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Scholars' Policy Papers

Views of young professionals on current challenges

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For a few years now, the Greece and Cyprus Office of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation invests in the future of youth by offering scholarships to Greek and Cypriot postgraduate students and researchers, who are committed and motivated, share our social values and actively support the Rule of Law and Human Rights. At the same time, we organize Seminars and Workshops with experts addressed exclusively to our scholarship holders aiming at their further enhancement of competences, knowledge and networking.

The KAS Greece and Cyprus Scholars' Policy Papers enrich our Scholarship Programme by offering our scholars the opportunity to share their expertise in the fields of international relations, politics, economy and social affairs. The views expressed belong solely to the writers and do not bind our Office.

The focus in this second volume lies in the war in Ukraine. Two of our scholars shed light to specific, usually overlooked aspects of Russian policy: on one side, the influence of Russia in the Balkan peninsula and on the other side the role of the Russian Orthodox church as part of the Russian Federation's foreign policy. The last essay is dedicated to the topic of elections security in light of the attack in the US Capitol.

KAS Greece/Cyprus supports the young generation in Greece and Cyprus and thus contributes to our common European future.

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Russia in the Balkans - Same players, new challenges

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that started on the 24th of February sent chill across the world and especially across Europe. Not many would expect to witness a full-scale military operation in Europe in 2022. These developments have inevitably turned the spotlight to Ukraine. What President Putin expected to be a special military operation that would end within a few days or a week with the overthrow of the Zelensky government and a regime change in Kiev has turned out to be an ongoing 4-week campaign highlighted by the admirable and fierce defense by the Ukrainian forces. At the same time, protests against the war in Russia, the growing number of Russian soldiers that die in Ukraine along with the devastating state of the Russian economy as a result of the sanctions imposed by the West have created an extremely difficult situation for Putin. Still, it was merely 30 years

ago when the Balkans, the backyard of the EU, was marred by suchlike military operations, war crimes and countless atrocities including genocide. The invasion of Ukraine, just like the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, is a reminder that peace, order and prosperity can be overturned, even on European soil.

Apart from Ukraine, the Balkans remain one of the fronts where the Russian and the European and American interests clearly collide. Even though Russia has not openly opposed the EU integration of the countries of the region, their NATO accession is considered a red line by Moscow. Russia is not in a position to offer the Western Balkan countries convincing alternatives to the Euro-Atlantic integration. Hence, Russia aims to capitalize on the fragile political systems of the region by supporting certain nationalist

political parties, NGOs and media outlets with close ties to Kremlin while promoting its ties with the local populations based on pan-Slavism and Orthodox Christianity through actions with symbolic meaning.[1] Furthermore, it is also important to highlight the energy dependency of the region on Russian gas.[2]

The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the role and presence of Russia in the Western Balkans while centering on the consequences of the invasion in Ukraine for the wider Balkan region. Finally, I will make certain policy recommendations addressing the current state of affairs in the Western Balkans bearing in mind the latest developments and the potential spillover effect of the invasion.

Russia in the Balkans

Before moving on, it is necessary to highlight that Russian presence in the region is the strongest in Serbia, Montenegro, and the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the contrary, it is significantly limited in Albania and Kosovo and to certain extends in North Macedonia.

SERBIA

Serbia is considered "Russia's last fort-post in the Balkans" and its closest strategic partner in the region.[3] Serbia's stance can be partially explained when considering the following; first, regarding Kosovo Serbia relies heavily on Russia, a permanent member of the Security Council which has not yet recognized Kosovo's independence. Second, the two countries have developed a

privileged relation vis-à-vis the field of energy which allows Serbia to import gas in better prices compared to other countries. Third, the memory and trauma of the NATO bombings of 1999 among a significant portion of the Serbian population are still very much alive and that explains its suspicion and hostility towards the West.[4] Finally, religion is one of the main pillars of the Russian strategy and propaganda (Russia as the leader of global Orthodoxy) that is based on the common tradition and the contacts between the two Churches.[5]

Over the last decade, Belgrade has been practicing a strategic ambiguity and neutrality regarding its relations with both Russia and the EU. This neutrality was tested in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea; Serbia did not recognize the aggression neither imposed any sanctions to Russia. Even in the case of the invasion and despite being under much more pressure to align with the EU on the issue, Serbia's National

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[1] Nicu Popescu, "Russia's Soft Power Ambitions", CEPS Policy Briefs, No. 115 (2006)

[2] Bojan Stojkovksi, "Balkan Countries 'Still Heavily Dependent on Russian Gas'", Balkan Insight, November 24, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/24/balkan-countries-still-heavily-dependent-on-russian-gas/.

