

# The new old challenges to NATO in the Balkans

Martin Sokolov

Youth Research Centre 'Knowledge and Progress', Sofia, Bulgaria.

[martinsokolov@abv.bg](mailto:martinsokolov@abv.bg)

**Abstract:** NATO is facing an array of challenges in the Balkans – both 'old' and conventional, and 'new' and asymmetric. This paper seeks to offer an overview and provide an analysis of the risks emanating from Russia's strategic interests in the peninsula and possible complications as an example of 'traditional' threat. Additionally, the author will strive to analyze them in the context of 'modern' security challenges in the region, such as the risks stemming from the migration from the Middle East and North Africa, and the challenges, particularly in the Western Balkans, of radicalization and returning foreign fighters. NATO's role in the region is particularly important as no single country in the region has the capabilities to address such transnational threats and challenges unilaterally. The hypothesis is that the Alliance needs to significantly enhance its soft power capabilities, intensify cooperation between stakeholders in the region, and adapt to more contemporary and asymmetric threats.

**Keywords:** NATO, RUSSIA, BALKANS, HYBRID, THREATS, RADICALIZATION, TERRORISM

## 1. Introduction

The Balkans are one of the most heterogenic regions in the world and also of significant strategic importance for the different stakeholders. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the countries in the region have gradually aligned and integrated themselves within the structures of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO) with the aim of improving national and regional security, and insuring economic growth.

While several countries have achieved their objective of joining both organizations, the Western Balkans are yet to successfully join the EU. This has created a certain 'vacuum' which has accommodated the growth of threats and created opportunities for influence by third parties that are in contrast with the stated objectives by the governments in the region [6]. First, currently, as in the EU and most of the world, one of the most pressing threats is that of radicalization and the additional challenges emanating from it: terrorism and returning foreign fighters. According to data the Balkans have the highest number *per capita* of individuals that traveled to the Middle East to join the terrorist organization ISIS [1, 3, 8]. This necessitates the study of the underlying causes for this trend and also the adoption and implementation of specific approaches to deradicalization, as there will certainly be return of foreign fighters in the region.

The second challenge that needs to be taken into consideration is the clashing interests in the region between the West and Russia. As stated, all the countries in the region are striving to become EU and/or NATO members, while Moscow regards the enlargements of these organizations as a threat to its national security. This has resulted in the Kremlin undertaking actions to both potentially postpone or dissuade states to join particularly NATO, and to also challenge the Alliance's unity itself via actions in current members [6, 7]. This has resulted in the fact that NATO has had to enhance its existing capabilities for conventional deterrence against an 'old' threat and to adapt to the 'new' one of radicalization and terrorism. However, because of factors such as globalization and interconnection it is evident that certain complexities have emerged that require the Alliance to both adapt, as well as increase cooperation with the EU in order to successfully tackle such issues.

## 2. Russian interests in the Balkans

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union Moscow's influence and interests objectively diminished in the Balkans; however, there has been a clear resurgence since the beginning of the new energy. This should be understood through the prism that the Kremlin: one, wants to reestablish its role as a regional and global power, as illustrated in its approaches to the Middle East and the wider Black Sea region; and, two, its view of NATO enlargement as a clear threat to its national security. Therefore, as all countries from the Balkans are either current or aspiring members of the EU and/or NATO, Russia's approach should be considered as damaging [6].

Moscow predominantly exercises its influence through hybrid means, strategic communications, investments in media outlets, utilizing its dominant role in the energy market, support for individuals and groups characterized by corruption, and subversive actions [7, 9]. In non-member states the Kremlin can directly challenge EU and NATO influence, while in member states it is applying the same means to challenge the unity of these organizations [7]. Furthermore, a worrying trend in the last decade is the formation of pro-Russian paramilitary organizations in the region. While such groups are not necessarily directly organized or supported by the Kremlin, they are at the very least influenced by anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda, promoted by pro-Russian media outlets. Such supposedly self-organized paramilitary organizations have acquired firepower and gained prominence in 2015/16 at the peak of the migration wave for the Middle East and North Africa, claiming to seek to protect people, religion in traditions from both migrants and Western influence. Such organizations have formed and are active in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro [6].

**Table 1:** Russia's view of contemporary warfare.

Russia's approach to warfare [4]	
Direct destruction	Direct influence
Direct annihilation	Opponent's inner decay
War with weapons and technology	Culture war
War with conventional forces	War with specially prepared forces and commercial irregular groups
Traditional battleground	Information/psychological warfare and war of perceptions
Direct contact	Contactless warfare
Clashes in the physical environment	War in human consciousness and cyberspace
Symmetric warfare	Asymmetric warfare of political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns
War in a defined period of time	State if permanent engagement as the natural condition of life

Russia evidently understands the primary battlespace of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which elaborates why it place significant importance on information and psychological warfare, with the idea to gain advantage prior to any direct contact, or if possible, avoid any contact [4]. Furthermore, this is not limited to enemy troops but to an adversary's entire population. Ideally this not only reduces the need to deploy hard military power but would also manifest itself in the support of local population for the aggressor. Additionally, this allows such operations to be both simultaneously evident and hidden; by blurring lines between state relations and subversion,

falsehood and reality, and war and peace itself, military campaigns can be conducted over extended periods of time at a relatively inexpensive cost [7].

