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So Similar, Yet So Different: Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans – The Case of Serbia

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Russia and Turkey have been among non-Western powers that have been more assertive in their foreign policies in the Western Balkans. Naturally, this creates the need to identify the key similarities and differences between these two geopolitical players. By using the case of Serbia, the pivotal country of the Western Balkans and a country whose foreign policy was largely influenced by the idea of hedging and engaging non-Western players, one can determine key similarities and differences between these two powers. This paper states two major similarities between these two powers and one major difference. The first similarity is that both Russia and Turkey are acting based on the same permissive environment of a regional power vacuum, the environment in which the EU's leverage has decreased and in which countries like Serbia feel emboldened to hedge their bets and diversify partnerships. The second similarity is that although the popular explanation is to stress to powers' ethnic and religious ties with the Balkans, Slavic and Orthodox ties in case of Russia and Islam in case of Turkey, or even as the continuation of old imperial traditions, the two countries are guided by strategic pragmatism. The difference between the two powers is that Russia can be defined as a status quo power as it aims to act as a spoiler perpetuating the current state of political dysfunctions; Turkey is not a status quo player as it does not oppose the region's membership in Western institutions as long as its interests are respected.

Keywords: power vacuum, hedging, strategic interest, revisionist power, status quo power

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Introduction

The Western Balkans has become one more region where in recent years, both Russia and Turkey have been more assertive in their foreign policy efforts, adding to the list of other non-Western powers which have increased their presence there. This begs the question of the key similarities and differences between these two powers, and how they operate in the region. A comparison must be drawn to determine these key similarities and differences; a case study is selected. This case study is Serbia. The reason being that, of all the six Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia

and Kosovo), Serbia is strategically the most consequential country. It is the largest country in terms of its territory and population. Serbia's geography also gives it regional clout, as the country constitutes a geographical heart of the region, with its land also falling in both the landscape of the Balkans and Central Europe, putting the country at the vital crossroads between Europe and wider Eurasia. On top of that, of all the countries in the Western Balkans, the idea of hedging, balancing and playing rival powers against each other has been most pronounced in Belgrade's foreign policy. This makes Serbia a suitable case study for an examination of the Russian and Turkish presence in the Western Balkans.

The article argues that there are two important points of similarity between Russia and Turkey in the Balkans, and one major difference. The article will stress that first similarity is that both Russia and Turkey seized an opportunity provided by the regional power vacuum in the Balkans that kicked in with the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis that followed. Every crisis that has impacted Europe, ranging from the migrant crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, has only exacerbated the process. This situation constitutes a permissive environment, which has allowed Russia and Turkey to be more assertive in the region, while also generating an incentive for Serbia to hedge its bets through the diversification of its partnerships, and to start playing the Western and non-Western powers off against each other.

The second similarity is that while it is commonplace to view Russian and Turkish engagement with the region through the lenses of historical and identity ties, this engagement is in fact driven by pragmatic interests. It will show that Russian engagement with Serbia is not driven that much by traditional links with Serbia, but by its current strategic interests, including Kosovo, which Russia uses as leverage. The same goes for Turkey, whose foreign policy in the region has profited from closer ties with Serbia, showing the fallacy of explanations based on identity and history. Ultimately, the article aims to present the major difference between the two players. This difference is that Russia acts as a status quo power in trying to preserve an advantageous status quo based on the current state of political dysfunction. As opposed to that, Turkey can be described as a revisionist power, trying to alter the environment because it can pursue a policy of supporting the region's integration into Western institutions, as long as Ankara's interests are protected.

The Permissive Environment – Regional Power Vacuum

Both Russia and Turkey have been capable of seizing the opportunity offered by the new permissive environment that has emerged in the Western Balkans in the past fifteen years. This permissive environment is one of a regional power vacuum that kicked in with the EU's growing inability to continue the policy of enlargement. In that environment, players like Russia and Turkey can be more assertive, while a country like Serbia feels more emboldened to hedge its bets by engaging with the likes of Russia and Turkey.

This vacuum-like situation started with the global financial crisis of 2008, which manifested itself as the Eurozone crisis in Europe. The attention of the US was diverted

from the region, and so was the attention of the EU, which has been unable to enlarge itself, with the sole exception of Croatia, which was the last member to join back in 2013.¹ In the case of Europe, the Eurozone and the Greek debt crisis occupied the EU to the extent that it upset the EU's ability to supervise reforms and offer enlargement, unsettling the European Union's status as the primary provider of stability and security in the region.² Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, a move that some thought premature, considering the incomplete rule of law reforms in these two countries also did not help the case that the Western Balkans were due to become part of the EU.³ This put the region in the structural situation of being on Europe's periphery, and as Dimitar Bechev prophetically wrote back in 2012: "Balancing and playing off rival powers in order to reap short-term benefits at the expense of long-term public interest may well become the dominant foreign policy strategy for local elites."⁴

Russia quickly seized the opportunity to jump in, particularly since during that same fateful year of 2008, Kosovo declared independence, putting Serbia, the strategically most important country in the Western Balkans, in a state of political dependency on Russia, as Belgrade needed a diplomatic protector on the United Nations (UN) Security Council. The Kosovo dispute, and the now-defunct South Stream gas pipeline project, were at the forefront of Russia's regional operations during that period.⁵ That same year, Russia's Gazprom Neft acquired majority share ownership in the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS), the national oil and gas supplier, a transaction motivated by the South Stream project and Russia's support over Kosovo.⁶ During this period, Russia improved its security presence with an agreement for a humanitarian center for emergency response in Niš, close to Kosovo and Bulgaria. It was signed between Serbia and Russia a couple of days after the European Commission blocked Serbia's EU progress.⁷ This episode showed once again that Russia would step in to fill any opening left by the EU.

