

# Russia, the Western Balkans, and the Question of Status

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This paper reassesses Russia's policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans in terms of its pursuit of status. The region has been historically significant to Russia. It saw centuries of interaction between rulers in Moscow (or St. Petersburg) with the local Orthodox Slavs and other great powers of the day. Following the end of the Cold War, the Russian state emerged as a very different entity from imperial Russia or the Soviet Union. In the Western Balkans, it found a stage for not just rekindling centuries-long ties but also rebuilding its image as a great power in cooperation and, as this paper shows, increasing competition with primarily the West. However, as this research attests by referring to the Larson–Shevchenko framework of the Social Identity Theory (SIT), status must be conferred through a voluntary recognition by other great powers, which recognize status-aspirant's actions as non-threatening to their standing and as having a positive value. So far, Russia's Balkan policies have primarily been seen negatively as either promoting retrograde ideology or outright spoiler behavior.

**Keywords:** *Russia; Balkans; status; great power*

## Introduction

Russia's presence and increased influence in the Balkans is hardly an anomaly. Dimitar Bechev noted, "Russia is not returning to the Balkans because it never left."<sup>1</sup> Historically, Russia has a complex, centuries-long relationship with the Western Balkan nations. For instance, during the nineteenth century, Russia supported the Balkan Christians living under Ottoman rule. However, these relations were also subject to Russia's dealings with other great European powers and its membership in the so-called Concert of Europe.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Balkan states were willing to use Russia's assistance to further their ambitions, which sometimes contradicted Russia's interests.<sup>3</sup> The end of the Cold War and the ensuing crisis in the Balkans allowed Russia to engage the region again, advance its international standing and reassess relations with the West.<sup>4</sup> Just as in previous periods, Russia's regional policy should be regarded within the context of other developments and relations between big powers. Post-Soviet Russia was very different from the Soviet Union or Imperial Russia. Its leaders were aware of the country's relative decline and diminishing material capabilities, which made its ability to continuously keep up with its main referential peers (especially the West) hard to attain.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the question of status became one of the main obsessions of the new Russian state.

This paper positions Russia's Balkan policy in terms of its push to reaffirm its status as a great power. Prominent scholars like Deborah Larson, Alexei Shevchenko, Andrej Krickovic, Zhang Chang, and Yuval Weber—to mention only a few—have meticulously studied Russia's pursuit of status.<sup>6</sup> The picture that emerges is a state seeking affirmation and restoration of its previously prominent standing among the great powers. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia had been pursuing some form of political equality with the United States and has sought Washington's appreciation, which it needed for, among other things, domestic legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Moscow was eager to affirm its status for identity-related reasons and practical purposes. As a declining great power with reduced means, high status could help it attain objectives its material capabilities have struggled to support.<sup>8</sup> Russia turned to risky status-managing strategies (namely, social competition in the form of intervention in third countries, e.g., Syria) due to the realization that the country's decline was inevitable unless it dramatically reemphasized its importance.<sup>9</sup> As an arena of interaction between big powers, the Western Balkans have a special place in Russia's foreign policy, given traditional relationships with local Slavic and Orthodox peoples.

This paper shows how Russia's regional policy embraced various status-managing strategies. Here I use the Larson–Shevchenko Social Identity Theory (SIT) framework.<sup>10</sup> The two scholars identified three identity-management strategies that Russia uses to address its status concerns: social mobility, social creativity, and social competition.<sup>11</sup> As I argue below, while Russia opted for social mobility in the Balkans during the 1990s,<sup>12</sup> it gradually turned to social creativity and social competition. Russia's regional social creativity is mainly seen through its patronage of conservatism, Orthodoxy, the links with the region's Slavs, and the promotion of Russia-friendly narratives. The paper looks at the role played by Russia-sponsored institutes.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, social competition also became Moscow's regional strategy (and in a more open way after 2014), given the growing perception of the regional order's illegitimacy, unfairness, and changeability.<sup>14</sup> In particular, this paper examines selected cases of Russia's willingness to challenge the status quo, prevent other great powers from obtaining their objectives, or even spoil collective regional stability efforts<sup>15</sup> in places like Montenegro and Bosnia.

The paper consists of three parts: first, I outline the fundamental tenets of SIT developed by Larson and Shevchenko. Next, I showcase how Russia pursues social creativity and social competition by looking at examples in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia. In the concluding section, I assess the relative success of these strategies in Moscow's quest for status.

