the current paper will attempt to show the reasons and the means of exerting influence to the Balkan peninsula by the current revisionist countries, the Russian Federation on the one hand and Türkiye on the other. The reason why the Balkans still hold a central position in the foreign policy of these states is-for Russia-the policy of Pan-Slavism which has been developed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Türkiye though, the political rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the presence of Muslim populations in the area are the reasons why the Turkish foreign policy still maintains its interest. By funding various cultural centers, events and restoring monuments of cultural heritage they aim to the creation of an appealing image of themselves. These two powers, apparently, target not only states with the status of candidate member-state of the EU, but also to EU member-states, making difficult for these countries to emphasize on rule of law.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the competition that it has been created by the presence of the current revisionist forces coming from the East, the Russian Federation and Turkey. These two countries have a particular interest in the Balkan peninsula, as they consider the area an important aspect to their foreign policy, due to historical-cultural ties, as well as with economic treaties.

In the recent years, these two countries had relatively good relations with the West, as Türkiye made an official application to join the then European Economic Community in 1987, with it being accepted in 1999 thus beginning the negotiations process in 2002. The rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP in power in that time, has halted Turkey's ascension to the EU. The rule of AKP has been marked by the rise of Islamism and Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey, in an attempt to challenge Atatürk's modernization and secular policies. The situation has been worsened since the 2010's, as Erdoğan's position has been challenged on various occasions, in order to preserve the Kemalist policies.

The same cannot be said about Russia however. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly-formed Russian Federation had a serious problem about its new position in the global system. This reevaluation about the position of the new state has concentrated the majority of the available resources, leading on the one hand to huge economic stagnation as well as to democratic backsliding, and on the other hand to increasing problems within the Russian society. The rise of President Vladimir Putin in 1999 had as its main purpose to prevent any further fragmentation to the economy, the society as well as the territorial integrity of the country. Once all these goals were achieved, President Putin consolidated his power by maintaining rather friendly relations with Russia's neighbors on the surface, whilst showing a trustful partner to the Westerners. The situation changed though since 2008, with the war against Georgia, with Russia defining its foreign policy towards recreating the former Soviet sphere with influence, which would now include the former members of the Soviet Union as well as the former members of the Warsaw Pact.

This paper is split into two parts. The first part explains why Russia and Türkiye have this particular interest in the Balkan peninsula, how these countries have developed their policies concerning the peninsula and the general importance of it. In the second part, it will attempt to present how Russia and Türkiye meddle into the Balkan states' inner affairs, the policies implied by them and how these countries influence the different factors of the Balkans, since the position in the global system of many Balkan countries is different.

## The importance of the Balkans for Russia and Turkey

Being the powers with the most consistent policy towards the peninsula, these two revisionist countries grant to the Balkans a central role to their foreign policies. On the one hand, the Russian Federation has two means of promoting its interests in the area: the religion and the use of the political idea of unity among the Slavic peoples.

Undoubtedly, a large portion of Christian Orthodoxy is concentrated in the Balkans. As early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> and more actively since the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Russians had close ties with the Christians in the area, as they got married with members of the last imperial Byzantine family. The marriage, more specifically, between the daughter of a Byzantine prince and the son of Ivan III in 1472, created the idea of a "Third Rome", as the capital Moscow was considered to be the successor of the Byzantine Empire. This idea was mostly cultivated by the Patriarchate of Moscow and became widespread throughout the main Orthodox centers, such as Mount Athos, Patriarchate of Jerusalem and of course the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. These pro-Russian circles preached the idea that Russia was the main power which could protect the interests of the orthodox communities-mostly Greek until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This image of Russia was purposely cultivated by the tsar himself, Peter the Great, since he aimed to the country's access to the Black Sea.<sup>2</sup>

