

THE BALKAN COUNTRIES BETWEEN THE EU AND RUSSIA - THE "SOFT UNDERBELLY" OF EUROPE?

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The Balkan region (in this context the countries of former Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania) have a long-standing reputation for instability and being a frontier between several powerful empires. They have recently once again become an arena of a power struggle between Russia and the West (the EU and NATO). As these great powers compete to influence the local governments, these very governments are aware of their own weakness, and seek to find a balance between the competing power blocs.

The current power struggle can be directly linked to the new course of Russian foreign policy. Namely, after a rapprochement with the West in the late 80s and early 90s, when Russia was mostly passive in the Balkans, Russia began to resurge as a global power. In 2008, Russia began reasserting its power against a weakening West (this is also related to the world economic crisis). In 2013 this went further: Russia has recently seemingly abandoned Western values in exchange for a "clash of civilizations" narrative (EU vs. Eurasia). Yet despite all this, Russia and the EU remain major trading partners.

In the Balkans, however, this conflict has taken on a different character. The struggle here is taking place on the so-called "soft power" level - politics, propaganda, economy, culture - with Russia promoting a positive image of itself in the Balkans while simultaneously fostering resentment towards the EU and NATO. Russia's growing influence is also felt on the economic level (esp. the energy sector), the political (Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and has veto power there), and the social (its historical ties to the Balkan Slavs, especially those of Orthodox faith). Furthermore, Russia has begun building institutions and associations which could rival those of the EU (CSTO, EaU, various local organizations, cultural associations).

Of course, the EU also has its own interests in the Balkan countries, all of which are either EU members or have applied for membership, and most of which are also NATO members or candidates. The EU strives to promote the values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and a free market, but faces considerable problems in implementing them in the Balkans. The countries there continue to be seen as a "fringe" or "peripheral" part of Europe, with unstable economies and weak governments. Furthermore, some of them have historical cultural ties with Russia.

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Due to its unique position, the Balkans remain particularly vulnerable to foreign influence. The destabilization of the region could have great consequences for the future of Europe. A better understanding of European and especially Russian policy and goals on the Balkans would allow a better dialogue between the EU and Russia.

The goal of this meeting is to discuss topics such as:

1. Why are the Balkans the site of clashing EU and Russian interests?
2. The projection of "soft power" in the Balkans: politics, propaganda, trade, and energy.
3. Western "liberalism" vs. Russian-style "patriotism": traditionally pro-West and pro-Russian divides in the Balkans - a threat to regional and EU stability?
4. The oligarchization of the Balkans - corruption, clientelism and inefficiency, and how it facilitates foreign influence.
5. The role of EU and Russian political, military and economic organizations and integrations in the Balkans - is Eurasia a valid alternative to the EU / NATO?
6. The ideological dimension of the Russia - EU conflict and its implementation in the Balkans.
7. Finding a common language - can the influences of Russia and the EU on the Balkans be complementary?

University professors and scholars from Croatia and the countries of Southeast Europe, representatives of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ambassadors of Russia, the EU countries, EEU countries, and the countries of Southeast Europe, journalists, and all other interested persons are invited to attend the meeting. The conference programme shall be finalized after all applications have been received, and then forwarded to all participants.

Presentations should be no longer than 20 minutes. The order of presentations shall be determined after the programme has been finalized, based on the submitted topics. The discussion will consist of several sections (panels) divided according to topic and presided over by one moderator each, followed by a general discussion on the main topic of the meeting.

The papers should be no longer than 15 pages including scholarly apparatus. A conference volume shall also be published if the necessary funds are secured.

The articles of attendees of the conference will be announced in the magazine *European Studies*: <http://hrcak.srce.hr/europske-studije?lang=en>

Applications should be sent to the following e-mail: bblazina85@gmail.com

The deadline for presentation submissions is 15 September 2016.

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