## **Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory**

The Larson–Shevchenko SIT framework is a popular tool for studying status-related issues.<sup>16</sup> Leading international relations (IR) paradigms such as Neorealism

emphasize that great powers compete for relative power rather than status,<sup>17</sup> which matters only in the absence of extreme power asymmetries among states.<sup>18</sup> However, Neorealism cannot account for why the Soviet Union, which reached near-equality in terms of military power with the United States, never received America's recognition.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, SIT shows how weakened great powers like Russia rely on their status at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to attain objectives that their diminished material means cannot provide (something that Russia did repeatedly during the 1990s Yugoslav conflicts).<sup>20</sup> Significantly, SIT increases our understanding of states' assertive behavior, which can result not just from increased material (namely, military) capabilities but also from the perception that the existing status hierarchy is illegitimate.<sup>21</sup> Also, structural explanations do not explain variations in status-seeking behavior for states that operate under the same structural conditions.<sup>22</sup> The different Russian and Chinese approaches to managing their status in the post-Cold War period are examples of this.<sup>23</sup>

Status is about a rank in a "status community."<sup>24</sup> It is intersubjective because it is based on a belief by others<sup>25</sup> and must be given by voluntary deference.<sup>26</sup> Perception is thus crucial. States seek a positive and distinctive identity and join groups (namely, high-status clubs) that are seen favorably.<sup>27</sup> This requires them to meet the standards and recognition set by the group's members. However, the criteria for great-power status gradually change.<sup>28</sup> In the late twentieth century, the standards for great-power status were contingent on good governance, human rights, and citizens' well-being.<sup>29</sup> Russia, on the other hand, underperformed on these criteria<sup>30</sup> and emphasized another criterion—namely, traditional Westphalian sovereignty. Importantly, the status seeker's actions must not be perceived as illegitimate, destabilizing, or threatening.<sup>31</sup> Hence, Russia's aggression against Ukraine violated international law and damaged its quest for recognition. Apart from widespread condemnation, higher status-holders expelled Russia from several exclusive status clubs such as the UN Human Rights Council and the Council of Europe.<sup>32</sup>

According to SIT, states adopt identity-management strategies to address their status deficiency.<sup>33</sup> There are three options: social mobility, social creativity, and social competition.<sup>34</sup> The choice of strategy is related to the openness of the elite group's boundaries to new members and the legitimacy of the status hierarchy.<sup>35</sup> Social mobility is regarded as unsuitable for great powers that seek a boost to their status. It places a declining great power in an unappealing situation of being lectured by others and prevents it from attaining a distinct identity.<sup>36</sup> Social mobility is based on voluntary adoption of the more advanced state's norms and institutions.<sup>37</sup> Russia pursued this strategy during the 1990s but abandoned it. It felt it would have awarded it a lesser role than its leaders believed Russia deserved.<sup>38</sup> Despite Russia's frequent displeasure at Western actions against Russia's declared Yugoslav allies—such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of the Bosnian Serb positions in 1994–1995<sup>39</sup>—Moscow was included in several important status-affirming groups that focused on the Balkan wars. It became a member of the informal International

Contact Group for Bosnia, a “kind of contemporary ‘concert of powers’ in which Russia . . . enjoyed, if not equal status, at least the status of a privileged partner of the United States.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Russia was essentially using Yugoslavia to “stake its vision of the post-Cold War order,” which pictured “a consortium of powers” like the old Concert of Europe.<sup>41</sup> However, the honeymoon phase with the West was short-lived. Russia resented NATO’s role as a security guarantor and was particularly unhappy about the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, Moscow turned to social creativity and social competition,<sup>43</sup> sometimes using them in tandem, as in Libya.<sup>44</sup> Social creativity relies on gaining recognition from the higher-status club in an entirely new dimension by reframing a negative trait.<sup>45</sup> Notably, the status aspirant does not seek to openly challenge the existing hierarchy (which it recognizes) or outcompete the high-status holders.<sup>46</sup> Instead, it wants to gain recognition by excelling in a different ranking system.<sup>47</sup> Larson and Shevchenko show how status-seekers can use this strategy to obtain recognition “on criteria other than those conventionally associated with being a great power (military capabilities or economic weight) such as regional leadership, diplomatic influence, economic growth rate, cultural achievements, or norm entrepreneurship.”<sup>48</sup> Elites that promote these values emphasize how their cultural and often conservative norms are superior to those practiced by other states.<sup>49</sup> In recent years, Russia’s social creativity took the shape of defense, reframing, and promoting certain norms and practices that are sometimes seen negatively: moral conservatism, sovereignty, or even illiberal values.<sup>50</sup> This is done, in part, through the active promotion of cultural, language, and other institutes abroad—including in the Balkans.<sup>51</sup> Hence, Russia’s social creativity, which includes the promotion of conservatism, serves its foreign policy.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, status-seekers also use social competition if the existing status hierarchy (namely, position of a higher status group) is seen as illegitimate (unfair) and unstable.<sup>53</sup> The status-aspirant seeks to equal or outdo the status-holder in the domain on which its superior status rests.<sup>54</sup> This can take the shape of arms races, geopolitical rivalries, competition for client states, intervention against weak states, preventing others from attaining their objectives, or even spoiler behavior by blocking collective stability efforts.<sup>55</sup> For instance, in 2021, Moscow strongly opposed the appointment of a new High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina without the UN Security Council’s approval and continued to refuse to recognize his authority.<sup>56</sup> An extreme example of social competition is Russia’s policy toward Ukraine since 2014, including the annexation of Crimea, support for Donbas separatists, and, more recently, the invasion of that country. Moreover, it is essential to emphasize the perception of the illegitimacy of the existing hierarchy, which will lead the status-aspirant to call out “unfair” (“or double-standard”) actions by higher-status holders.<sup>57</sup> This is visible in Russia’s references to Western policy in the former Yugoslavia, especially following Kosovo’s independence, which President Putin described as a “terrible precedent” against the fundamental principles of the international system.<sup>58</sup>

It should be said that these strategies can be hard to distinguish. Larson admits that states may sometimes pursue social competition by emulating the military innovations of rivals. However, here, unlike with social mobility, emulation is supposed to supplant rather than win recognition from high-status holders.<sup>59</sup> Also, social competition is an exclusively “zero-sum” game.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, social creativity, while not confrontational, might lead to conflict if the status-seeker believes its efforts are unrecognized.<sup>61</sup> In this work, I show how Russia’s social creativity efforts do not gain the positive recognition Russia seeks and lead to more combative actions.

