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European negligence in the Balkans

Brussels risks facing stiff political competition from Moscow and Russian efforts to undermine the European values in region

During last month, two Russian pranksters known as Vovan and Lexus released an hour-long audio recording of several prank calls with Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. In the conversations, the pranksters tricked the North Macedonia leader into believing he was talking to former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

Among other topics, the Russian pranksters got Zaev to talk about North Macedonia's NATO hopes, the issue between Serbia and Kosovo and Russia's supposed interference in the Balkans. The Macedonian PM claimed that Russia and Turkey were behind the idea of dividing and exchanging territories between Serbia and Kosovo. Time and time again during the phone calls, Zaev also acknowledged that Russian President Vladimir Putin had direct control over his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vucic.

The Russian comedians, or as they refer to themselves 'political pranksters', are frequent guests on Russian news outlets such as RT and Sputnik. They have stated on numerous occasions that they are working 'only for themselves' and specifically target foreign state officials and political figures who express a strong anti-Russian sentiment. Some of their other high-profile victims include French President Emmanuel Macron, former British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson, former US Ambassador to UN Nikki Halley and US Representative Maxine Waters.

Although their latest prank turned out to be short-lived and Zaev defused the incident in the days that followed without significant consequences, it showed that the Balkans remains Europe's weak spot. The region is mainly susceptible to malign foreign influence, especially regarding its EU and NATO perspectives. Even a minor, almost comical incident like this one can cause waves through the Balkans, at a time when the European hopes of the region seem to be in danger.

The EU's failure in the Balkans

Two months ago, the EU Council decided not to follow the European Commission's recommendation for opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. The Council postponed the decision for later this year, amid a current political turmoil in Albania, and a tense political summer in North Macedonia.

French President Emmanuel Macron is the most vocal when it comes to the future of the enlargement process. He claims that the EU first needs to implement deep reforms and then focus on new members. While there are arguments that support Macron's claim, the decision was not taken lightly by the Balkan countries. And while Brussels' overall message didn't sound encouraging for the Balkans, it was like music to Russia's ears and its role in the region.

In the case of North Macedonia and its impending effort to join NATO until the end of the year, it's clear why the country would become a target for Russian propaganda. Last year, Greece expelled two Russian diplomats, accusing Moscow of trying to interfere in the historic name agreement with its northern neighbor. The name deal later became the main driving force behind the country's NATO accession and beginning the accession talks with the EU. In the case of Albania, the country has been a NATO member for more than a decade, having joined the Alliance in 2008.

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Both countries have invested a lot of effort into their EU integration. The beginning of the accession talks this summer was touted as a big victory for both Skopje and Tirana, as well as the EU, too. Unfortunately, this failed to materialise, leaving North Macedonia and Albania in a European limbo until, at least, this October.

The region's firm determination and course towards EU and NATO has angered Moscow in the past. The most notable case was Montenegro's NATO accession and the failed coup attempt in October 2016. In May this year, the Montenegrin court gave five-year jail sentences to two pro-Russian opposition politicians for their involvement in the plot.

Since then, Moscow has taken up a different approach to gain the upper hand in one its traditional geopolitical sphere of influence. Many similar Russian tricks, like the one with Zaev showed, are hovering over EU-oriented politicians in the region.

A European future for the Balkans

The latest development in which Russia provided military vehicles to its biggest crony in the region, Serbia (an EU candidate country), has shown that Moscow still has important friends nearby. Both Bulgaria and Romania refused to allow the transfer of the military vehicles to Serbia, citing EU sanctions against Russia. However, Hungary, a relevant EU and NATO member country, stepped up and came to the rescue.

At a time when the region needs encouragement about its European perspectives, the EU's influence in the Balkans appears to be waning. Instead, Brussels is sending mixed messages about the enlargement process. Within the EU, there are many contradictory statements about the enlargement process, made by key European officials. This way, it invites Moscow to become proactive in the region and to deter its countries from their European perspectives.

The Balkan political leaders are left to interpret the statements by European officials, depending on the circumstances and developments in their own countries. This confusion alone opens the door for any other geopolitical player to step in. And this comes at a time when it is crucial to acknowledge that some countries have come a long way in their effort to become EU members. For North Macedonia, it took a name change, resolving the three-decade-long argument with Greece; for Albania, painful judicial reforms that shook the political system in the country.

Should the EU react sooner rather than later, it can still win the geostrategic battle over the Balkans. A stable and democratically developed Balkans can only be seen as a win for the EU. It will also emphasise that all of the efforts that the EU has done in the last decade, are not in vain and that the region is finally heading in the right direction. Otherwise, Brussels risks facing stiff political competition from Moscow and repeated Russian efforts to undermine the European values in region.



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