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NATO IN THE BALKANS AFTER UKRAINE CRISIS

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Abstract

The annexation of Crimea from Russia was completely surprise for NATO. Although increasingly aggressive rhetoric coming from Moscow no one has believed that Russia was ready to cross the line and challenge existing European security system. Balkan states, even NATO and EU members are extremely susceptible to destabilization by political and economic pressure, cyber attack and information propaganda, tactics which Russia employed lately to achieve its goals. In this entirely new security situation NATO should rethink its presence in the Balkans not so much militarily but politically in order to counter Russian attempt to regain its influence in the region.

Keywords: NATO, Russia, Balkans, security policy

Twenty five years after the end of the Cold war the existing European security system is almost dead or at least needs serious overhaul. With annexation of Crimea and support it gives to separatist in east Ukraine Russia demonstrates that is no longer ready to adhere to basic principle in security policy and therefore can't be seen anymore as strategic partner to NATO. In this new reality the Alliance should start rethinking not only what military measures to take to counter Russian aggressive action, but also how to prevent Moscow attempts to regain its influence in eastern member states and provoking instability along their borders.

Baltic States look more vulnerable than Balkans to Russian intimidations and provocations at first glance. Common in many places unmarked border and large Russian minority are great incentives for president Putin to test NATO readiness to react, but it is unlikely to do so. This is too dangerous and also as a consequence will convince western allies to relocate significant military assets close to the Russian border. Taking this into account Moscow prefers to use psychological pressure like aggressive rhetoric and showing

military power¹ but not so much to provoke NATO to act resolutely. In order to reassure Baltic States and prevent Russia from more risky behavior Alliance increases its presence in the region and NATO troops constantly participate in exercises on a rotating basis. At the moment this is enough to counter Russian action, but these measures are more tactical answer to Moscow policy than long term strategy.

It is obvious that president Putin won't change Russian policy soon and probably it will last as long as he is in power. This means that NATO has to find sustainable solution because current approach with constant rotation cost too much and is politically exhaustive to be kept for a long time. Inevitably the Alliance will have to relocate military assets, as air surveillance, defense and Special Forces capabilities, in Baltic countries, but the question is how much and how to do it without to provoke heavily militarization of the western Russia. From political point of view the main task is how to counter Kremlin's propaganda towards ethnic Russian in Baltic States. Here NATO can't do much except to formulate clear strategy how to deal with president Putin's policy and to avoid any disagreement between member states that can split Alliance or hinder decision – making process.

In the Balkans situation is different. There is no direct military threat from Russia but the region is much more vulnerable to political and economic pressure than Baltics. Here Moscow has very subtle and refine leverages to influence decision – making process or provoking internal and regional instability². There are two main reasons for that. The first one is weak and ineffective public institutions even in NATO member states, like Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and Greece. Low quality of governance, pervasive corruption, lack of transparency and independent media creates perfect environment to Russia to influence behind the scene important domestic and foreign policy decisions or provoking instability using financial and economic instruments and political allies³. In all Balkan countries Russia demonstrates support (there is suspicion that support is not only diplomatic, but financial) for political parties and public persons that are favorable or at least are not critical to its policy, especially about Crimea and Ukraine. The aim of all these efforts and particular to Balkan's NATO member states is to support change in the Alliance policy in terms of accepting

¹ R. Milne, S. Jones, K. Hille, Russian air incursions rattle Baltic states, *Financial Times*, September 24, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9d016276-43c3-11e4-baa7-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3vuNa224P>

² Conference report, *Russia in the Balkans*, London School of Economics, 13 March 2015, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/europeanInstitute/research/LSEE/Events/2014-2015/Russia-in-the-Balkans/merged-document.pdf>

³ I. Traynor, S. Walker, Russian resurgence: how the Kremlin is making its presence felt across Europe, *The Guardian*, 16 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/russian-resurgence-how-the-kremlin-is-making-its-presence-felt-across-europe>

existing status quo and normalization of relations between NATO and Russia. At the same time Moscow uses psychological pressure threatening these countries with gas supply problems or that they will be targets to Russian armed forces if agree to host any NATO military assets. All this is backed by massive information propaganda and suggestions that political and economic problems of the state are consequence of NATO and EU membership. Third direction of Kremlin`s policy is trying to stir up tensions between NATO allies in the region. President Putin decision to cancel South stream gas pipeline project and to replace it with Turkish stream⁴ that circumvent Bulgaria is clear example of this policy.