Moreover, it is important to stress that status-seekers usually choose more than one strategy,<sup>62</sup> of which one may predominate. For instance, led by liberal reformers like Andrei Kozyrev, Russia pursued social mobility in the early 1990s by seeking integration into the Western status clubs like G7, GATT, and IMF.<sup>63</sup> When Primakov replaced Kozyrev in the foreign ministry, Russia turned to social competition, trying to balance U.S. dominance by advocating multipolarity.<sup>64</sup> However, it did not abandon integration into the West and sought it on its own terms.<sup>65</sup> Later, Putin started a variant of social mobility by seeking cooperation with the United States in the global war against terrorism and wanting to make Russia a reliable exporter of hydrocarbons.<sup>66</sup> However, following the 2014 Ukraine crisis, a final turn to social competition occurred. Hence, there was also a visible change in status-seeking policy in the Balkans after 2014 and a move to more confrontation and spoiler behavior in Montenegro and Bosnia.

## **Social Creativity Tools: Russia-Affiliated Institutes and Media**

As indicated, social creativity is a strategy that centers on reframing a characteristic perceived negatively or attaining superiority in a new dimension of comparison.<sup>67</sup> Part of Russia’s strategy and appeal among the Orthodox Slavs in the Balkans is its ability to present itself as an alternative to the West and harness “shared history, religious bonds, cultural and linguistic affinities with the Southern Slavs, human contacts, emotions, and fears.”<sup>68</sup> Starting from his third term, Mr. Putin embraced conservatism as a defensive status quo strategy for ensuring Russia’s continued national development and domestic stability.<sup>69</sup> As part of its social creativity, Russia would try to redefine attributes that some view negatively: moral conservatism, sovereignism, or even illiberal values.<sup>70</sup> In particular, conservatism is supposed to position Russia as a “savior of traditional family values,”<sup>71</sup> which elevated Mr. Putin to the status of a global conservative icon.<sup>72</sup> He famously criticized Western societies for abandoning their roots “including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western [civilization].”<sup>73</sup>

According to Andrei Tsygankov, Russia’s conservative turn “[serves] foreign policy objectives.”<sup>74</sup> The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept recognized soft power as a “comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives.”<sup>75</sup> In embracing

Orthodoxy and conservatism, post-Soviet Russia deliberately focused on the Russian speakers and those generally interested in Russia.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, according to Marlène Laruelle, Russia relies on “micro-targeting” to disseminate its messages among selected groups it has identified as predisposed to a positive view of Russia’s role and policies.<sup>77</sup> It wants to offer an ideological alternative to the West, garner support abroad, and present “a messianic mission and the ability to win hearts and minds globally.”<sup>78</sup>

It is well placed to micro-target amenable groups in the Western Balkans, especially among the Orthodox nations. Russia can harness their resentment—especially among Serbs—toward the West over the 1999 bombing and the general conservative attitude toward foreign post-modernist values. Moscow emphasizes religious and cultural commonality and reframes it as a positive and distinctive feature. To this end, an increasingly important role is being played by the state-affiliated institutes (considered by some scholars to be government-organized non-governmental organizations).<sup>79</sup> Social creativity can be implemented by establishing tools of influence, especially the culture and language centers.<sup>80</sup> Russia has already put this into practice in a more extreme way in Ukraine. There Moscow tried to politically instrumentalize portions of the Russian speakers to further its geopolitical agenda and territorial appropriation (namely, Crimea).<sup>81</sup> Several state-backed entities, including the Izborskii Club, promoted concepts like “Novorossiya” as a spatial and ideological justification for Russia’s “reassertion of great-power status” and efforts to “recollect” the alleged Russian lands that were unfairly given to Ukraine.<sup>82</sup> In the Western Balkans, Moscow does not have “compatriots” to mobilize or territories to annex. However, it deploys institutes and other soft-power tools to promote Russia-friendly narratives among backup pro-Russian groups. These are affiliates of the existing influential bodies set up in Russia, such as Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), the Gorchakov Fund, and the Russkiy Mir Foundation (the Russian World Foundation).<sup>83</sup>