The EU's leverage continued to deteriorate, leaving additional leeway for Russia and Turkey in the Balkans. In 2014, at the start of his mandate as the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker addressed the European Parliament and noted that the EU

1 Gordon N. Bardos, "The Balkans, Post-Pax Americana", *The National Interest*, 1 October 2012, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-balkans-post-pax-americana-7537> (Accessed 04 July 2022).

2 Rita Panagiotou, "The Impact of the Economic Crisis on the Western Balkans and their EU Accession Prospects", *EUI RSCAS*, 2012/64, p. 1-16, <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/24557> (Accessed 08 July 2022).

3 Georgi Gotev, "Romania and Bulgaria Were not Ready for Accession, EU Auditors Confess", *Euractiv*, 13 September 2016, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/auditors-romania-and-bulgaria-were-not-ready-for-accession/> (Accessed 08 July 2022).

4 Dimitar Bechev, "The Periphery of the Periphery: The Western Balkans and the Euro Crisis", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 30 August 2012, p. 2, https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_periphery_of_the_periphery_the_western_balkans_and_the_euro_crisis/ (Accessed 08 July 2022).

5 Bardos, "The Balkans, Post-Pax Americana".

6 "Tadić uveren da će Južni tok biti izgrađen [Tadić Convinced that the South Stream Would be Built]", *N1*, 2 December 2014, <https://rs.n1info.com/biznis/a16577-tadic-uveren-da-ce-juzni-tok-biti-izgradjen/> (Accessed 08 July 2022).

7 "Russia Opens 'Humanitarian' Base in Serbia", *Euractiv*, 18 October 2011, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-opens-humanitarian-base-in-serbia/> (Accessed 08 July 2022).

would not be enlarged during his term.⁸ The refugee crisis also decreased the EU's strategic clout. The crisis sidelined the enlargement, and instilled fear among the local nations that Europe was starting to perceive them as a buffer toward the Middle East and the migration from that region.⁹ The decision by the United Kingdom (UK) citizens in a 2016 referendum to leave the EU (Brexit), alongside the institutional and political crisis that ensued, also implied that the region and the enlargement were put on the EU's backburner.¹⁰

In this regional strategic environment, the local nations all had an incentive to engage with powers like Russia and Turkey even further. The leaderships of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Croatia were trying to score points in the West by portraying themselves as Western bulwarks in the Balkans, directed against Russian interference, while Serbian leaders wanted to play Russia and the West against each other.¹¹

Russia used its opportunity, as Vladimir Putin was a guest of honour at a military parade held to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Belgrade's liberation from Nazi occupation by the Yugoslav Partisans and the Soviet Red Army.¹² Russia and Serbia, alongside Belarus, established the trilateral military exercise "Slavic Brotherhood", which has been held since 2015.¹³ Serbia also started to receive military hardware from Russia, including Mig-29 fighter jets for its outdated air force.¹⁴ In the media domain, Russia also used the opportunity in 2015 to open a Serbian bureau for Radio Sputnik.¹⁵ Inside Serbia, Russia nurtured ties with the Orthodox Church, nationalist groups, pro-Russian parties, and other pro-Russian players.¹⁶

Russia was not the only one seizing an opportunity. Turkish foreign policy became more active under the stewardship of Ahmet Davutoğlu, a political scientist who, after being Erdoğan's foreign policy adviser, became the Turkish foreign minister (2009–14) and then the prime minister (2014–16). Some described Davutoğlu as "Turkey's Kissinger" for being an intellectual turned into an adviser and foreign policy strategist.¹⁷ The main ideas of "Turkey's

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- 8 Maja Poznatov, "Serbia Grudgingly Accepts Juncker's Enlargement Pause", *Euractiv*, 16 September 2014, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbia-grudgingly-accepts-juncker-s-enlargement-pause/> (Accessed 09 July 2022).
 - 9 Jonathan Zaragoza-Cristiani, "Containing the Refugee Crisis: How the EU Turned the Balkans and Turkey into an EU Borderland", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 52, No 4, 2017, p. 59–75.
 - 10 Dusan Stojanovic, "Brexit Shakes Hopes of Balkan EU Bidders", *The Associated Press*, 30 June 2016, <https://apnews.com/article/03abbc7f960842b5be6e463db975daf5> (Accessed 09 July 2022).
 - 11 Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 82.
 - 12 "Putin Guest of Honour at Serbia Military Parade", *BBC*, 16 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29641642>. (Accessed 09 July 2022).
 - 13 "Active Phase of the Exercise "Slavic Brotherhood 2021", *Serbian Armed Forces*, 18 June 2021, <https://www.vs.rs/en/news/A182E6DBD00011EB8D050050568F5424/active-phase-of-the-exercise-slavic-brotherhood-2021>. (Accessed 10 July 2022).
 - 14 "MiG 29 - A Guarantee of the Sovereignty of Our Sky", *Serbian Armed Forces*, 9 September 2020, <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/16455/mig-29-garancija-suvereniteta-naseg-neba-16455>. (Accessed 10 July 2022).
 - 15 Stanislav Secieru, "Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks", *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Brief 8: 2 July, 2019, p. 2, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russia-western-balkans>. (Accessed 10 July 2022).
 - 16 Heather A. Conley et al., "Kremlin's Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Eastern and Central Europe", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 2016, p. 6-7
 - 17 Abbas Djavadi, "'Turkey's Kissinger' Leads Foreign-Policy Balancing Act", *Radio Free Europe*, 30 October 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Turkeys_Kissinger_Leads_ForeignPolicy_Balancing_Act/1865343.html (Accessed 16 July 2022).