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the Russian Federation is neither the 'creator' of hybrid warfare, nor the only country employing it. Prior to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the most cited example of hybrid warfare was the Israel – Hezbollah in 2006. Additionally, China has its own concept of 'unrestricted warfare', according to which as a result of globalization, the nature of war itself has changed, moving beyond the military realm. [5] Regardless of the name such concepts stem from the same practical necessity, i.e., to challenge the West economic and technological superiority via asymmetrical measures.

### 3. Radicalization and early signs

The conflict in Syria and the rise of ISIS was characterized by an unprecedented outflow of foreign fighters from the Western Balkans, particularly Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who provide approximately 1/3 of the fighters [1]. What is more, while there are various reasons why these individuals decided to travel to Syria and Iraq, the majority of them did join terrorist organizations such as ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra.

**Table 2:** Number of foreign terrorist fighters from the Balkans 2014-2015 [10].

Country	Number of Foreign Fighters	Per capita basis/per million people
Kosovo	316	172
Bosnia and Herzegovina	330	85
Albania	90	30
Serbia	70	10
N. Macedonia	12	6

One of the key driving factors for the process of radicalization is the feeling of vulnerability or even marginalization by the state: feeling that their respective governments either do not have the capacity or will to protect and ensure their civil rights and legitimate interests. Nevertheless, radicalization is a complex process based on complex factors, that takes time. They can be divided into macro-, micro-, and the individual-personal-level [2].

**Table 3:** Radicalization factor levels.

Radicalization factors	
<b>Macro-social</b>	<i>Globalization, flow of goods and services, connectivity.</i>
<b>Micro-social</b>	<i>Social identification, collective emotions, group-group interactions, group- state interactions</i>
<b>Individual-personal</b>	<i>Emotions, experience, gender, age, etc.</i>

The **macro-social level** refers particularly to globalization, which allows the unimpeded spread of ideologies, and both the horizontal and vertical movement of people and resources. Of this order are the problems with the integration of minority groups, poverty and social bleakness. The **micro-social level**, incorporates categories such as social identification, collective emotions, interaction between groups, alienation from the state and society. At the **individual level** are factors such as personal characteristics, personal experience, emotions, gender, age, etc. The role of the Internet as an important factor through which radical ideas and

currents are easily spread and followers should also not be overlooked. For example, 90% of French citizens who joined and likely fought for ISIS were recruited online [2, 6]. The complex combination of many of these factors leads to radicalization and terrorism, but the processes themselves have not yet been sufficiently analyzed.

Nevertheless, it is certain that education and upbringing are particularly important in the fight against radicalism and terrorism, and also identifying their early signs. The psychological processes behind radicalization are often associated with external manifestations. In many cases, this is the change of names or the adoption of pseudonyms taken from religious texts, thus aiming to demonstrate empathy. A change is made in the appearance - change of clothing and shaving - hair and/or beard [8].

Behavioral changes often begin with the desire for regular contact with leaders of radical religious groups, accepted as undisputed authorities, whose opinions are accepted with no question. Suspiciously large amounts of propaganda material can be found in the homes of radicalized individuals. This process is often accompanied by a change in religious practices themselves. The individual becomes significantly stricter in the observance of religious practices, which are performed in full accordance with the canon, and also as often as possible. In order to strictly observe these rituals, the individual often begins to neglect daily activities, such as going to school or work. Another typical sign is visiting websites and forums with radical content. In this space, the individual satisfies his need to share his more extreme ideas. In these circles, he finds like-minded people and other people he could potentially radicalize. In the process of radicalization, there is a change in the pattern of travel and stay in specific places where residents share the ultimate views. In most cases, these are countries, regions of the country or neighborhoods in which a given ideology is widely accepted and practiced freely. In this way, the person can without hesitation demonstrate their empathy for the community or group [2].