Rossotrudnichestvo was set up by President Medvedev in 2008,<sup>84</sup> modeled in part on the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and officially focuses on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), where it seeks to “strengthen Russia’s humanitarian influence.”<sup>85</sup> However, it is also active in the Western Balkans. Its soft-power sway mainly comes from the activities of its local centers, such as the Russian House (Ruski Dom) in Belgrade.<sup>86</sup> It organizes and promotes themes that harness local sentiments and grievances against the West (namely, the memory of the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, commemorated on 24 March), highlights Russia’s positive regional role, and cultivates a mutually important historical legacy (namely, the Second World War). An event in 2021 that celebrated the Second World War victory was attended by Russia’s ambassador to Serbia and Serbia’s minister of internal affairs.<sup>87</sup> While subject to certain polarizing opinions in the former Yugoslavia, this topic is very sensitive to Russia, which vigorously defends the Soviet sacrifice. The

Head of Rossotrudnichestvo—Yevgeniy Primakov Jr.—emphasized the importance of the Russo-Serbian shared stance on this,<sup>88</sup> and the politicians in both countries committed to fighting historical revisionism of this topic.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Mr. Putin thanked Serbia for its effort in this and for preserving the monuments and burial sites of the Soviet soldiers.<sup>90</sup>

Notable also are activities sponsored by the Gorchakov Fund. It originated in 2010 and is closely connected to the Foreign Ministry (Foreign Minister Lavrov is the Fund's Chairman of the Board of Trustees).<sup>91</sup> While nominally working to promote “development of public diplomacy and support creation of public, political and business climate abroad, favorable for Russia,”<sup>92</sup> the Gorchakov Fund organizes discussions dealing specifically with the Balkans, where the views tend to be aligned with Moscow's. NATO's regional role is portrayed as destabilizing and its regional expansion unwanted.<sup>93</sup> During these events, the idea of a united Orthodox civilization has been promoted as an alternative to the “Anglo-Saxon” world.<sup>94</sup> More controversial are other discussions sponsored by the Fund. For instance, at a December 2021 debate, discussants openly challenged labeling the 1995 events in Srebrenica as genocide and placing exclusive responsibility on the Serbs.<sup>95</sup> Russian institutes officially claim to promote a more evenly balanced examination of the events in Yugoslavia. At the same time, Russia blocked a U.N. Security Council resolution in 2015, arguing that the measure aggravated the situation and did more to create inter-ethnic tensions rather than stabilize the region.<sup>96</sup> This goes hand-in-hand with Russia's regional social competition strategy, especially the attempts at dismantling the international administration in Bosnia.

On the other hand, Mr. Putin set up Russkiy Mir in 2007 to represent Russian civil society.<sup>97</sup> However, its ties to the state are hard to ignore, given that it is a joint project of the ministries of foreign affairs and education and science.<sup>98</sup> While formally its mission is “promoting the Russian language, as Russia's national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture,”<sup>99</sup> it has focused on a holistic vision of Russian heritage and active promotion—in cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)—of conservative and traditional values.<sup>100</sup> President Putin hinted at this in 2012 when he stated how, through the Russkiy Mir Foundation, it was necessary “to support Orthodoxy in Serbia and Kosovo.”<sup>101</sup> Russkiy Mir was brought into closer cooperation with ROC after a memorandum was signed in 2009 between its head and Patriarch Kirill to “strengthen the spiritual unity of the Russian World.”<sup>102</sup> By 2017, the Foundation had opened more than 250 Russian centers and offices in 76 countries.<sup>103</sup> This underscores the geopolitical dimension of this project. Russkiy Mir centers exist in the Western Balkans at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Philology, the University of Montenegro, the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in North Macedonia, and also at a university in Bosnia's Serb entity (Republika Srpska [RS]).<sup>104</sup> Moreover, in April 2021, another formally non-governmental body was opened in Belgrade—the Russian Balkan Center.<sup>105</sup> It is a joint project between the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Russia's Institute for CIS

countries and focused on further developing mutual ties—which, according to the Head of the Serbian parliament, were at the highest point in history—in the economic, cultural, and humanitarian realms.<sup>106</sup> Notably, at the founding event, the Russian chairman of the executive board once again alluded to the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia. He argued that Russia could not be forgiven for failing to stop it and averred that it would never have happened today.<sup>107</sup>

Studies also show how, in addition to state-affiliated entities, Russian private citizens—especially powerful oligarchs with connections to the Orthodox Church and far-right groups—contribute to its soft power.<sup>108</sup> As one scholar argues, Russia’s regional policy is de-institutionalized and personalized.<sup>109</sup> Konstantin Malofeev, a nationalist businessman, sanctioned by the West for his involvement in Crimea and bankrolling Sevastopol’s pro-Russian mayor,<sup>110</sup> plays an important role in the Balkans. In Russia, he is the influential founder of a philanthropic fund and TV station, “Tsargrad,” and promotes traditional values, Orthodox education, and reconstructs Orthodox churches.<sup>111</sup> In the Balkans, Malofeev nominally promotes pan-Orthodox solidarity.<sup>112</sup> In 2015 during Orthodox Easter, he funded the bringing of “ritual Holy Fire” to Belgrade and sought to further expand his sway by acquiring a local TV station.<sup>113</sup> His conservative anti-Western think-tank Katehon spreads pan-Slavic views, and he even funded the building of a monument to Tsar Nicholas II in Bosnia’s Serb entity to increase Russia’s clout.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, in addition to these institutes and individuals, Russo-friendly media have a considerable role in Russia’s soft power. Bechev explains that these primarily shape the discourse and portray Russia in a positive light while discrediting the West.<sup>115</sup> In a conservative region predisposed to feelings of victimization and anti-Westernism, these information outlets popularize an image of Russia as a power that stands for the traditional family and is an honest partner. At the same time, the West is seen as a decadent propagator of defunct multiculturalism and incompatible values.<sup>116</sup> In particular, in places with a majority or considerable Serbian population, Russia can take advantage of the memory of the 1999 NATO bombing.

