

Escalating tensions between Russia and the West over Balkan energy

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On December 1, Russian president Vladimir Putin announced that Russian state energy company, Gazprom, had cancelled the South Stream pipeline, bringing gas from Russia under the Black Sea and through the Balkans to central Europe. It was another sign of the escalating tensions between the imperialist powers and Russia—tensions that have impacted significantly on the Balkans.

For the last few years, the European Union (EU) and the United States had tried to stop South Stream, viewing it as an attempt to increase Europe's dependence on Russian energy supplies. These moves were accelerated after the US and German-orchestrated coup that toppled the government of Ukraine.

Earlier this year, the European Parliament passed a resolution opposing the pipeline, and the European Commission (EC) forced Bulgaria to halt work on the project, claiming that it violated EU anti-monopoly laws. Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) were warned to withdraw from their agreements or renegotiate them if they wanted to become full EU members.

The South Stream pipeline was a major element in Russia's attempt to reduce its reliance on Ukraine as a transit territory for its gas supplies to Europe. It also served to retain Russia's influence in the Balkans, as states in the region joined the EU and NATO following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia.

Foremost has been Russia's relationship with Serbia. In October, Putin was guest of honour at ceremonies marking 70 years since Belgrade's liberation by the Soviet Red Army, and in mid-November, the first-ever joint Serbian-Russian military exercise took place. Serbia has refused to support EU sanctions against Russia, although it refused to sign the final agreement on South Stream while Putin was in Belgrade—an

indication of its increasing difficulty in balancing between the West and Russia.

Last month, Russia abstained, for the first time, in the United Nations Security Council vote on extending the EU peacekeeping force in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Vitaly Churkin, Russia's ambassador to the UN, declared, "We are against having an international presence in the field of security that could be viewed as an instrument to accelerate the integration for the country into the European Union and NATO."

NATO has expanded its membership into the Balkans, and three more countries—BiH, FYROM and Montenegro—are candidates. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has warned against NATO expansion in the region, which would be seen as a provocation by Russia and a threat to Europe's security and stability.

Russia has also been courting Hungary's Viktor Orbán—described by former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer as "the only Putinist governing in the EU"—pressuring Montenegro to allow a Russian naval presence at its port of Bar and proposing a redivision of Kosovo, transferring the Serb-dominated north to Serbia and the Presevo Valley, home to a majority of ethnic Albanians, to Kosovo.

The US and EU are also stepping up their activities in the Balkans. US senator Chris Murphy, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on European Affairs, following a week-long tour of the Balkans in October, declared that "American involvement and interest in the Balkans has receded consistently, year after year, over the course of the last decade."

He warned that "this turn away from the Balkans is a mistake, and perhaps a grave one, if not reversed," because, "To put it bluntly...Russia is sitting on the doorstep, ready to take our place."

He specifically drew attention to the South Stream

gas pipeline “increasing the dependence of Serbia and the entire Balkan region on Russian energy.... And even more dangerous is talk that Russia seeks to expand its military partnership with Serbia....”

Murphy called for a high-level visit from the Obama administration to the region, a reversal of the cuts to US AID, speeding up NATO membership and more pressure on the EU not to “mismanage” the membership application process as it had done in Ukraine.

The need for more aggressive EU intervention in the Balkans was also the subject of a recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations think tank chaired by Joschka Fischer and former Finnish president and UN Balkans envoy Martti Ahtisaari. It warned that “while the EU is absorbed with other international crises (and its own), Russia is deftly spreading its web of influence across a region in which it wields significant levers....”

“Like it or not, Europeans will also have to engage in some smart forms of balancing and come up—very soon—with a strategy to fill the present power vacuum that defines the Western Balkans. The new EU leadership...should set in motion a bold policy reset for the EU’s engagement in the Western Balkans.”

The EU has already begun. At the end of August, German chancellor Angela Merkel held an international conference on the Balkans to discuss “stabilising” the region and speeding up EU membership. This month, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and neighbourhood and enlargement negotiation commissioner Johannes Hahn visited BiH to discuss the country’s EU membership process, which has stalled over the EU’s main demand for the constitution to be amended to allow minorities to run for public office. A recent German-UK initiative suggested membership could be speeded up by postponing the constitutional changes.

While in BiH, Mogherini told Russia to keep its hands off the Balkans before declaring the right of the EU to assert its own interests. “We always say that all countries of the Western Balkans have a future in the EU and we have to make it real now, together, with the sense of ownership,” she said.

US and EU officials have also visited Kosovo to press for the formation of a government, which is still not in place nearly six months after elections. US

ambassador Tracey Ann Jacobson declared, “My message to the politicians has been clear, I can even say it in Albanian, *Mos e dhi punen* (Don’t screw up).”

Hahn has made it a top priority to persuade the five existing EU member states that do not recognise Kosovo to do so.



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