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THE HYBRID WAR IN THE BALKANS

From the beginning of the 21st century, the Balkans was referred to as the heart of Europe, a region of intense rivalry between Russia and NATO to establish geopolitical spheres of influence. NATO's activities are focused on implementing the "open door" policy, extending the Alliance to include the Balkan states and developing close cooperation with the European Union in the area of stabilization missions carried out in this region. In turn, Russia is seeking to strengthen its influence in the Balkans by pursuing a policy of containment a number of the Balkan countries, which have chosen the Euro-Atlantic course of development by using the hybrid policy mechanisms already applied by the Kremlin authorities to destabilize Georgia and Ukraine.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the activities carried out by Russia to gain influence on the shaping of domestic politics and security of countries such as Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Bulgaria. The basis of these activities is to strive Russia to strengthen its position in the region and gain the ability to decide about the stability and security of it. Therefore, the hybrid policy mechanisms used by Russia to overthrow the Montenegrin government as a response to NATO's membership of the country will be discussed. It will be explained the reasons for the support of the Russian authorities for the created pro-Russian Serbian paramilitary forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, the role of Russia in building political relations between Serbia and Kosovo will be showed. The activities of Moscow regarding launching massive cyberattacks on Bulgaria's government institutions and the testing of Bulgaria airspace in the wake of the annexation of Crimea will also be analyzed.

The research will help answer the question: *How does Russia intend to trigger a hybrid war in the Balkans? What scenario of hybrid activities can be applied by Russia?*

It is considered that Russia is seeking to strengthen its influence in the Balkans by enhancing its military capabilities and implementing a hybrid policy aimed to removing from power the current pro-Western leadership of Montenegro and Bulgaria and to replace it with the representatives of pro-Russian forces; strengthening the ethnic tensions and separatist political aspirations in the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina, fueling the strained relations between Serbia and Kosovo. These activities create an environment enabling Russia to provoke or unleash a new conflict in the Balkans - a hybrid war, in which Moscow will be used on large - regional scale the methods that have already been mastered by Kremlin in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and also in the Crimea and the Donbas. The consequences of such a scenario may be fatal for the geopolitical situation in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, NATO must strengthen the military capabilities in the Balkans to prevent scenarios from reappearing, such as the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine.

Key words: hybrid war, hybrid policy, Balkans, Russia, NATO, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Bulgaria

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