Pro-Russian outlets regularly misuse it to lobby against Serbia’s integration with the West. For instance, in right-wing “New Serbian Political Thought” and “The Stamp,” NATO is described as a colonial and militaristic project of the West, which Serbs everywhere are morally bound to oppose.<sup>117</sup> Serbian government’s voluntary decision to send its soldiers to participate in the U.S.-led NATO exercise was described as a “hidden occupation.”<sup>118</sup> The Serbian-language version of Russia’s Sputnik news service is particularly prolific in spreading sensationalist and negative views of the West, including regular reminders of the anniversaries of NATO’s against Yugoslavia and the Bosnian Serb forces in 1995.<sup>119</sup> It also perpetuates the demonization of the former members of the Clinton administration (namely, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright), who oversaw the 1999 bombing.<sup>120</sup>

Studies show that Russia-friendly outlets target niche audiences<sup>121</sup> with nationalist and conspiracy-laden narratives.<sup>122</sup> However, their impact seems to go beyond

these narrow groups. In Serbia, and generally, throughout the region, there is a paucity of funding for news reporting, which affects standards and makes the outlets vulnerable to disinformation and prone to borrow Sputnik “analyses” without much assessment.<sup>123</sup> This helps disseminate a skewed pro-Russian worldview, including the largely dysfunctional depiction of Moscow’s Western rivals and the images of a world where Western states are in decline.<sup>124</sup> Hence, public polling in Serbia unsurprisingly shows a broad pro-Russian sentiment. Russia is seen as the closest international partner of Serbia (by 54 percent of those interviewed) and the most desired long-term friend (43 percent).<sup>125</sup> There is also a widely shared belief (by 32 percent) that Russia is the world’s leading geopolitical actor, ahead of the United States and China.<sup>126</sup> As many as 79 percent of the poll participants viewed NATO negatively (or very negatively), 41 percent shared the same view on the European Union (EU), whereas 72 percent saw Russia as either positive or very positive.<sup>127</sup> Even in a NATO member state, Montenegro, where Russia-affiliated institutes do not have a similarly powerful presence or government patronage, Russia’s soft power and image have sway. Whether it is the media or the Orthodox Church’s influence, Russia is still viewed positively by as many as 41 percent of those interviewed in a 2018 poll.<sup>128</sup>

### **Social Competition: Russia’s Challenge to the Status Quo**

Notwithstanding the strong impact of the regional offshoots of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and *Russkiy Mir*, Russia is not satisfied with expanding its presence only through social creativity. Despite early cooperation with the West (and interest in social mobility), gradually (and more resolutely after 2014) Russian leadership, especially under President Putin, moved to regard the wider post-Cold War international order as illegitimate. It started advocating for its transformation into some form of a new “Great Power Concert,” where it would participate on par with others.<sup>129</sup> Spoiler behavior, preventing others from attaining their goals (namely, expansion of the membership of Western-led organizations into the Balkans), blocking collective stabilization efforts, or even interventions against third countries are examples of social competition.<sup>130</sup> This is partly driven by the perception of an international (or regional) order’s illegitimacy, the feeling that higher status holders’ actions disregard status-aspirant interests,<sup>131</sup> and even a sense of “unfairness.”<sup>132</sup> This was visible in Russia’s feelings about the 1999 NATO bombings against Yugoslavia and Kosovo’s parliament’s 2008 declaration of independence. Mr. Putin opined that “supporting a unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo is amoral and against the law.”<sup>133</sup> Following the February 2008 declaration of independence by Kosovo’s parliament, he commented that this move created a “terrible precedent” that undermined a centuries-long system of IR.<sup>134</sup> His successor Dmitry Medvedev echoed this view by describing the Kosovo declaration as “an unacceptable precedent on using the lack of progress during talks as an excuse for unilateral action, including the recognition of new subjects of international law.”<sup>135</sup> Russia was

determined to challenge this existing status quo. Here we also see the impact of other individuals in shaping Russia's social competition. Former ambassador to Serbia Aleksandr Konuzin was outspoken in criticizing the then-government of Serbia for not standing up to Kosovo, warned it against seeking membership in NATO, and participated in rallies of pro-Russian opposition parties.<sup>136</sup>

In recent years, there have been at least two standout cases of Russia's social competition in the Balkans. First, in Montenegro, there was an attempted, allegedly Russia-backed coup in October 2016 ahead of the country's NATO membership in summer 2017. Also, in late 2019 and 2020, the country was similarly engulfed in a crisis over the contested law on religious freedoms, which was heralded by street protests led by a Russia-backed church. Second, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia challenges the regional order by pushing for the removal of international administration.