Kissinger” were contained in his 2001 book “Strategic Depth: Turkey’s International Position”, in which Davutoğlu argued that Turkey should work hard to become a major player in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, including in the Balkans.¹⁸

To achieve its ambitious tasks, Turkey had to conduct what was then known as the “zero problems policy”, a policy of eliminating problems that Turkey has with its neighbours, to avoid Turkey’s ambitions being impeded by disputes and conflicts on its borders.¹⁹ The conflict and dispute resolution mechanism was also tested in the Balkans and Serbia. Turkey established a trilateral mechanism that had to deal with the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, involving that country, Turkey and Serbia. The first meeting was held in Istanbul in April 2010, resulting in the Istanbul Declaration, affirming the principle of Bosnia’s territorial integrity and regional cooperation.²⁰ This trilateral format also met in Karađorđevo, Serbia and in Ankara, in 2011 and 2013, respectively.²¹ During this same period, there were also consultations regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina that included these three countries and Croatia.²² Ankara also tried to mediate in a dispute between two Islamic communities in Serbia, one in Belgrade, and the other in Novi Pazar, in the Bosniak-populated province of Sandžak.²³ Showing Turkey’s increased interest in Serbia and the Balkans, “some of the most active and promising diplomats of the Turkish Foreign Ministry were employed at the Turkish embassy in Serbia.”²⁴

Even when Davutoğlu was forced to resign, leaving the helm of Turkey’s Balkan policy in the hands of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had a more personalized approach to foreign policy,²⁵ the notion that Turkey would seize any opening left by the EU to strengthen its ties with the region remained. In the summer of 2021, motivated by the EU’s inability to be successful in its mediation between Serbia and Kosovo, Erdoğan tried to seize the moment and increase its leverage with both Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, by pledging to lobby for more countries to recognize an independent Kosovo.²⁶

18 Ibid.

19 Vuk Vuksanovic, “The Long Fall of Turkey’s ‘Zero Problems’ Mastermind”, *The National Interest*, 17 May 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-long-fall-turkeys-zero-problems-mastermind-16240> (Accessed 12 July 2022).

20 Erhan Türbedar, “Trilateral Balkan Summit in Istanbul”, *TEPAV Evaluation Note*, April 2010, https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1274094120r2517.Trilateral_Balkan_Summit_in_Istanbul.pdf (Accessed 17 July 2022).

21 “Joint Statement on The Third Meeting of the Trilateral Summit among Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia”, *Republic of Turkey Permanent Mission – OSCE*, 16 May 2013, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/c/101689.pdf> (Accessed 17 July 2022).

22 Anes Alic, “Vying For Influence In The Balkans”, *Radio Free Europe*, 2 June 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Vying_For_Influence_In_The_Balkans/2059788.html (Accessed 17 July 2022).

23 Bojana Barlovac, “Turkey Mediates Between Serbia’s Battling Muslims”, *Balkan Insight*, 17 October 2011, <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/10/17/turkey-to-reconcile-two-serbian-islamic-communities/> (Accessed 24 July 2022).

24 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Samim Akgönül, “Turkey: Forced Marriage or Marriage of Convenience with the Western Balkans?”, Florian Bieber and N. Tzifakis (eds.), *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, Basingstoke, Routledge, 2020, p. 230.

25 Ekrem Eddy Güzeldere, “Turkey’s Soft Power in the Balkans Reaching its Limits”, *Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy*, 1 July 2021, p. 4, <https://www.eliamap.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Policy-paper-75-Guzeldere-.pdf> (Accessed 24 July 2022).

26 Vuk Vuksanovic and Nikolaos Tzifakis, “Erdoğan Eyes an Opening in the Balkans”, *Middle East Institute*, 31 August 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/erdogan-eyes-opening-balkans> (Accessed 26 July 2022).

Ancient Ties or Pragmatic Interests?