The other ideological weapon used by the Russians was the idea of Pan-Slavism, which aimed to unite all the Slavic nations of Europe under one state entity. The idea of a Slavic political and cultural union was conceived as early as the 1650's, by the Croatian Catholic priest Juraj Križanić. According to the priest, the Slavs would be united under the banner of the Muscovite Tsar and the spiritual guidance of the Pope, hence he attempted to create a single Slavic language based by the languages of the Old Church Slavonic, Serbo-Croatian and Polish.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and affected by the revolutionary movements across Europe and the rather friendly attitude towards them by the German philosophers, the Slavic communities firstly did not want to align with Russia but with the West, whilst the Tsar condemned it and connected it with rebellion. The situation changed after the end of the Crimean War in 1856, as Russia believed that it didn't have any allies in the West, thus starting the attempt to ally the Slavic communities of Europe. The obvious communities for Russian to target

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<sup>1</sup>The Byzantine Emperor Basil II made an agreement with Prince Vladimir of the Rus requesting his help, with him offering his sister Anna as a bride and obliging the Russians to convert to Eastern Orthodoxy. Warren Treadgold, *A Concise History of Byzantium*, trans to Greek: George Leveniotis, Thessaloniki 2007, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup>Dimitris Papastamatiou-Fokion Kotzageorgis, *History of Neo-Hellenism during the Ottoman political rule*, Athens 2015, p. 50

<sup>3</sup>Constantin Tonu, "The Pan-Slavic Utopian Imaginary", in the Babeş-Bolyai University, *Utopian Imaginaries*, ed.: Maria Barbu-Phantasma. The Center for Imagination Studies, vol. 46, Cluj-Napoca 2024, pp. 283-298, p. 285.

for this goal were without any doubt the Slavs who lived under the Habsburg and Ottoman rule.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Türkiye considers the former Ottoman territories as the one core element to the country's security-with the other being the Middle East. This is one of the main points mentioned by the ex-Foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who claims that besides the loss of the Ottoman empire in World War I, the Muslim Bosniaks and Kosovar Albanians asked Türkiye to come to their help during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990's. The fact that there are Turkish communities still living in the Balkans(i.e. in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Western Thrace), dictates by default Turkey's right to be present in the peninsula<sup>5</sup>.

## **The revisionist-powers influence in the region**

Given the mentioned policies towards the Balkan countries, Russia and Türkiye never stopped trying to engulf these countries in their own sphere of influence, even though many of them have joined either the European Union, NATO or some of them both institutions. This categorization can be expanded in the level of countries being in specific zones, such as a "zone of turmoil" and a "zone of peace" described by Singer and Wildavsky. In the turmoil zone, there are no stabilizing factors for the economy and politics, intensified by political-historical reasons, thus leading these countries into economic backwardness and political instability. The opposite can be said about the countries included in the zone of peace, with them having stable political institutions and economic growth, resulting to their societies' wealth.<sup>6</sup>

This categorization can help us divide the Balkans into these main zones. The countries who have joined both the EU and NATO can logically be put into the zone of peace, such as Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, whilst the countries who have joined either one of the institutions-mostly NATO-or none of them can be put into the zone of turmoil, with them being the Western Balkans, as being categorized by the EU. This include countries such as North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo.<sup>7</sup> Given the problems that these countries face-of economic nature or of democratic issues-it makes it easier for the revisionist powers to meddle into their internal affairs. This does not mean of course, that they do not meddle into the affairs of the countries of the zone of peace. Their influence mostly concentrates on influencing local factors for their favor and funding various projects.

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<sup>4</sup>Tonu, "The Pan-Slavic Utopian Imaginary", pp. 289-290.

<sup>5</sup>Ahmet Davutoğlu, *The Strategic Depth. The International place of Turkey*, trans: Nikos Raptopoulos, Athens 2010, p. 200

<sup>6</sup>Georgios Antonopoulos, "Unraveling the knot: Exploring the role of international power politics in the Serbo-Albanian rivalry over Kosovo", in Balkan Studies Foundation, *6<sup>th</sup> International-Balkan Summer School. Balkans and Global politics proceedings*, eds.: Berat Halili-Hanife Etem, Skopje 2024, pp. 33-54, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>Antonopoulos, "Unraveling the knot...", p. 37.