The case of Montenegro is interesting given the country's apparent turnaround in relations with Moscow since its independence in 2006. From that year on, the successive Montenegrin governments set membership in the European Union and NATO as their primary foreign policy objectives. As studies show, the foreign policy of Montenegro was in significant part driven by the country's small size and limited economic resources and the subsequent need to develop relations with international and supranational organizations.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, in the case of NATO, the country abolished mandatory military service, professionalized its armed forces, and sought greater security by joining the alliance.<sup>138</sup> While deepening cooperation with Western countries, the early post-independence years also saw further development of relations with Russia. The country became a significant investor, especially in the real estate market on Montenegro's coast (where around 40 percent is believed to be Russian-owned)<sup>139</sup> and in a major aluminum smelter (which contributed 15 percent of its gross domestic product before it defaulted). In addition, Montenegro has positioned itself as a booming destination for Russia's tourists, who make up around a third of all annual arrivals.<sup>140</sup> These relations gradually declined due to the foreign policy orientation of Montenegro's elite. It also faced domestic challenges given societal divisions, including, among other things, over NATO membership (which, unlike the support for the EU—at around 70 percent—was rarely above 40 percent).<sup>141</sup> A notable factor was the demographics, given that roughly a third of Montenegro's population are Serbs who resent the West's past policies. This provided Russia with an avenue for playing a spoiler and attempting to derail the process, thus showing the EU and United States that its opinion should be considered. Moscow deployed various tools typically used in social competition—significantly hindering other great powers' regional initiatives and challenging regional stabilization initiatives.<sup>142</sup>

For instance, in the buildup to the formal invitation of Montenegro to join NATO, which happened in December 2015, Russia approached the then-Montenegrin government in 2013 with an interest in installing a military base (for servicing its fleet)

in the port town, Bar. Unsurprisingly, this was rejected, given the country's pursuit of NATO membership.<sup>143</sup> Russia used this to portray Montenegro as unreasonably Russo-phobic. Russia has since tried to fuel domestic instability and demonstrations and issued open threats.<sup>144</sup> An important tool in Moscow's social competition arsenal has been the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Russia had employed it (via its local allies) to voice opposition to Montenegro's foreign policy.<sup>145</sup> Studies have shown how the ROC regained a vital position in promoting state-supported policies during Mr. Putin's presidency.<sup>146</sup> Its primary role has been allying with the state, advocating for values shared with Kremlin, and nurturing ties with religions in other countries.<sup>147</sup> Church-state partnership incorporated foreign policy in that Russia's Church sought to "heighten the role of religious diplomacy and assist in the construction of a multi-polar world that respects diverse cultural worldviews."<sup>148</sup> Since 2003, a working group has been established in Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate activities where the Church could help the state,<sup>149</sup> given that, in the words of Sergey Lavrov, "the Church engages in tackling the same tasks as does diplomacy" and plays a role in strengthening Russia.<sup>150</sup>

In recent years, the ROC was vocal in verbal and other support of its local allies, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), thus promoting Russia's interests. For instance, in December 2015, Patriarch Kirill expressed "concerns" over Montenegro's NATO membership, and the SOC in Montenegro issued statements calling for a popular referendum on this question.<sup>151</sup> Later in 2019 and throughout 2020, the ROC supported the SOC during the fallout from the passage of the law on religious institutions. The legislation polarized Montenegrin society and led the SOC and its supporters to stage months-long prayer marches and protests. The controversy arose over the Church's argument that the law unfairly required it to prove ownership over its property, which the then government denied.<sup>152</sup> Russia supported the SOC, and the ROC gave "its sister Serbian Church all possible support."<sup>153</sup> The ROC launched attacks on the then-Montenegrin government, accusing them of attempting to "create their own 'pocket' church," which "would reinforce the independence of Montenegro by its existence," a tactic it argued had been done before in Ukraine.<sup>154</sup> Patriarch Kirill spoke of "large-scale and purposeful persecution" of the SOC and its faithful.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, as in the case of Ukraine, the ROC dismissed the existence of an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which they described as uncanonical and a part of the SOC.<sup>156</sup>

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed to have coordinated its actions with the ROC. Regarding NATO membership, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson called upon Montenegro's authorities to hold a referendum.<sup>157</sup> After Montenegro officially joined the alliance in June 2017, the Russian officials warned of "retaliatory measures on a reciprocal basis."<sup>158</sup> In an interview with Serbian newspapers, President Putin argued that Montenegro was "drawn" into the alliance against the wishes of half of its population.<sup>159</sup> The Ministry would similarly continue to openly criticize Montenegro following the adoption of the law on religious institutions, with Russia's

top diplomat, Sergey Lavrov drawing parallels between the situations in Ukraine and Montenegro.<sup>160</sup>

