



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

More Europe in the Balkans to reduce Russia's influence



Italy wants to be at the forefront of Western efforts to counter Russia's destructive influence in the Balkans. Its foreign minister has told NATO partners that "more Europe" is needed in the Balkans to limit Russia's influence.

"We have to stop the Russians in the Western Balkans; we need more Europe. We must guarantee the security of all the countries of the Western Balkans and neighbouring Ukraine because it is important at this moment to work together, unity is important and it is a strong message for Russia", said Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani in Bucharest, during the latest NATO ministerial meeting, where Ukraine was the main topic.

The Italian minister recently visited Serbia and Kosovo, where an Italian general commands the Kosovo Force (KFOR), a NATO-led international peacekeeping force. Italy is by far the largest contributor to this mission, which maintains the peace achieved after the NATO intervention in 1999 with 715 soldiers out of a total of 3,762 from 27 countries. Minister Tajani emphasised the commitment of the new Italian government to lead a stronger Western influence in the Balkans by organising an upcoming ministerial meeting in Rome.

"Italy must turn into a key player," said Tajani recently for *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* - "both because of its direct interests there and because of the geopolitical situation and the migration issue. I can tell you that this issue is a priority interest for us. Our spotlights are focused on the region. In the wake of an historic tradition, Italy is greatly committed to assuring an Italian and European presence in the Balkans."

And indeed, in addition to its own interests, Italy also has objective reasons to seek a leadership role in the Western presence in the Balkans. Mr. Tajani is right when he says that Italian troops are well-liked by the Kosovars and by the Serbians, both by Muslims and Christians. This is a status that few Western countries in the ethnic conflict-ridden Balkan region can be proud of.

NATO presence in the Balkans

At the two-day meeting in Bucharest, NATO ministers did not spend much time on the Balkans, because the main topic was Russian aggression against Ukraine and agreements on increased efforts to help the Ukrainian defence. It was similar at the NATO summit in July in Madrid, where the final document - Strategic Concept - mentioned the Balkan region only once, in Article 45, where NATO repeated its position that the Balkans and the Black Sea region "are of strategic importance for the Alliance".

However, in the overall position of NATO and the West towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the Western Balkans has a far greater importance than mentioned in the official documents and discussions of NATO heads.

The Western Balkan region is mostly integrated into NATO. The youngest, 30th member of NATO is in this region - North Macedonia, which joined the Alliance in March 2020. Only Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are not members of the Alliance in the Balkan region, and their accession is unlikely in the short term. Serbia opposes NATO membership because of negative recollections of 1999 and the Alliance's intervention against it. Bosnia and Herzegovina is blocked from joining NATO by its Serbian entity (Republic of Srpska), which does so as a sign of solidarity with its ally - Serbia. Kosovo wants to join NATO, but its membership does not have a consensus in the Alliance, because four members - Spain, Greece, Romania and Slovakia - do not recognize it as a state.

Kosovo and Bosnia - the main targets of Russian destruction

Such variety makes the Western Balkans still very susceptible to destabilising Russian influence, especially since none of the six countries of the Western Balkans are even close to membership of the European Union. Russia has traditionally used the region's

distance from membership of Western integration as a training ground for its destructive influence. With the passage of time and the declining will in the Balkans to join Western integration, Russian influence achieves effects, which Western partners suppress on a case-by-case basis.

One of the most drastic cases occurred in Montenegro, in October 2016, on Election Day, when an attempted armed coup and takeover of power by pro-Russian groups was thwarted at the last moment. At the trial that followed, it was proven that the Russian intelligence services participated in the organisation of this coup, the goal of which was to prevent Montenegro from joining NATO. This small Mediterranean country joined NATO the very next year, in June 2017, but to date has not achieved full political stability, precisely because of the strong Russian influence on some domestic political actors.

With the aggression against Ukraine, Russia has strengthened its otherwise aggressive presence in the Western Balkans, trying to make this region a new crisis focus and relax its difficult position in Ukraine. Russia knows well that the root of all Balkan conflicts lies in ethnic divisions and is trying to strengthen those lines of division, hoping to provoke a conflict, which it needs because of Ukraine.

"The region's ample ethnic, political, and social fractures, along with widespread disenchantment with the slow pace of Euro-Atlantic integration, create easy opportunities for Moscow to disrupt the post-Cold War European order," said Paul Stronski, senior fellow in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

That is why the Russian destructive effort is most visible in the zones where ethnic divisions still have the most destructive potential and the possibility of conflict - in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Russia and Vladimir Putin are the main political patrons of the leader of the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, who won the race for president in one of the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republika Srpska,

in the elections on October 2. During the campaign, Dodik even met with Putin twice, as one of the few political leaders from Europe who visited the Kremlin since the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine.

Tensions in Kosovo, between the local Albanians and the minority Serbs supported by the government in Belgrade, have particularly intensified since September, and have threatened to escalate into open conflict. Russian officials, and especially Kremlin-controlled disinformation channels, have been advocating a conflict in Kosovo, even spreading messages that Russia will side with the Serbs in the event of a conflict. These tensions have been calmed by extraordinary efforts of Western diplomatic teams, led by the US. However, the negotiation process between Serbia and Kosovo, which has been ongoing since 2011 under the auspices of the EU, has still not produced results, and thus keeps the door open for new attempts by Moscow to destabilise the region.

This danger will remain, and will continue to increase, as long as the Russian invasion against Ukraine lasts. "With Russia's economic toolkit likely weakening over time, the war in Ukraine could incentivise Moscow to use its more destabilising tools in the region with the goal of overtaxing the limited bandwidth of EU and U.S. decision-makers," said Paul Stronski. "Russia has proven that it knows how to be a master of distraction and how to take advantage of ethnic cleavages, bolster hard-line nationalist politicians, and complicate the region's lagging reform agendas."