[3] Eduard Abrahamyan, " "Pax Russica" in the Balkans: Serbia Between Myth and Reality", E-International Relations, April 30, 2015, https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/30/pax-russica-in-the-balkans-serbia-between-myth-and-reality/.

[4] BiEPAG, "Western Balkans: Reactions and Implications of the Russian Aggression of Ukraine", BiEPAG, March 11, 2022, https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/.

[5] David Clark and Dr Andrew Foxall, "Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?", The Russia Studies Centre – The Henry Jackson Society (2014)

Security Council maintained the country's neutral position. Even though Serbia voted in favor of the UNGA Resolution calling on Russia to halt its military operations in Ukraine, no one can overlook the fact that Serbia joined Belarus as the only two countries in Europe that have not imposed sanctions to Russia.[6] President Vučić will be called to take difficult decisions very soon and the stakes are high as ever; the future and prosperity of Serbia and its people.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosnia is both a country with strong Russian presence in the Serbian Republic of Bosnia as well as a country whose future will be directly affected by the outcome of the war in Ukraine. The current political crisis in the country is orchestrated by Mirolad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb political leader who has close ties with Putin and is holding the country hostage while actively promoting and campaigning in favor of the breakaway and autonomy of the Serbian Republic. Dodik and his version of Serbian nationalism and separatism have the support and approval of Putin.[7]

Bosnia's divided leadership is even more divided in the case of Ukraine; on the one hand, Bosnian authorities without the support of Dodik and the Serbian Republic condemned Russia, voted in favor of the UNGA Resolution against Russia's aggression and demanded "candidate status" for the country not only in order to strengthen the security and sovereignty of the country but also to send a message that the EU is deeply committed to the integration of the Western Balkans. On the other hand, Dodik and the

authorities of the Serbian Republic showed their support to Russia after the invasion in Ukraine while trying unsuccessfully to block the Bosnian UN Ambassador from voting in favor of the said resolution. Overall, the majority of the Bosnian population is against the war in Ukraine; the horrid memories of the 90s are not forgotten. Still, while Bosnian citizens in the Federation publicly demonstrated their support and solidarity to Ukraine and its citizens, in the Serbian Republic public gatherings in favor of Putin and Russia were organized mainly by far-right groups and football hooligans.[8]

MONTENEGRO

Just like in the case of Bosnia, the situation in Montenegro is also complicated. Overall, the two countries always had close political and economic ties; Russia is the biggest foreign investor, Montenegro is highly depended on Russian gas and the majority of tourists come from Russia. Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro has very strong ties with the Moscow Patriarchate, a political and religious actor close to Kremlin.[9]

The relations between the two countries greatly deteriorated in 2016 when the Montenegrin authorities thwarted an alleged coup and assassination of Prime Minister Milo Đukanović whose aim was to prevent the NATO accession of the country. The prosecutors argued that circles close to Kremlin were responsible, even though Moscow dismissed the accusations.[10]

[6] Engjellushe Morina, "Bound to Russia: Serbia's disruptive neutrality", European Council on Foreign Relations, March 14, 2022, https://ecfr.eu/article/bound-to-russia-serbias-disruptive-neutrality/.

[7] Vesna Pusic, "What Russia Really Wants in the Balkans", Foreign Policy, November 23, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/23/bosnia-russia-milorad-dodik-putin-wants-balkans/.

[8] BiEPAG, Western Balkans, 2022 https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/.

[9] Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, "Russia's Game in the Balkans", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 6, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235.