Another example of Russia's interference occurred in October 2016, days before the parliamentary elections. An alleged Russia-supported coup attempt was foisted when one of the would-be plotters defected and turned himself in, days before the event took place.<sup>161</sup> Russian intelligence officers, and eleven other men (primarily Serbian nationals with ties to paramilitary and right-wing groups), including two Montenegrin opposition party politicians, were accused (and later sentenced) of plotting to seize the parliament building, kill the then-incumbent prime minister, and install an anti-NATO government.<sup>162</sup> The trial of the accused would be completed in the early summer of 2019 when the courts sentenced fourteen individuals to prison sentences. In a further show of the "de-institutionalized and personalized nature of Russia's Balkan policy," Russia's nominally private citizens were linked with activities destabilizing social competition.<sup>163</sup> Their activities promote Russia's interests and provide easy deniability if plans misfire.<sup>164</sup> Oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who helped increase Moscow's soft power, is believed to have been involved in the early planning of the attempted coup in Montenegro, which he thought could destabilize the country and derail its NATO membership.<sup>165</sup> It is believed that he was assisted by an operative of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, Leonid Reshetnikov (associated with Malofeev's Katchon think-tank), and Nikolai Patrushev, former head of the Federal Security Service (FSB).<sup>166</sup> The men chosen for attempting the coup were GRU (military intelligence) operatives and were later among those officially convicted by Montenegro's prosecutors.<sup>167</sup> Later studies revealed that the attempted coup was believed to have been a plan B for Russia. Plan A was hatched years earlier following NATO's summit decision to postpone the formal invitation to Montenegro to join the alliance. Russia saw this as an opportunity and applied a mixture of tactics of social competition. According to the Senate Committee testimony by Damon Wilson of the Atlantic Council, the objective was to "defeat the pro-NATO forces in this election through using the Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, a telecommunications company, and a media empire," and a fringe radical Serbian opposition party.<sup>168</sup> As a result, Montenegro was flooded with resources to try and turn it against the Western path.

It should be noted, however, that Montenegro's opposition parties denied the government's allegations and the official inquiry, calling them fabrications, while Russian authorities categorically denied the possibility of any involvement.<sup>169</sup> Moreover, given the polarized and divided state of Montenegrin society, studies suggest that considerable portions of the society were also distrustful of the government's version of events.<sup>170</sup> In a further twist to the story, following the August 2020 elections, which brought a change of government, a court of appeal annulled the 2019 indictment, claiming many errors in the original investigation, and requested a new trial of the individuals charged.<sup>171</sup>

The second example of social competition is in Russia's policy vis-à-vis Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia is also driven by its larger objective of obstructing its slide into NATO and the EU.<sup>172</sup> Following the 1995 Dayton Accords, Russia became a permanent member of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board.<sup>173</sup> Its interests and degree of involvement in Bosnia evolved over the years and resulted from Russia's gradual recovery and return to the grand stage.<sup>174</sup> The confrontational scene in relations with the West over Bosnia started late in Mr. Putin's second term when Russia faced NATO enlargement closer to home and was willing to support players like the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik who opposed Bosnia's NATO bid.<sup>175</sup> Russian analysts point out that the zenith of support for him came from 2010 to 2019,<sup>176</sup> and it led other scholars to describe Republika Srpska as the closest thing to a Russian client in the Western Balkans and the "most trustworthy partner."<sup>177</sup> Malofeev also supported Mr. Dodik and has ties to right-wing groups like the Cossacks and biker gang Night Wolves, who visited Republika Srpska.<sup>178</sup> The bikers are believed to have connections with Kremlin and received funding for their Balkan tour.<sup>179</sup> These extremist non-state groups have local affiliates and could potentially cause destabilization, which is evident in their blacklisting by the West over their actions during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>180</sup> They represent another element of Russia's multifaceted ability to influence the Balkans.

Moscow is generally supportive of the Serb entity's desire to preserve its distinct entity within Bosnia and became progressively more unhappy with the international administration and the broad powers given to the Office of the High Representative.<sup>181</sup> Russia believed that the high representative's vested powers were too large (namely, the representative could override and even dismiss local elected officials). In contrast, Western states believe this was necessary to move the country toward the EU.<sup>182</sup> In 2014, Foreign Minister Lavrov opined how under the Western push, the trend inside Bosnia is toward a unitary state that would silence the voices of Serbs who disagree with others on foreign policy. Hence, Russia saw the role of the high representative as "harmful" and imbued with "dictatorial powers," which should have been abolished long ago.<sup>183</sup> Russia favored giving more responsibility to the local players and stimulating Bosnians to negotiate among themselves.<sup>184</sup> Lavrov believes that a transfer of full responsibility for Bosnia and Herzegovina to local legal authorities should take place and compared the maintenance of the office of the high representative to a "protectorate."<sup>185</sup> Russia showed its dissatisfaction with the international presence by abstaining from (albeit not vetoing) the U.N. Security Council vote to extend the EU-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia (EUFOR) in 2014.<sup>186</sup>

In 2021, a more serious crisis erupted. It followed the resignation of the then-high representative Valentin Inzko. Russia challenged his successor—former German government minister Christian Schmidt—in a show of social competition and an attempt to spoil collective stabilization efforts. Moscow objected to what it deemed an attempt to appoint a new High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina without UN Security Council's approval, although the Western partners argued that the