While both Russia and Turkey are perceived as powers acting either on circumstances based on ancient history or on the basis of some special ties with the local nations, both countries are pragmatic in their policies. It is too facile to describe Russian foreign policy in the region, particularly its ties with Serbia through Slavic and Orthodox equivalence, with the alliance between Serbia and Russia being perceived as an immutable fact of history. However, this image is misleading and omits a very complex history. Throughout history, how close the two Slavic nations were always depended on the strategic environment of the given historical era, and the power structures in the two countries.²⁷

Indeed, Russian foreign policy in the region is not a continuation of Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union. Instead, Moscow's role in the region should be viewed in the modern, post-Cold War context.²⁸ Namely, in the 1990s, despite Russia's initial attempts to cooperate with the West and participate in international conflict resolution, Moscow perceived Western interventions in the region as indicators of a unipolar world, where the US did not treat Russia as a great power and where the US could unilaterally set the rules. The 1999 Kosovo War played a particularly powerful role in fomenting these Russian grievances.²⁹ NATO interventions in the region also augmented Moscow's anxieties about the alliance, which had already become apparent with NATO's interventions against the Bosnian Serbs in 1995.³⁰ The NATO intervention in Kosovo was even more influential on that front, as the NATO intervention took place the same year as the first tranche of NATO expansion took place, leading the Russians to think that NATO was not just approaching its borders but had also altered its operations, transforming from a collective defence organization into a battle group.³¹ On top of that, bitter Russian memories of the 1990s Balkans were augmented with what James Headley called "mirror factors", a tendency to make analogies between the fate experienced by the USSR and by former Yugoslavia, as well as that experienced by post-Soviet Russia and post-Yugoslav Serbia.³² The analogies between Chechnya and Kosovo played a powerful role in 1999, as Moscow was then engaged in the Second Chechen War.³³

27 Vuk Vuksanovic, "Serbs Are Not 'Little Russians'", *The American Interest*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/07/26/serbs-are-not-little-russians/> (Accessed 04 July 2022).

28 "Russia in the Balkans - Panel 1 (The Balkans in Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy)", *Russia in the Balkans Conference, London School of Economics and Political Science*, 13 March 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3QVJY3virc&t=2795s> (Accessed 04 July 2022).

29 Vuksanovic, "Serbs Are Not 'Little Russians'".

30 John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No 5, September/October 2014, p. 78.

31 Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No 3, May/June 2016, p. 33.

32 James Headley, *Russia and the Balkans: Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin 2008*, London, Hurst Publisher Ltd, 2008, p. 61-66.

33 Vuk Vuksanovic, "An Unlikely Partnership in Trouble: Serbia and Azerbaijan", *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, 19 August 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/unlikely-partnership-trouble-serbia-and-azerbaijan> (Accessed 06 July 2022).

Based on that, the current Russian foreign and security policy in the Western Balkans is not driven by pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox motives, but by sheer pragmatism and present-day interests. A case in point is certainly Russian ties with the Serbs, where Moscow is not willing to sacrifice very much for the Serbs, but sees its backing for the Serbs as a way to maintain some degree of presence in the Balkans and, by extension, regain the status of a European and global power that it believed was denied to Russia by the West in the 1990s, including in the Balkans.³⁴

In that same context, the Russian behavior in the region fits into the description of “a spoiler power”, a power bent on obstructing the designs of other powers, namely the EU and the US, in order to increase its leverage and have a bargaining chip with these players.³⁵ This behavior particularly came to the fore after the original Ukrainian crisis of 2014, when Russia saw the Balkans as a theatre where it could push back against the West to restrict the Western “meddling” in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.³⁶ During this period, Moscow started to perceive the Balkans as “Europe’s soft underbelly”, a place where it could instigate controlled crises, to leverage the West and divert its attention away from Ukraine.³⁷

Even in the case of Russian support to Serbia in the Kosovo dispute, we can hardly talk about sentimental ties but rather Moscow’s ability to turn the Kosovo precedent against the West. In almost every territorial dispute and conflict in the post-Soviet space since 2008, Russia would impose a territorial change upon its neighbors while invoking a Kosovo precedent both as a justification and as a way to deter the West from attractine criticism, by accusing it of hypocrisy. The same year as Kosovo declared independence in 2008, Russia, in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war, imposed the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁸ In 2014, the annexation of Crimea was justified by the precedent of Kosovo.³⁹ Deep into the period of the Ukraine War of 2022, Putin declared that pro-Russian republics in Donbas had the same right to independence as Kosovo.⁴⁰

The Serbian leadership is aware of Russian opportunism, and sometimes displays dissatisfaction with Russia, dispersing the notion of pan-Slavic harmony. In 2019, a video emerged of a Russian intelligence officer, stationed at the time in the Russian embassy in

34 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.430.

35 Nikola Burazer, “[EWB Interview] Bechev: Russia is Playing the “Spoiler” in Western Balkans”, *European Western Balkans*, 28 November 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/28/ewb-interview-bechev-russia-playing-spoiler-western-balkans/> (Accessed 04 July 2022).

36 Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Foray into the Balkans: Who Is Really to Blame?”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/10/russias-foray-balkans-really-blame/> (Accessed 27 July 2022).

37 Ivan Krastev, “The Balkans are the Soft Underbelly of Europe”, *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/2287ba66-8489-11e4-bae9-00144feabdc0> (Accessed 27 July 2022).

38 Michael Kofman, “The August War, Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War”, *War on the Rocks*, 17 August 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-august-war-ten-years-on-a-retrospective-on-the-russo-georgian-war/> (Accessed 08 July 2022).

39 Bojana Barlovac, “Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession”, *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/18/crimea-secession-just-like-kosovo-putin/> (Accessed 06 July 2022).

40 “Putin: Right to Recognise Donbas Republics Same as How Kosovo Got Recognition”, *NI*, 18 March 2022, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/putin-right-to-recognise-donbas-republics-same-as-how-kosovo-got-recognition/> (Accessed 08 July 2022).