[10] Dimitar Bechev, "The 2016 Coup Attempt in Montenegro: Is Russia's Balkans Footprint Expanding?", Foreign Policy Research Institute (2018)

After the latest developments, the Montenegrin citizens and civil society have been very vocal in their support of Ukraine. However, the political parties had mixed reactions as a result of the deep polarization and political instability which has paralyzed the country on a political level. The Montenegrin Government not only supported the EU's sanctions on Russia but also donated non-lethal military equipment to Ukraine.[11] However, the powerful Serbian parties as well as the popular Democratic Front coalition either aligned with Serbia's position or openly supported Putin.[12] Russia responded by adding Montenegro to the list of its "enemies" alongside Albania and North Macedonia.[13]

ALBANIA - KOSOVO

Russian influence is very limited in Albania and Kosovo for two reasons; Russia has very close ties with Serbia and holds an adamant position regarding Kosovo's recognition while Albania, a member of NATO, and Kosovo have developed strong cooperation with the US and the EU. Thus, Russia cannot be considered an important counterweight to the Euro-Atlantic institutions in the cases of Albania and Kosovo.[14]

Albania condemned the invasion of Ukraine, the Parliament adopted a resolution in support of Ukraine, the country voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's actions. Albania also aligned itself with the EU sanctions against Russia.[15]

The case of Kosovo is more complicated mainly due to the country's legal status and the interconnection between Kosovo and the West on the one hand and Serbia and Russia on the other. Kosovo has requested the establishment of a permanent NATO base in the country for security reasons and the acceleration of its Euro-Atlantic accession, despite the fact that certain European countries have yet to recognize Kosovo's independence. The outcome of the war might as well (re)define Serbia's position on Kosovo; if Russia emerges somehow victorious, Vučić will gain leverage over the Kosovar government and the West. If Russia ends up on the losing side, then Vučić will need to reevaluate Serbia's stance on various issues including Kosovo.[16]

NORTH MACEDONIA

Ever since its independence in 1991 North Macedonia has developed closer relations with the US and the EU than Russia. After a decade of improved relations while VMRO was in power, the relationship deteriorated after Russia's alleged efforts to undermine and exert influence against

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[11] BiEPAG, Western Balkans, 2022 https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/.

[12] Johannes Gold, Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes, Sven Petke, Tobias Rüttershoff, Daniel Braun, Holger Haibach, "Der Russische Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine – Reaktionen auf dem Westbalkan", Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung - Auslandsbüro Albanien, March 9, 2022, https://www.kas.de/de/web/albanien/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/der-russische-angriffskrieg-gegen-die-ukraine-reaktionen-auf-dem-westbalkan.

[13] Samir Kajosevic, "Russia Adds Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia to 'Enemy' List", Balkan Insight, March 7, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/russia-adds-montenegro-albania-and-north-macedonia-to-enemy-list/.

[14] Walter Glos, "Albania" in "The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans", eds. Lars Hänsel and Florian C. Feyerabend (Berlin, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2018), pp. 9-13

[15] Fjori Sinoruka, "Albania Unveils Sanctions on Russia Over Attack on Ukraine", Balkan Insight, February 28, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/02/28/albania-unveils-sanctions-on-russia-over-attack-on-ukraine/.

[16] BiEPAG, Western Balkans, 2022 https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/.

the historic Prespa Agreement, a rare diplomatic success in the region that opened the door for North Macedonia's NATO accession.[17]

The government and the main opposition parties as well as the citizens of North Macedonia expressed their support and solidarity towards Ukraine. The support towards Russia and Putin was marginal. North Macedonia immediately aligned with the EU sanctions imposed on Russia, closed the Macedonian airspace for Russian aircrafts and provided military aid to Ukraine. Russia's response was quick; North Macedonia along with Albania and Montenegro were added to Kremlin's "enemy" list.[18]

Conclusions & Policy recommendations

Overall, the vast majority of the Balkan leaderships, with the exception of Serbia, echoing the sentiment of their citizens aligned their positions with the EU and NATO and sent a clear message; the region stands by Ukraine while remaining committed to its Euro-Atlantic integration. As for Serbia, it will be called to make a conclusive decision on where it stands following the April 3rd elections.