Security Council's or UN Secretary General's role in the matter was not necessary.<sup>187</sup> Russia called for a vote to agree to the high representative's appointment but only until 31 July 2022, when the post would be closed.<sup>188</sup> While the initiative was unsuccessful, Moscow continued to stand by its argument that the representative was illegitimate and not recognized.<sup>189</sup> In November 2021, Russia voted to extend EUFOR until 2022, but only after the corresponding resolution was cleared of any references to the post of the high representative.<sup>190</sup> However, in the same month, a report by the high representative reaccount Republika Srpska's secessionist plans, including the intention to withdraw from the BiH Armed Forces, the formation of the RS's own Taxation Authority, and even the Intelligence-Security Agency.<sup>191</sup> The report stated that Bosnia's Serbs seek secession without proclaiming it.<sup>192</sup> Russia continued to defend RS and criticize the high representative for writing a "Serb-phobic" document and creating provocation with his unbalanced approach.<sup>193</sup> Then in April 2022, Moscow announced it would cease its financial contribution to the High Representative's office.<sup>194</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has built upon important scholarship that explores Russia's regional role in the Balkans as either "senior stakeholder in European affairs" or contributor to "great power concerts that decided the fates of Balkan nations."<sup>195</sup> By applying SIT, I contribute by contextualizing Russia's different strategies—social creativity and competition—and assessing their relative success. More importantly, this study adds a significant case study—the Western Balkans, where Russia had centuries-long relations with local Slavic peoples—to the growing body of scholarship that relies on SIT to examine Russia's status-seeking at regional levels—for instance, in the Middle East (namely, Libya).<sup>196</sup> Finally, this paper also underscores the explanatory value of SIT relative to other theoretical frameworks like Neorealism, which do not account for all status-driven causes of assertive policies by great powers.

Ultimately, the success of status-seeking depends on whether the higher-status holders recognize the achievements in the new domain in which the status aspirant is trying to achieve prestige.<sup>197</sup> Studies show that improvements in status can only be claimed through voluntary deference by higher-status holders.<sup>198</sup> Hence, Russia's policies in the Western Balkans would need to be seen as worthy and non-threatening to the Western-led initiatives. However, looking at perceptions in the West, there is little to suggest that this is the present reality.

Prominent scholars see Russia's Balkan policy as spoiler behavior.<sup>199</sup> Others agree that Moscow's strategy lacks much economic substance and mainly seeks to unnerve the West or administer "a payback" for perceived Western meddling in the CIS space.<sup>200</sup> Dmitri Trenin believes that the Balkan states' NATO membership is not a threat to Russia and that the latter opposes it mainly on principle.<sup>201</sup> Hence, the

overall perception of its actions tends to be negative. While there are those sympathetic to Russia's concerns over NATO enlargement closer to its borders, Moscow's opposition to Balkan states' NATO aspirations is not based on any real threat to Russia itself.<sup>202</sup>

Also, some of Russia's alleged regional involvements—even if not believed by everyone and officially denied by Moscow—generate a negative image for the country and do not earn the recognition Russia seeks. The events surrounding the suspected coup in Montenegro in 2016 led to a rebuke in the West. The then-British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt labeled these actions “one of the most outrageous examples of Russia's attempts to undermine European democracy.”<sup>203</sup> Later, former U.S. Vice President Pence, who visited the region in 2017, emphasized that “Russia [continued] to seek to redraw international borders by force” and worked to destabilize the region, undermine its democracies, and separate it from the rest of Europe.<sup>204</sup>

Moreover, Moscow's actions in Ukraine impact its pursuit of status. Status-seekers need to be mindful of the legitimacy of their actions. Following the invasion, international outrage was nearly immediate. If one is to judge by “status markers,”<sup>205</sup> Russia's war on Ukraine was very costly for its status. Prestigious status clubs like G7 condemned it as an “unjustifiable, unprovoked and illegal war of aggression.”<sup>206</sup> U.N. General Assembly denounced it in a vote supported by 141 countries.<sup>207</sup> There were also other losses of status markers, including hosting prestigious sporting events and races.<sup>208</sup> In an unprecedented move, Russia's top leadership, including its president, was hit with sanctions and an assets freeze, and Mr. Putin was branded a “war criminal” by U.S. President Biden.<sup>209</sup>

In the Western Balkans, Russia saw its diplomats expelled from Montenegro and North Macedonia, its aggression condemned by certain politicians, and even the closure of their airspace for Russian airlines, including official state visits by Sergei Lavrov to Serbia.<sup>210</sup> Although not all Western Balkan states and entities joined the Russian sanctions—Serbia officially maintains a neutral stance—Moscow's actions in Ukraine hurt its hopes of improving its regional and global status.

Lastly, Russia's penchant for spoiler tactics brings additional costs. Unlike in other places (namely, Libya) where Russia pursues status through SIT strategies,<sup>211</sup> in the Western Balkans, Russia does not have visible “partners in crime” (namely, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in the Libyan conflict) that partake in its disruptive strategies. Hence, the negative perception of its impact in places like Bosnia or Montenegro is exclusively Russia's to bear.

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## Notes

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