Belgrade, bribing a retired officer of the Serbian military.⁴¹ In 2020, Serbia faced violent protests against the COVID-19 lockdown and against the ruling party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). The same pro-government tabloids that used to glorify Russia accused the “Russian deep state” of fomenting the unrest in Belgrade. This was done when Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić was trying to pivot toward the US during Trump’s presidency, and at the moment when he was seeing French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris. The Serbian leadership has no qualms about scapegoating Russia and inflating the Russian threat, when it believes it can make a better bargain with the West.⁴² In 2022, Serbian pro-government tabloids expressed dissatisfaction with Putin’s statement in which he justified the right of Donbas to separate from Ukraine, citing the precedent of Kosovo’s independence – again showing the self-interest underpinning the relationship.⁴³

The dilemma is similar in the case of Turkey, where there is also a tendency to link its current foreign policy in the Balkans with the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, and its special ties with the local Muslim communities. After being largely an outpost of the West during the Cold War, the independence of the Turkic states in post-Soviet Central Asia, and the Yugoslav wars, where Turkey backed the Bosniaks⁴⁴ and Kosovo Albanians, awakened the idea of Turkey as an independent power.⁴⁵ During the 1990s, Serbian fears of the reawakened Turkish factor were frequently described through the concept of the “Islamic Arc” or “the green transversal”, which referred to the string of territories inhabited by Balkan Muslims, including Turkey, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, the Muslim-populated Serbian province of Sandžak, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴⁶ The essential fear was that through “the green transversal”, Turkey would cut off Greece from its Balkan rear, but more importantly for Belgrade, it would terminate its alliances with Athens, by severing the land route from Serbia to Greece.⁴⁷

This logic became very pronounced when the concept of “neo-Ottomanism” arose. The concept “refers to the idea of Turkey becoming a major geopolitical player once again in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire — primarily the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus. In domestic politics, the term refers to the restoration of Ottoman political and cultural heritage in Turkish society.”⁴⁸ The term “neo-Ottomanism” is not exactly a new

41 “Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic Confirms Russian Spy Operation after Bribe Video”, *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, 21 December 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/serbias-president-aleksandar-vucic-confirms-russian-spy-operation-after-bribe-video/a-51359672> (Accessed 10 July 2022).

42 Vuk Vuksanovic, “Belgrade’s New Game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe”, *War on the Rocks*, 28 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/belgrades-new-game-scapegoating-russia-and-courting-europe/> (Accessed 10 July 2022).

43 Milica Stojanovic, “Russian Ambassador to Serbia Denies Change in Putin’s Kosovo Policy”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 April 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/29/russian-ambassador-to-serbia-denies-change-in-putins-kosovo-policy/> (Accessed 10 July 2022).

44 Didem Ekinici, “The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkish Parliamentary Debates (1992-1995): A Constructivist Approach”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 6, No 22, 2009, p. 37-60.

45 Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p. 393.

46 Vuk Vuksanovic, “How the Balkans Were Won: A Turkish Foreign Policy Success Story”, *The National Interest*, 17 October 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-the-balkans-were-won-turkish-foreign-policy-success-22771> (Accessed 17 July 2022); Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p. 386.

47 Ibid.

48 Vuksanovic, “The Long Fall of Turkey’s ‘Zero Problems’ Mastermind”.

concept, and it is certainly not the product of Erdoğan's era. The late Turgut Özal, Turkey's first post-Cold War president (1989-1993), also represented an earlier version of "neo-Ottomanism."⁴⁹ However, the idea of "neo-Ottomanism" in the Balkans came to the fore during the era of Ahmet Davutoğlu.

In 2011 Davutoğlu stated: "As a matter of fact, the Balkans had its golden age of peace during the Ottoman reign. This is a historical fact. Those who blame the Ottoman period for the region's economic backwardness and internecine fights are under the influence of historical prejudices and stereotypes."⁵⁰ However, even this policy had a foundation in pragmatic interests, as Turkey believed it had to court local Muslim communities to avoid being outplayed in the region by Russia and Greece, who would capitalize on pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox sentiments.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the statements with references to the Ottoman era continued to irritate Serbia. In 2013, during his visit to Prizren, Kosovo, Erdoğan, then Prime Minister, said: "Do not forget, Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey!"⁵² In response, the Serbians pulled back from Turkey's trilateral initiative on Bosnia.⁵³ This language had a detrimental impact on Ankara's regional initiatives that involved Belgrade. Namely, Serbia and the other local Christian nations frequently perceived Turkey as a biased mediator favoring Muslim communities.⁵⁴ This episode clearly demonstrated the limits of an approach based on identities and historical narratives, and how detrimental it could even be for Turkey's influence.

In a sense, Davutoğlu's departure also paved the way for a more pragmatic Erdoğan to take the helm of Ankara's Balkan policy, and this change brought dividends for Ankara. Even Serbian President Vučić, during this visit, clearly discounted historical motives in favour of pragmatism by referring to the famous Kosovo battle with the Ottomans in 1389. As Vučić underlined: "This is not 1389. Serbia and Turkey are friendly countries."⁵⁵ There were strong forces at play that propelled this upgrade in bilateral ties. Davutoğlu was gone; Turkey's more troublesome neighborhood in Syria and the Middle East diverted Ankara's attention away from the Balkans; Ankara's disputes with the West made it acceptable in the eyes of the nationalist groups in Serbia, thus lowering the domestic risks for the Serbian government, while Serbia got another partner to boost its policy of diplomatic balancing.⁵⁶ On top of that, Serbia was interested in potentially stronger economic ties, and the TurkStream gas pipeline project,

49 Dimitar Bechev, "A Rival or An Qwkward Partner? Turkey's Relationship with the West in the Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 22, No 1, 2022, p. 17.