The focus currently is on Ukraine and the EU, the US and their allies must ensure the protection and support of Ukraine and its citizens. Unfortunately, the clash with Russia has many fronts and the Balkans is one of them. The ties of the region with Russia create a complex interconnection which calls for cautious yet bold handlings from the West in order to provide the political and economic safety net that the Western Balkans need and demand because of their decades-long commitment to the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

At this point, certain policy recommendations are presented drawing upon the latest developments in Ukraine and the Western Balkans:

■ Prepare for a more active Russia in the Balkans

Following the invasion of Ukraine, the ties between Russia and the West seem to have passed the verge of rupture. The most likely scenario is that Russia could become more active and involved in the region by capitalizing on its historical, political and economic ties with certain countries and political leaders as well as the Orthodox populations of the Balkans. That is why the West must focus with renewed interest on the area in order to counterbalance Russia's efforts to establish itself as the major player in the Balkans. The EU must support with concrete actions the pro-Western actors of the region and most importantly deliver on its promises regarding the enlargement and the accession negotiations.

■ The accession process must speed up

The EU membership is the ultimate goal for the Western Balkans. In certain cases such as Albania for example, the democratization process as well as the reform process was slow and problematic but the progress in the fields of democracy and the rule of law should be highlighted.[19] Even more reforms are required on economic and political level before the accession, but these countries must be rewarded for their progress. The EU must profess its support and commitment to the Western Balkans by speeding up and reshaping the enlargement process by starting the accession process for North Macedonia and Albania in June.

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[17] Bekim Maksuti and Sebastian von Münchow, "North Macedonia's turn to the West – A difficult passage", George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, April 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/concordiam/strategic-communications-winning-information-war/difficult-passage.

[18] Kajosevic, Russia Adds Montenegro, 2022, https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/07/russia-adds-montenegro-albania-and-north-macedonia-to-enemy-list/.

[19] European Court of Auditors, "EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist", European Union (2022)

■ The politicization of the enlargement must be avoided

The accession needs to remain a merit-based goal and not a political tool that serves certain countries' interest at the Western Balkans' expense. The cultural politicization of the enlargement regarding issues such as the Muslim population of the region that was raised by France in 2019 is completely unfounded and creates dangerous assumptions. Similarly, one country cannot hold another country hostage for political reasons. Bulgaria is blocking the accession talks for North Macedonia when the rest of Europe has given the green light. The consequences are severe; pro-Western powers lose their trust to the EU while the people lose their trust to these powers and other alternatives both inside (nationalist/far-right/populist parties) and outside (Russia/China) appear more and more appealing. The overwhelming majority of the people and politicians in the region are pro-Western. However, with each passing year there is a decrease in the number of people and leaders who continue to set their hopes for a better future to the EU even in countries with decades-long pro-Western orientation (In 2021, only 9.5% of the citizens of North Macedonia considered the EU as the most influential factor in the country compared to almost 45% in 2019).[20] The gap between the EU and the Western Balkans will be bridged gradually when the accession negotiations begin.

■ The weakest links must be supported and safeguarded

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo constitute the weakest links in the region and are the ones most likely to be affected by the spillover effect of the war in Ukraine. In Bosnia, Dodik is more than a tough-guy politician; he is an authoritarian leader who enjoys the support of Putin and whose aim is to break up Bosnia. The deployment of troops was the first step to showcase the West's commitment to Bosnia's security. Now the forces which promote stability and the country's integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions need support (rejuvenate the EU and NATO accession process) in order to counterbalance Dodik's actions and Russia's presence in the Serbian Republic. Regarding Kosovo, everyone must focus on "the elephant in the room"; Kosovo's recognition. The EU member-states that have not recognized Kosovo's independence (Greece, Spain, Cyrpus, Slovakia and Romania) need to reevaluate their position. By not being recognized by these countries, Kosovo remains in a limbo and vulnerable to an escalation of violence and interethnic conflict once again. Kosovo needs support and a clear path towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

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[20] Anamarija Velinovska, Ivan Nikolovski and Marie Jelenka Kirchner, "From a poster to a foster child - 2021 public opinion analysis on North Macedonia's EU accession process", Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia & Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (2022).