Russia is particularly interested by the countries in the western Balkans that are still not members of EU and NATO. Moscow is trying to attract them in its sphere of influence or at least to stop their further integration in western organization. The arsenal includes mostly financial and economic instruments like gas price discounts, low interest loans, investments, access to Russian market and more rarely arm sales⁵. This approach is very clear when it comes to relations with Serbia. Geographic location and close historical ties put Belgrade at the center of Russian policy to regain its influence in the Balkans. Kremlin`s actions and propaganda are facilitated by positive public opinion towards Russia. For historical, religious and cultural reasons majority of population not only in Serbia, but in most Balkan states including in NATO member don`t perceive Russian policy in Crimea and east Ukraine as a direct threat to peace or violation of European security system norms. That is employed by Moscow to put maximum pressure on pro-western orientated governments in the region and to erode public support to them.

The second reason for the greater vulnerability of the Balkans is problems emanated from disintegration of Yugoslavia. Negative sentiments are still strong and there are “hot spots” that can easily inflame nationalistic feelings. All this unresolved issues and existing tensions within and between counties in the region can be exploited by Russia at any moment creating instability and hampering their efforts for NATO and EU membership.

In the last twenty five years Russia has seen significant shrinking of its influence in the Balkans. Despite that Moscow reluctantly cooperated with NATO but doesn`t accept this new status quo and now is eager to reverse it to some degree. On the other hand involvement in the conflicts in the Western Balkans and presence here after that was by and large reason d`être for Alliance in the first decade since the end of the Cold war. After 2001 region lost its

⁴ D. Korsunskaya, Putin drops South Stream gas pipeline to EU, courts Turkey, *Reuters*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-gas-gazprom-pipeline-idUSKCN0JF30A20141202>

⁵ Russia invests 5 milliard euro in Serbia, <http://www.russia.hr/en/news-on-russia/hrvatski-rusija-ulaze-5-milijardi-eura-u-srbiju/>

significance but NATO presence here is still indispensable for upholding stability, especially in times of increased geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West. It is not necessary this presence to be large and massive but the Alliance should be ready to react quickly and decisively at any moment if there is a crisis. Provocations at football game in 2014 between Serbia and Albania⁶ and disastrous counter terrorist operation in Macedonia in May 2015⁷ showed that small incidents can easily deteriorate and threaten stability in the region.

Because vulnerability of the Balkans is not coming from Russian military actions measures that NATO can take beyond purely defensive even to its own member states are limited. In the light of expansion and modernization of Russian Black sea fleet⁸ the Alliance has to strengthen its air surveillance and anti-submarine capabilities and to enhance joint exercises with Bulgarian and Romanian armed forces. At the same time NATO has to continue to press the two countries to increase defense budgets in order to modernize their military capabilities. That will not only improve interoperability with allied armed forces, but will cut Bulgaria and Romania dependence from Russian spare parts and services that they need for old soviet weapons and equipment.

Domain where NATO can make great contribution is cyber security. All Balkan states are not adequately prepared to deal with cyber-attacks, no matter if they come from state or non-state actors. Supporting them to protect sensitive data and important networks from unauthorized access will make them more stable and increase resilience capacity of the states. Helping Balkan states to develop procedures, emergency measures and protection plans for the critical infrastructure is another step in direction to make them less vulnerable to potential hidden hostile action.

NATO can't do much when it comes to political measures because its instruments are very limited. Nevertheless it can and should cooperate much more closely with EU to keep the pressure on the governments to implement necessary reforms that will increase quality of governance and make public institution more stable, transparent and effective. From national security point of view NATO can and has to urge Balkan states to double their efforts to decrease energy dependence from Russia. The region is in the worst position than any other part of Europe and Moscow uses that for exerting political, diplomatic and economic pressure

⁶ N. Ames, S. Ibrulj, Serbia v Albania abandoned after players and fans brawl on pitch, *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/oct/14/serbia-albania-euro-2016-flag-halted>

⁷ M. Robinson, F. Bytyci, Gun battle in ethnic Albanian region deepens Macedonian crisis, *Reuters*, May 10, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-police-idUSKBN0NU06X20150510>

⁸ J. Bender, Russia is now projecting serious power in the Black Sea, *Business Insider*, April 13, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/russia-projects-power-with-black-sea-fleet-2015-4>

over Balkan states. The Alliance has to focus again on the region and to reinvigorate cooperation on bilateral and multilateral base with all Balkan states. The most strong and effective political measure in NATO arsenal remain membership invitation and Alliance has to use it. Inviting countries that are ready to join Alliance and fulfill accretion criteria is a powerful message and incentive for developing positive security environment in the Balkans. This will show that open door policy is not an empty rhetoric and no one outside the organization has veto power on important decisions.