The glorification of martyrdom is also a sign of radicalization [3]. The individual no longer seeks only an excuse for his possible actions, but also perceives the processes as a personal path and vocation. Socially, there is isolation, such as avoiding work, school, concerts and other events where many people gather. There is a change in the attitude, as well as in the interaction with others, the use of radical or specific terminology, which is not generally available and cannot be perceived as a random means of expression. The bearers of Islamist radicalism skillfully blame ordinary Muslims for not being good enough Muslims and succumbing to the new age. Breaking their ties with Islamic traditions and in an environment of informal segregation, some Muslims in European countries are seeking a new identity in jihad. The individual begins to feel strong when he identifies with the ideal religious community as the antithesis of the modern secular state. Sometimes the process of radicalization is characterized by the commission of minor crimes. They are not for material gain, but to demonstrate disrespect for established rules in societies. This often grows into disrespect for secular power and the norms of regulating public relations through demonstrative disrespect for it [2].

If the processes of radicalization continue unchecked it is also possible to manifest into acts of terrorism either on home soil or in other parts of Europe because of the relatively easy movement of people even for European countries outside the EU. This risk is further exacerbated by the return of foreign fighters. Some of them will likely be traumatized and perhaps sincerely disheartened by what they witnessed in ISIS [2, 6]. Nevertheless, it is also possible that some will also return with the idea to continue ISIS' war on European soil, seeking to either carry out acts of terrorism, radicalize other individuals, and/or create terrorist networks and cells. This necessitates the establishment of platforms and mechanisms not only for preventing radicalization but deradicalizations as well. This in itself requires both regional and multinational cooperation and support from the EU and NATO.

#### 4. Adapting NATO to the new challenges

Despite these challenges and the continuing need for improvement and adaptation, NATO has an indispensable contribution to security in Europe and an indisputable deterrent to potential aggressors. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the Alliance and the EU have 21 common member states, which largely have a shared vision and a synchronized assessment of the risks facing Europe. The Lisbon Summit in 2010 emphasized the need to improve the NATO-EU strategic partnership. The 2010 Strategic Concept commits the Alliance to work more closely with other international organizations to prevent crises, manage conflicts and stabilize post-conflict situations. Subsequently, in Warsaw in July 2016, the two organizations outlined areas for enhanced cooperation on common East and South challenges, including countering hybrid threats, increasing resilience, defense capacity building, cyber defense, maritime security and exercises. In December of that year, NATO foreign ministers approved a statement to which 42 common measures to advance NATO-EU co-operation were attached. In December 2017, another 32 measures were agreed. On 10 July 2018, in a joint declaration, the two organizations agreed to focus on military mobility, the fight against terrorism and strengthening the resilience of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear risks. This joint declaration was welcomed at the Brussels summit in July 2018 and noted that the development of European defense capabilities, which will also contribute to the security of the Alliance [6, 7]. Close cooperation between NATO and the EU is undoubtedly an important element in developing an international "comprehensive approach" to crisis management and operations that requires the effective deployment of both military and civilian assets.

In the Balkans specifically NATO continues to provide stability based on membership or partnership. At the same time, it has been demonstrated that the two organizations can support each other with ever-increasing levels of cooperation, as evidenced by the provided support to the EU's operation Sophia in 2016 to secure European borders [6]. Furthermore, NATO has the capacity to intensify the exchange of good practices in the region and promote expertise. To counter specifically the process of radicalization, the establishment of a shared database between the EU and the alliance would significantly ease the flow of important information. Additionally, while EU enlargement has stalled, Brussels can still intensify efforts for adequate reforms in non-member states that are striving for accession. The focus of EU-led social reforms can play a significant contributory role to NATO's security, by decreasing internal tensions in countries, where they are rooted in the lack of rule of law, high levels of corruption, slow economic growth, and threats of radicalization stemming from general social and economic factors.

#### 5. Conclusion

NATO faces increasing and overarching challenges, both external and internal, that require innovation and adaptability. Addressing and overcoming them requires optimal levels of cooperation, both within the Union and with the EU. This report presents and analyzes only some of these threats. For a more in-depth study of the topic, it will be appropriate to take into account: Russia's subversive activities in Europe through energy projects; the activities of Russian private military companies such as Wagner in the Middle East and Africa; the country's policies and actions in countries such as Syria and Libya; bilateral relations between Moscow and Beijing; China's investments in NATO and EU member states; Chinese state-owned companies that use Western funds to finance military technology; return of foreign terrorist fighters to Europe; radicalization; and terrorism.

A significant part of these proposed topics' themes and challenges does not *prima vista* necessitate the competence and expertise of NATO. However, each of them has the potential, indirectly or directly, to become a destabilizing factor for NATO, particularly in the Balkans. This, in turn, requires an increase in the Alliance's expertise, but also the need for coordination, cooperation

and even possible harmonization on a number of policies with the EU. But only by continuing to maintain its deterrence capacity, technological superiority, innovative approach, levels of cooperation and exchange of good practices and experience, timely and coherent action and operations, and to remain an attraction for democracies around the world, will NATO succeed to legitimize not only its power but also its very existence.

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