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Russia's new state of play:

a comparative analysis of the role of the Church in Ukraine and in Africa

Pavlos Petidis

Introduction

The contested nature of the post-Cold War European order is the key reason that has reawakened the confrontation between the West and Russia. The post-Cold War European order was built on democracy and human rights, voluntary collaboration and integration among nations, and states' right to select their domestic political systems and foreign policy orientations. Although the Soviet leadership recognized the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and Germany's reunification, Russia never fully accepted the loss of its sphere of influence. Following its disintegration, religion resurfaced in several

post-Soviet countries.[1] During the catastrophic economic crises of the 1990s, the presence of well-funded Western evangelicals arose distrust and animosity among many Russians, particularly the Orthodox, who were offended by their ubiquity, evangelical ardor, and opulence. The Russian Orthodox Church's efforts to assert its authority in post-Soviet space extended to Crimea, where, even more than in Kyiv, centuries of conversion to Christianity and Islam confused claims to holy sites. This set the stage for further Russo-Western conflicts over the former Soviet territory, particularly the 2014 Ukraine crisis.[2]

The emergence of the Russian World as a geopolitical frame

The visit of Patriarch Kirill to Crimea in 2009 was part of a larger effort to bolster Russian Orthodox claims to the Church's ancient laity in Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. During the opening ceremony of the third Russian World Assembly, he laid out the conceptual framework for the Church's mission field. He stated that limiting the Russian world to the Russian Federation's territorial borders would be a sin against historical reality. Although Kirill considered Russian Orthodox communities in Europe, the Americas, and Asia to be part of the Russian World, he concentrated his efforts

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[1] Cottey, A. 2022

[2] D'Anieri & Kuzio, 2019

on Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Patriarch Kirill built on Chernigovskii's idea, claiming that the Russian World included anybody who based their national identity, in whole or in part, on Russian spiritual and cultural foundations, such as Moldovans.[3] In Kirill's Russian World concept, group identity was not founded on ethnicity because Russian culture belongs to Russians, Tatars, Ukrainians, and Georgians. Patriarch Kirill highlighted numerous strategies for bolstering the Russian World, including expanding pilgrimages to Russian holy sites both within and outside the Russian Federation's boundaries, as well as sustaining active lay groups, churches, and monasteries. To further the Church's purpose, other measures included enlisting the help of civil society and developing elites both inside and beyond Russia. Patriarch Kirill described the Church's position as apolitical throughout his address.

Russia in Ukraine: Autocephaly as Religious Persecution and a «Frontal Attack» in Russia

The silence or inaccurate messages from the Orthodox, Catholic, and other churches, as well as ecumenical groups like the WCC, surprised or even frightened many Christians in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea. They were not astonished, however, when the Russian church approved the aggression.[4] For many, it was first and foremost this church that was behind it, as a Kremlin ideological collaborator. The Moscow Patriarchate's deep involvement in Russia's assault against Ukraine gave the Ukrainian Orthodox faithful a significant impetus to pursue ecclesial independence from Moscow. The issue of Ukraine's ecclesial independence was not just ecclesiastical, but also political for the Ukrainian state. The Russian Orthodox Church actively undercut Ukrainian resistance to the Kremlin, sometimes blatantly promoting the

latter's anti-Ukrainian agenda, both directly and through its outpost in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, by exploiting its pro-Russian fractions. The surprising progress achieved by Ukrainian authorities in attaining autocephalous status for Ukrainian Orthodoxy in April 2018 sparked widespread worry among the Moscow Patriarchate hierarchy and high-ranking Kremlin officials. While tensions between the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow developed dramatically, Russian state officials also paid close attention to religious developments in Ukraine after April 2018.