50 Altin Raxhimi, "Davutoglu: 'I'm Not a Neo-Ottoman'", *Balkan Insight*, 26 April 2011, <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/04/26/davutoglu-i-m-not-a-neo-ottoman/> (Accessed 16 July 2022).

51 Güzeldere, "Turkey's Soft Power in the Balkans Reaching its Limits", p. 4.

52 Yavuz Baydar, "Erdogan: 'Kosovo Is Turkey'", *Al-Monitor*, 28 October 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/10/erdogan-kosovo-turkey.html> (Accessed 24 July 2022).

53 Ibid.

54 Vuksanovic, "How the Balkans Were Won".

55 Dimitar Bechev, "Erdogan in the Balkans: A Neo-Ottoman Quest?", *Al Jazeera*, 11 October 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/10/11/erdogan-in-the-balkans-a-neo-ottoman-quest> (Accessed 17 July 2022).

56 Ibid.

and Turkey was important for its control over the migration flows.⁵⁷ Since 2019, Serbia has become Turkey's biggest trading partner in the Western Balkans, ahead of Turkey's traditional allies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania, showing Ankara's pragmatism.⁵⁸

Turkey also profited. One can say that the Balkans has been one place where Turkish foreign policy has been a success, if one compares it to the Middle East, East Mediterranean and the Caucasus, where it is always plagued by security risks and geopolitical conflicts, destroying the old idea of "zero problems with the neighbors."⁵⁹ Since 2018, Serbia has been ready to arrest and, in some cases, deport to Turkey supporters of the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, and members of the Kurdish organizations wanted by the Turkish government.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, despite the warm rhetoric, Ankara's hunt for the Gulenists complicated its ties with Tirana and Priština, overlapping with an upswing in Ankara's ties with Belgrade.⁶¹

Indeed, Erdoğan capitalized on transitioning away from being a champion for any of the local ethnic or religious groups, and has instead increased his country's diplomatic clout by acting as a broker between ethnic groups.⁶² In doing so, Turkey again shows pragmatism, as it does not sever ties with Serbia, even when Serbia pursues policies that are displeasing to Ankara, like cooperating with Turkey's rivals, such as Armenia, Republic of Cyprus and the United Arab Emirates.⁶³ Boosting ties with Serbia has provided Turkey's regional policy with a degree of strategic flexibility it did not have before. These ties also show the limitations of policies based on grand historical and identity narratives.

Who's a Status Quo Power and Who's a Revisionist Power?

While the two countries have noted similarities, there is a major difference. As paradoxical as it may sound, Russia is a 'status quo' power, given that it wants to preserve the current state of affairs. One of unresolved disputes, and where Serbia and the Balkans are left outside the Western alliances. As opposed to that, Turkey can be called a 'revisionist' power, to the extent that it wants to alter the regional order by supporting its integration into Western bodies. Moscow tries to preserve the dysfunctional status quo, through its role as a spoiler power. Russia's spoiler power techniques are frequently present in how Moscow uses its UN Security Council veto to back the Serbian case in regional disputes. A case in point is when in 2015, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that qualified the Srebrenica massacre committed during the Bosnian war (1992-1995) as genocide.⁶⁴

57 Maja Zivanovic, "Turkish President Erdogan to Visit Serbia", *Balkan Insight*, 9 August 2017, <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/08/09/turkish-president-erdogan-to-visit-serbia-08-08-2017/> (Accessed 24 July 2022).

58 Güzeldere, "Turkey's Soft Power in the Balkans Reaching its Limits", p. 7.

59 Vuksanovic, "How the Balkans Were Won".

60 Sasa Dragojlo and Hamdi Fırat Büyük, "Serbia Jailing Kurdish Politician 'Unlawfully', Rights Groups Say", *Balkan Insight*, 1 July 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/01/serbia-jailing-kurdish-politician-unlawfully-rights-groups-say/> (Accessed 24 July 2022).

61 Vuksanovic and Tzifakis, "Erdoğan Eyes an Opening in the Balkans".

62 Vuk Vuksanovic, "Turkey's Pragmatic Policy in the Balkans has its Limits", *Balkan Insight*, 11 November 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/11/turkeys-pragmatic-policy-in-the-balkans-has-its-limits/> (Accessed 27 July 2022).

63 Ibid.

64 "Russia Vetoes UN Move to Call Srebrenica 'Genocide'", *BBC*, 8 July 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33445772> (Accessed 10 July 2022).

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the Kosovo dispute, within which Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, backs the Serbian stance. By opposing Kosovo's independence and the Western countries that have recognized it, Russia remains a player in the region that can trade its acquiescence in the regional disputes for something else. If not, Moscow still has the satisfaction of frustrating the West, and using the Kosovo dispute in territorial disputes and conflicts in the post-Soviet space. This also causes occasional frustrations in Serbo-Russian ties. While Serbia needs Russia in order to secure a settlement of the Kosovo dispute, which the Serbian leadership hopes they can sell domestically, Russia perceives the Kosovo dispute as the cornerstone of its influence in the region.