Whilst both Russia and Türkiye use these methods, Russia rather inclines towards influencing local factors as it considers the Western Balkans a part of the “near abroad” perspective of the Russian Foreign ministry.<sup>8</sup> Consequently to this, it is estimated that since the 2016 failed coup attempt in Montenegro, Russia is more keen on using hybrid warfare tactics in the Western Balkans, such as conspiracy, sabotage and diversionary tactics.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, Türkiye is more active when pursuing the creation of its sphere of influence, since there is a pouring of resources to infrastructure, trade, the banking sector and telecommunications.<sup>10</sup> Apart from these sectors though, Türkiye pursues also a rather energetic presence in the area as an important military partner. In the recent years, there has been a significant increase to Turkish military exports—such as drones, along with an ongoing arms sale since the 1990’s and the training of soldiers coming from the Balkans, especially Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to their means of intervention, as mentioned previously, they both use hybrid warfare methods as well as straight-up interference. More specifically, Russia is a staunch supporter of the Republic of Serbia, as well as the Serb entity of Republika Srpska (RS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This position is still ongoing since the 1999 bombings of NATO against Serbia, which they were condemned by the Russians, and also the 2008 independence declaration of Kosovo, which is still boycotted by Serbia and backed by Moscow. The most important factor though of Russian interference is undoubtedly in the energy sector, as the Serbian government has signed multiple treaties with many Russian companies. The most prominent of them is the acquisition of the state-owned company NIS by the Russian Gazprom in 2008.<sup>12</sup> The same situation can be told about Montenegro, as the coup attempt of 2016 was said to be organized by the Russians with the purpose of preventing American presence in the country.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Bosnian Serbs of RS, its paramilitary force and police are equipped by the Russians, not to mention the friendly relationship between the Russian President and the Bosnian-Serb leader Milorad Dodik.<sup>14</sup>

In the cases for both countries, the Serbian Orthodox Church is highly affected by the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, which present a rather positive image of Russia instead of the West.<sup>15</sup> The Russian ecclesiastical influence is not only in Serbia and Montenegro but in North Macedonia too, in Bulgaria, even in Greece. From these three countries, North Macedonia seems the most vulnerable to Russian influence, since it took the side of the rivals of the Social Democratic Party of North Macedonia, such as the Levica [=Left] party and the VMRO-

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<sup>8</sup>Lars Hänsel-Florian C. Feyerabend, “Introduction: The role of external actors in the Western Balkans”, in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*, ed.: Florian C. Feyerabend, Sankt Augustin/Berlin 2018, pp. 4-8, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>Hänsel- Feyerabend, “Introduction...”, pp. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup>Hänsel- Feyerabend, “Introduction...”, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup>Ekrem Eddy Güzeldere, *Turkey’s soft power in the Balkans reaching its limits*, Athens 2021, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Antonopoulos, “Unraveling the knot..”, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup>Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes, “Serbia and Montenegro”, in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*, ed.: Florian C. Feyerabend, Sankt Augustin/Berlin 2018, pp. 32-38, p. 32, 34.

<sup>14</sup>Karsten Dümmel, “Bosnia and Herzegovina”, in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*, ed.: Florian C. Feyerabend, Sankt Augustin/Berlin 2018, pp. 14-16, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Beckmann-Dierkes, “Serbia and Montenegro”, p. 35.