The issue of "the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine" was discussed by President Putin during a meeting of the Russian Federation's Security Council on October 12, 2018, the day following the Constantinople Patriarchate's announced decision to restore its control over Ukrainian Orthodoxy.[5] Despite the fact that the brief media report on the meeting did not mention any specific decisions made by the Council, pro-autocephaly forces in Ukraine saw the mere fact of such a public discussion in the Kremlin as direct proof that the UOC-MP should be treated as a Russian agent of influence and

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[3] Mykhnenko, 2020

[4] Allison, 2014

[5] Kremlin 2018

a national security threat. President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and an official spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, were focused on condemning the Ukrainian authorities' actions as a gross violation of constitutional secularism and an illegal governmental incursion into religious issues. President Putin declared that the Russian authorities retain the right to react and do everything for the defense of human rights, including freedom of belief, based on this framing of the Ukrainian situation as akin to Soviet practices of widespread religious persecution. According to Zakharova, the establishment of an autocephalous church in Ukraine should be seen as part of Washington's efforts to influence domestic politics in nations with a sizable Orthodox population.[6] Similarly, President Putin asserted that the decisions of the Constantinople Patriarchate were made in the United States and that, in addition to being a brutal breach of religious liberty, they were a politically motivated attempt to divide the Russian and Ukrainian peoples.[7]

The scramble for Africa: religion as the foundation

Given that Orthodoxy has long been a pillar of Russian nationhood, the Russian Orthodox Church's conception of the Russian World underpins Moscow's efforts to re-establish an ideational backbone, a meaningful narrative supporting Moscow's aspirations to be a leading nation capable of attracting others into its civilizational orbit. Other countries and confessions are encouraged to participate in this endeavor. In the same way that the Russian state positions itself as a bastion of resistance to pressure to follow the course of political development advanced by Western countries, Russian Orthodoxy is envisioned as playing a leading role in mounting an interfaith front of resistance to the universalizing spread of

liberal secularism.[8] In that respect, the Russian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod announced on December 29 2021 the establishment of an African Exarchate with two dioceses covering the whole African continent, as well as the welcome of 102 African clergy into the Exarchate. The Synod decided to act on the requests from African clergy when Patriarch Theodoros of Alexandria concelebrated with Epiphany Dumenko, the head of the schismatic Ukrainian group, in August of 2021. At its meeting earlier this month, the Holy Synod of the Alexandrian Patriarchate replied, calling the creation of the African Exarchate direct reprisal, blackmail, and revenge.

As relations deteriorated following the annexation of Crimea and the expenses of waging war in Donbas increased as a result of sanctions, Moscow increased its efforts to strengthen non-European parts of its foreign policy by using religion as the foundation for further cultivation of ties. It's been dubbed a flanking strategy because it aims to show that Russia can't be diplomatically isolated and has viable economic options. It serves to surprise and challenge Europe in some ways, obtain new levers of influence, and therefore lift the ante outside the European continent. Last but not least, Russia's ventures into Sub-Saharan politics have frequently been prepared by a succession of military, political, or economic achievements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Thus, the Russian world is part of a much larger initiative aimed at regaining for the Kremlin the global ideological clout it lost with the fall of Communism. Especially for Africa, Russia is exploiting the spiritual component of the Russian World concept by focusing on cultivating a fertile ground through religion under a new geopolitical landscape. But Russia does not stay there. Military cooperation and arms sales, according to Neethling, are

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[6] Zakharova, 2018

[7] Putin,2018

[8] Putin 2012

[9] Casola et al., 2019

[10] Casola et al., 2019

the most crucial types of engagement between Moscow and African nations. Several military cooperation agreements have been inked since 2015.[9] Increased armament sales to African governments, a bedrock of bilateral relations, were combined with regular armed forces training missions, civil expert consultations, and the deployment of troops in crisis situations. Furthermore, Russia's participation in the fight against violent extremism – such as in Nigeria and Mozambique – sent a strong signal about the country's willingness to expand its military presence on the continent.[10]