Consequently, Russia opposes any attempt to resolve this dispute in a way that excludes Russia, and denies it an opportunity to ask for something in return in great power bargaining with the US.⁶⁵ This dilemma came to the fore in 2019 and 2020, when the Serbian leadership tried to resolve the Kosovo dispute with the US during the time of the Trump administration. However, the Serbian leadership fears the prospect of Russia sabotaging any hypothetical settlement on Kosovo, as that would be interpreted among Russophile voters as Russia being more attentive to the Serbian national interest than the Serbian government, causing the domestic downfall of the Serbian leaders.⁶⁶ This is one of the reasons why the Serbian leadership was so enthusiastic about accusing Russia through its media machinery back in 2020 of organizing anti-lockdown protests in Belgrade.⁶⁷

Serbia also does not want to sacrifice the interest felt in it by the Russians, implying the limitations of the spoiler tactics approach. A case in point is the Humanitarian Centre in Niš, as Belgrade denies Moscow's request for diplomatic status to the Russian personnel at the center, the Serbian government being aware that this act would shatter its balancing act between Russia and the West.⁶⁸ Serbia, since 2020 at least, has replaced Russia with China as its primary partner in the East.⁶⁹ The war in Ukraine, and the heat that Serbian ties with Russia potentially attracts from the West, are propelling Belgrade to nourish its relationship with Beijing even more.⁷⁰

However, Serbia remains vulnerable to Russian spoiler techniques, which would cement the status quo of keeping Serbia outside the Western camp. Political dependence related to the Kosovo dispute remains in play, but other techniques can also be used. Serbia is afraid of joining Western sanctions against Russia because of Russia's domestic popularity, which Moscow can use against the government in Belgrade.⁷¹ A clear case in point is a large pro-

65 Maxim Samorukov, "Escaping the Kremlin's Embrace: Why Serbia Has Tired of Russian Support", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 January 2019, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/78173> (Accessed 12 July 2022).

66 Ibid.

67 Vuksanovic, "Belgrade's New Game".

68 Emily Sherwin, "Serbia Balances between Russia and the West", *Deutsche Welle*, 21 December 2017. <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-balances-between-russia-and-the-west/a-41854351>. (Accessed 11 July 2022).

69 Vuk Vuksanovic, "Belgrade is Embracing China as it Ditches its Russian Alliance", *Reaction*, 10 July 2020, <https://reaction.life/belgrade-is-embracing-china-as-it-ditches-its-russian-alliance/> (Accessed 11 July 2022).

70 Vuk Vuksanovic, "With All Eyes on Russia, Serbia Nourishes Ties With China", *The Diplomat*, 21 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/with-all-eyes-on-russia-serbia-nourishes-ties-with-china/> (Accessed 11 July 2022).

71 Una Hajdari, "Pandering to Putin Comes Back to Bite Serbia's Vučić", *Politico*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-russia-serbia-aleksandar-vucic/> (Accessed 12 July 2022).

Russian gathering in Belgrade in March 2022, supporting Russia and its military operation in Ukraine.⁷² It is unknown who organized the gathering, but it does show the domestic sensitivity and vulnerability of Serbian leadership to the Russian factor. Energy blackmail is also on the cards, as made evident by the late May 2022 agreements, when Serbia, in opposition to the EU, negotiated a beneficial gas price with Russia.⁷³ The war in Ukraine and the deterioration of ties between Russia and the West will certainly impede Russia's ability to act as a spoiler in Serbia and the wider Balkans. However, Russia will use every opportunity to perpetuate the status quo in the region, where Serbia and its neighbors are left outside the Western alliances, always creating potential problems for the Western powers in the form of semi-functional governance and unresolved disputes.

Turkey is different from Russia, which is qualified as an external power. Turkey can even be qualified as a Balkan country, with a small part of its territory in that region. The Balkans might be important for Ankara in terms of its geopolitical ambitions, but it is also viewed as important to have a defence perimeter in the European rear that is the Balkans.⁷⁴ In that context, integrating the Balkans into the Western groupings can help Turkey establish a security zone in its European rear. It should still be underlined that this is not a totally one-sided picture, as Turkey is not fully aligned with the Western camp.

However, unlike Russia, Turkey can categorize its actions in the region through the lenses of a Western, Euroatlantic approach. Turkey continues to express support for Serbia's EU path. Most recently, during his June 2020 visit to Serbia, where he met Serbian President Vučić, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Foreign Minister Nikola Selaković, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu expressed support for Serbia's EU membership, while underscoring Belgrade's vital role in preserving regional stability.⁷⁵ For Turkey, having Serbia and the rest of the region in the EU would be beneficial, as it would increase the number of friendly or non-hostile EU member states.⁷⁶ As Dimitar Bechev also pointed out, Turkey does not oppose EU enlargement in rhetoric or substance, and Turkey would even profit from new EU members, since Ankara is already part of the Customs Union with the EU.⁷⁷

It should not be forgotten that while Turkey is not a member of the EU, it is a member of NATO and a major military force within the alliance. In NATO's peacekeeping force in Kosovo, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), Turkey contributes 350 soldiers out of the total number of 3,762 troops.⁷⁸ Turkey also contributes to the EU's missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

72 "Thousands of Serbs March in Support of Russia in Belgrade", *Euractiv*, 5 March 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/thousands-of-serbs-march-in-support-of-russia-in-belgrade/> (Accessed 12 July 2022).