DPMNE party, putting pressure in the meantime on the preservation of the Russian pipeline network.<sup>16</sup> The most important Russian attempt however was the boycott of the Prespa Agreement, which also affected Greece. The economic activity of the Russian oligarch-tycoon Ivan Savvidis, particularly in Northern Greece, which ranges from tobacco production to the ownership of a sports' club, and more recently to local and national media. He is considered to be the instructor of many protests in Athens, Thessaloniki and generally Northern Greece that were against the signing of the Prespa Agreement. In the end though, not only the Agreement was signed with the Russians changing their rhetoric saying they were in favor for a compromise between the two nations, but also the Greek government put pressure into the activity of Savvidis, forcing him to flee.<sup>17</sup>

The situation with Türkiye is completely different. The first beginnings demanded a rather active presence in the Muslim countries of the peninsula, as the Yugoslav wars of the 90s offered the perfect opportunity for Türkiye to provide any assistance necessary.<sup>18</sup> One important aspect of this assistance is offered by the various institutions active in the Balkans, such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency(TIKA), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities(YTB), as well as the television channel TRT.<sup>19</sup> In the cultural aspect of Turkey's influence it should be noted that since the failed coup attempt in 2016, the Turkish government has requested from all the Muslim countries to extradite any supporters of Gülen.<sup>20</sup> Despite this small inconvenience, Türkiye maintains good relations with Albania, in Bosnia and Herzegovina strengthens its ties with the entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina(FBiH), as President Erdoğan and former Bosniak President of the Presidency Bakir Izetbegović are personal friends.<sup>21</sup> The other aspect of Turkey's assistance is the economic agreements, as it presents herself as a rather cheap player, since it offers products in reduced prices and rather similar to them.<sup>22</sup>

Two small exceptions should be noted here: in Kosovo, the public is not rather that fond of this intense Turkish presence, as it is viewed as a "reconquista" of Kosovo by the Turks, despite Turkey's fifth place as the country's main investor.<sup>23</sup> In North Macedonia however, the situation is a bit complex. Even though the country is Orthodox in its majority, there is an important Muslim Albanian community living there, with Türkiye not differentiating its policy. In addition to that, after the United

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<sup>16</sup>Johannes D. Rey-Zoran Ilievski-Siniša Aleksoski-Davor Pašoski, "Macedonia", in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*, ed.: Florian C. Feyerabend, Sankt Augustin/Berlin 2018, pp. 25-28, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup>Vsevolod Samokhvalov, "Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response", in the SETA Foundation, *Insight Turkey*, ed.: Muhittin Ataman, vol. 21, no. 2, Ankara 2019, pp. 189-210, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup>Güzeldere, *Turkey's soft power...*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Hülya Eşki Uğuz-Rukiye Saygılı, "Turkish Public Diplomacy in The Balkans: The Power of Soft Power", in the International University of Sarajevo, *Inquiry – Sarajevo Journal of Social Science*, vol. 3, issue 1, Sarajevo 2017, pp. 143-150, p. 146.

<sup>20</sup>Güzeldere, *Turkey's soft power...*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>Dümmel, "Bosnia and Herzegovina", p. 16.

<sup>22</sup>Güzeldere, *Turkey's soft power...*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup>Johannes D. Rey, "Kosovo", in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*, ed.: Florian C. Feyerabend, Sankt Augustin/Berlin 2018, pp. 17-20, pp. 18-19.

States, Türkiye is the second country that North Macedonia has signed Strategic Partnership Agreement with.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Johannes D. Rey-Zoran Ilievski-Siniša Aleksoski-Davor Pašoski, “Macedonia”, in the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, *The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans*, ed.: Florian C. Feyerabend, Sankt Augustin/Berlin 2018, pp. 25-28, pp. 25, 27.

## **Conclusions**

To summarize, in the current decade there has been a respectable rise of the revisionist powers in the world, with the most important of them being the Russian Federation and Turkey. These two countries though have a particular interest in the Balkan peninsula for historical, cultural and economical reasons. Russia on the one hand utilizes mostly its influence towards the Orthodox countries of the area, as it aims not to incorporate them into her sphere of influence but to rather slow their integration to the West or to destabilize them. Türkiye on the other hand, aims to create its own sphere of influence particularly within the Balkan Muslims, since they are provided with any requested assistance rather generously. This intervention attempts consist an important factor to the ascension of many of these countries into the European Union.

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