Concluding Remarks

In the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, religion plays a vital role. For hundreds of years, the Russian Orthodox Church has overseen religious space in Crimea and Ukraine, including parishes, Christian monuments, and holy locations, and has maintained its spiritual territory even after the Soviet Union fell and

new political borders emerged. The Russian Orthodox Church retained its jurisdiction over Ukrainian residents as the post-Soviet state of Ukraine strove to forge an identity independently from Russia. The outcome has been a Russification of Ukrainian and Crimean laity and spiritual space, for lack of a better description. Furthermore, many Russian Orthodox believers retain a sense of ownership over Kyiv and Crimea, the Cradle(s) of Russian Christianity, according to the Russian Orthodox Tradition. The Russian Orthodox Church has established an enduring tie with Moscow throughout Ukraine and Crimea, serving as a continual reminder of shared history and faith. Religion has been invoked by Russian and Ukrainian officials, while separatist groups have been marked by religious chauvinism and religious brutality. Given the current state of affairs, it appears that religious divisions will worsen before they improve.

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On Election Security

Driven by the attack on US Capitol - An American Point of View

Giorgos Chamilakis

Democracy is a form of government where opposing political powers can win. At the core of democracy rest the elections, as a hymn and celebration to the democratic process, but also as an institutional prerequisite for our form of government. While most countries in the world today hold elections, that is not enough for Democracy to exist or for a country to be deemed a Republic; it is a prerequisite, but it is not enough. Democracies simply cannot exist without holding free and fair elections. In some cases, in the contemporary world of politics, and in many cases historically, Democracies may hold elections, but the governing party will not step down if it loses; these regimes appear to be just a mirage of Democracies, while in reality they fall under the umbrella-term of authoritarian regimes, concealing their authoritarian practices under a façade of pseudo democracy. It becomes evident today, that the most severe and pressing issues that our democracy and our elections face are the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, violent insurrections, and political violence, meddling in the electoral process by domestic and foreign malicious actors, and tampered information in all its forms, be it misinformation, disinformation or manipulated information.

The backslide of democracy is a common theme between Political Science circles. The erosion of democratic institutions, mechanisms, and structures in countries where democracy was consolidated for years, is an ongoing and pressing global issue. The rise of populism and of populist leaders around the globe has been attributed with this gradual, yet continuous, democratic decline. Reputed international rankings that study and grade democracies all over the world, like those of "Freedom House" or of the "Democracy Index" of the Intelligence Unit of The Economist try to make into qualitative data[1] (ranking democracies by giving them several numbers, following a methodology that could include civil liberties, freedom of the media, political corruption metrics etc.) an otherwise purely theoretical field. While such rankings may not capture the wholeness of a republic or all the characteristics of a given regime, they still try to see and evaluate every aspect of democracy and offer a synthesized overall picture of the quality of democracies. Thus, according to these rankings, and in the most recent academic literature of the field, the American democracy has been declining every year for the last five years. From the attack to the Capitolium on January 6th, 2021, and the politicization of U.S. electoral practices, to the harsh treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers, the American democracy has suffered.

The capstone of the decline of the American democracy were the events that transpired during January 6th at the US Capitol. Having rejected the acknowledgement of the official election results, a President incited with guiding rhetoric an angry mob into violent actions at the heart of the country and at the core of the Republic. Following the deadly attacks, the legality and the procedures of the electoral process were questioned, theories about electoral schemes were diffused, and the word "fraud" became one of the most used words in the political lexicon. Political practices like the aforementioned, especially when conducted by former head of states, poison and erode the essence of the polity and furthermore, underline the question of how safe and secure the electoral process is. How vulnerable is the electoral system from malicious domestic or foreign attacks that seek to destabilize the democracy by manipulating elections' results? The truth is that the overwhelming data and intelligence point out to a Russian interface in the 2016 American elections through digital and cyber means. How can the democracy, any democracy in the world, avoid such interferences, from domestic or foreign actors, from happening ever again? Some experts have suggested that reforms in the elections' process should be the first priority. Some have gone so far as to suggest that in this contemporary cyber era, where the menace of a cyber-attack is ever-present, we should turn the whole electoral process from digital to analog; voting machines can be faulty, and anything digital can be compromised, they argue, and thus switching the whole process to analogical where election officials and impartial, nonpartisan observers would count papers and ballots is the most viable way to safeguard the elections. While this option may seem archaic, it may be the solution. The answer to technology, when problems arise because of technology, may be to remove some (or most?) of the technology out of the equation. Certainly, upgrading old and faulty voting machines is a small and essential step forwards, an investment that is worthy for the democratic procedure. Others have suggested holding the elections on a single day and making that "National Elections Day" into a national federal holiday. These are options that both can work to the extent of their abilities, and despite the logistical and administrative side and challenges that they pose, they can still aid in making the elections more secure.