73 "Serbia Secures Gas Deal with Putin, as West Boycotts Russia", *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/29/serbia-ignores-eu-sanctions-secures-gas-deal-with-putin> (Accessed 12 July 2022).

74 Vuksanovic, "How the Balkans Were Won".

75 "Turkey Backs Serbia's EU Path", *Euractiv*, 17 June 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/turkey-backs-serbias-eu-path/ (Accessed 17 July 2022).

76 Güzeldere, "Turkey's Soft Power in the Balkans Reaching its Limits", p. 11.

77 Dimitar Bechev, "Turkey's Policy in the Balkans - Continuity and Change in the Erdoğan Era", *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, No 5, 2020, p. 11.

78 "Contributing Nations", *Kosovo Force*, 2022, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/welcome-to-kfor/contributing-nations> (Accessed 22 May 2023).

including both EUFOR ALTHEA and the European Union Police Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina (EUPM), as well as to the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).⁷⁹ Serbia is not interested in joining NATO, but within NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), it is implementing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest degree of cooperation a non-member can have with the alliance.⁸⁰

Turkey can potentially try to boost its security ties within that framework, with Belgrade and the region. Realizing the limitations of soft power, Turkey is already working on strengthening military and security ties, by training local troops, exporting products of its growing arms industry, and through technology transfers (e.g. Bayraktar drones), all to generate political dependency.⁸¹ Serbia is also part of this package, as the two countries signed an agreement on defence cooperation during Erdoğan's visit to Serbia in 2019.⁸² Serbia's Vučić, in both 2020 and 2022, expressed interest in purchasing Bayraktar drones for the Serbian military, after witnessing their performance in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Ukrainian conflict, with Erdoğan allegedly promising them to his Serbian counterpart.⁸³ The fact that the Turkish arms industry is in line with NATO standards also helps Turkey.⁸⁴ As the war in Ukraine is expected to create some convergence between Turkey and the West on regional security matters,⁸⁵ Ankara can even utilize its ties with Belgrade to promote the idea of the Balkans being anchored in the Western security architecture. Turkey can comfortably continue with its rhetoric and policy of supporting the region's integration into Western institutions, as long as Ankara's core interests are not at stake. These interests may imply privileged ties with local Muslim communities, an uninterrupted hunt for Gullenists, and deal-making with Belgrade. The fact that Turkey has ties with the Euroatlantic community, but is not fully part of the West, gives it good clout for its more independent policies.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans region is one of the many regions where Russia and Turkey have increased their activities in recent years. Serbia has provided a suitable case study example, to identify two major similarities between Russia and Turkey in the Western Balkans, and one major difference.

79 "Turkey's International Security Initiatives and Contributions to NATO and EU Operations", *Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/iv_-european-security-and-defence-identity_policy-_esdi_p_.en.mfa (Accessed 25 July 2022).

80 "Serbia Adopts New IPAP with NATO", *European Western Balkans*, 8 November 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/11/08/serbia-adopts-new-ipap-with-nato/> (Accessed 25 July 2022).

81 Hamdi Fırat Büyük et al., "With Arms Deals and Donations, Turkey Steps up Balkan Influence", *Balkan Insight*, 11 December 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/11/with-arms-deals-and-donations-turkey-steps-up-balkan-influence/> (Accessed 25 July 2022).

82 Ibid.

83 "Erdoğan Promised Serbia Turkish Bayraktar TB2 Drones: Vucic", *Daily Sabah*, 10 April 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/erdogan-promised-serbia-turkish-bayraktar-tb2-drones-vucic> (Accessed 25 July 2022).

84 Büyük et al., "With Arms Deals and Donations, Turkey Steps up Balkan Influence".

85 Dimitar Bechev, "Russia, Turkey and the Spectre of Regional Instability", *Al Sharq Strategic Research*, 13 April 2022, p. 6, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/04/13/russia-regional-instability/> (Accessed 25 July 2022).

The first similarity is that Russia and Turkey ante up on their Balkan policy based on the same permissive environment, which has not only allowed them to become more active in the Balkans but also gives them leeway to operate in the region, as we speak. This permissive environment relates to the regional power vacuum that kicked off in 2008 with the global financial crisis, diverting the attention of the West, particularly the EU, away from the region. In that environment, Russia and Turkey feel more emboldened to step up and Serbia feels to need to hedge its bets and diversify alliances, by engaging both Russia and Turkey.

The second similarity is that even though both Russia and Turkey are affiliated popularly with historical and ideological motives that are supposed to explain their behavior in the Western Balkans, in truth the two powers are guided by sheer pragmatism. Serbia turned out to be a strong case for this argument, as it shows that Serbia approaches these two countries equally from the standpoint of strategic pragmatism.

However, there is a very major difference. The difference is a paradoxical one. Namely, Russia is qualified as a status quo power because it wants to preserve the current state of affairs in the region. A state of affairs where Serbia and the rest of the Western Balkans are left outside the Western groupings, plagued by unresolved disputes, poor governance and dysfunctional politics, all to the detriment of the Western powers. As opposed to that, Turkey is a revisionist power, to the extent that it wants to change the regional order, as it has no objection to Serbia and the region becoming integrated into the Western organisations.

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