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[1] "Expanding Freedom and Democracy", Freedomhouse.org, Accessed 28/3/2022, Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/ and "Economist Intelligence Unit: Global Insights", eiu.com, Accessed 28/3/2022, Available at https://www.eiu.com/n/

It was well documented that not only the American democracy, but also the American people suffered because of politicized misinformation and constant misrepresentation of data by the executive branch. The role that tampered information can have is tremendous, especially when the stake is the result of an election. This manipulated information can have many origins (trolls, automated bots, deepfakes) and when targeted accordingly, it can influence greatly the preferences and the will of the people- or make it seem that the preferences and the will of the people are different from what they really are. One of the most important actors that facilitate this proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, albeit unintentionally or without a political motive, is the social media. Internet giants like Facebook and Google have built their empires on spreading information easily, but what about if their platforms are used to manipulate elections? It was well documented that the Russian side spread misinformation on social media, targeting electoral groups that they deemed to be more vulnerable to manipulation, more prone to heed their call for their preferred candidate, and in areas where the electoral victory could be judged in a margin of several thousand votes. Should not internet giants impede the flow of misinformation when they catch it and when it can be impactful for the security of elections?

However, there are ways with regards to the Internet infrastructure, and with regards to federal and government regulation of social media that can make a difference. Enabling political manipulated information that is diffused and proliferated via the Internet, should be regulated to be a crime. Social media should not have the motive and the chance to increase their profits by circulating

(manipulated) political content; on the contrary, this should be discouraged or deterred. The Federal Government and the Congress can regulate this situation accordingly and be more active and intervening in this arena. France on its own, but also the European Union as a bloc too, have imposed heavy, unprecedented, fines on internet giants for monopoly practices and for violating the privacy of their nationals; certainly, similar measures can be taken, and the legal framework can be expanded, to include the penalization of proliferating (mis/dis)information in their platforms that have not been verified and which could potentially alter the electoral behavior of the electorate.

The silver lining here is that Democracy, compared to other types of regimes, is more resilient in the sense that it holds malicious political leaders accountable. There are processes that are built-in and embedded into Democracy that foresee the removal of such individuals from their positions of powers (even for the highest office, that of the President-albeit difficult to carry through with, in cases where the crime is not evident or

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2 "9 Solutions to Secure America's Elections", Americanprogress.org, Accessed 28/3/2022. Available here: https://www.americanprogress.org/article/9-solutions-secure-americas-elections/

hard to prove). As mentioned above, political leaders that try to manipulate the outcome of elections poison and gradually erode the democratic institutions, but the policy proposal here wants the democratic institutions to be strong enough, for long enough, and with the appropriate safeguards before completely receding, to dispose said politicians on time; any further and more permanent regime change would range between highly unlikely to virtually impossible to accomplish through covert mass scale political manipulation and spread of political misinformation and would require the systematic and organized use of force, which could only derive from a potential coup-d'état.

Lastly, a vast, and technical, agenda with regards to upgrading the election infrastructure should be adopted. Setting as a legal prerequisite the award of verification paper ballots, that would be able to be validated with each and every individual who exercised their right to vote would be a good start. Instilling a threat information-sharing system, that would necessarily provide overviews of the potential breach and notify in real time the appropriate governmental agencies and entities.[2] Moreover, setting covert, "election simulations" to test the election infrastructure could provide valuable data about potential vulnerabilities and would check how every election machine functions under real conditions.

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