

**Bechev, Dimitar. 2017. *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*. Yale University Press, 320 pages. \$ 27.50 (Hardcover).**

In his latest book, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, Dimitar Bechev offers a novel and nuanced understanding of the much talked-about role of Russia in Southeast Europe. In response to the increasing interest in the region of Southeast Europe, shown by both Russia and the West, *Rival Power* investigates Russia's growing influence and takes a closer look at what Russia is up to in the region that encompasses the post-communist Balkans, Cyprus, Greece and Turkey. In view of Russia's comeback after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breakup of Yugoslavia, the book is certainly timely. Moreover, Bechev makes good use of his considerable knowledge of relations between the Russian Federation and Southeast Europe.

Divided into two sections, this absorbing book is very well structured. In Part I, the author analyses the relations between Russia and each of the Southeast European states, providing highly insightful historical perspective of these relations. As not everyone is familiar with the historic background of Southeast Europe and Russian Federation, Bechev provides for a very clear and easy understanding. History is usually full of myths and legends, especially when it comes to the religious connections between Russia and its Orthodox counterparts, but the author looks beyond those stereotypical explanations. In part II, titled 'Areas of Russian Influence', Bechev, as one of the most astute contemporary observers of Russia's foreign policy in the Balkans, leads us through many aspects of Russia's reinvigorated presence – economic, military, security and diplomatic (soft power).

*Rival Power* shows how Russia balanced its domestic concerns around further disintegration during the 1990s, in an effort to interact with the US on equal footing during the crises in Bosnia and Kosovo. As Bechev put it, just like today, during the Balkan crisis of the 1990s Russia kept poking the eye of the West without actually having a clear and long term strategy. After the Russian military withdrawal from Kosovo and Bosnia in 2003, Russia stepped into the Balkans in a different form, using its energy assets to broaden its footprint. These 'energy links helped Russia make further inroads into the Serbian economy', underlined Bechev.

*Rival Power* demonstrates that is not exactly the historical and cultural links with Russia that make this region so dependent on it. In order to provide a better understanding of the Russian foreign policy in the Balkans, Bechev warns that one first has to learn more about Gazprom and Lukoil, as oil and gas happen to be key to understanding Russia's power. The

chapter entitled 'Playing the Energy Card' gives us a clear picture of how Kremlin plays its energy card and strengthens its ties with governments and business elites to advance its economic and political aims. Here, Bechev supports his claims with numerous new data that help us to better understand how Moscow managed to co-opt both governments and national companies by offering them better terms and price discounts. On the other hand, the book also draws attention to the region's vulnerability to cut-offs, which came together with the huge economic advantage for the Russian side after the region paid Gazprom the premium.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned Russia's omnipotent leverage over energy, *Rival Power* convincingly shows that Moscow lacks the economic potential to embrace any of the states that are now under its sphere of influence. On the other hand, in addition to energy there is yet another domain where Russia's presence is unyieldingly strong: the public sphere. As Bechev underscores, the 'soft power is one of the Kremlin's most potent weapons deployed in the Balkans'. When it comes to soft power, Russia is in a position to play on common historical, cultural and religious bonds with Southern Slavs. On the flip side, anti-Western sentiments, nationalism and authoritarian leaders make Russia the most preferable ally to many in the Balkans, without it having to invest much into this. Moscow exercises its influence by using its own associations and the media, social movements and connections with parties and leaders, writes Bechev. Also, he states that the official message of the Russian diplomacy is 'that the West is bad and the Balkan nations along with Turkey are, and have always been, its victims'.

Furthermore, Bechev's research makes it clear that Russia's main goal in the region is to discredit and upset the existing institutions set up by the West and place the US and the EU under pressure. Contrary to that, the narrative presented through the media and social movements linked with Kremlin is that Russia is a great power headed by its strong leader, Putin. Unlike in the case of former Yugoslavia, Bechev thoughtfully notices that 'Russia is much more intimately connected to the eastern parts of the peninsula'. The author emphasises the fact that his native Bulgaria used to be known as 'the sixteenth Soviet republic', unlike Romania which pursued a much different path as a result of the fact that the country was able to cover most of its energy exigency from domestic sources.

In addition to the above Russia's energy asset, Bechev also deals with military power that plays a significant part in the Kremlin's presence in Southeast Europe. Despite NATO's enlargement in the Balkans and Turkey's membership in the Alliance, Russia tried to balance NATO militarily and apply more pressure thereon. Also, as Ankara's relations with the West deteriorated, Moscow saw this as an opportunity to embrace Turkey. However, in the case of Romania and Bulgaria, we could see that Russia was neither willing nor capable to stop their turning towards the NATO, which supports Bechev's claim about the Russian absence of strategy. In Serbia, on the other hand, although military cooperation with NATO is more significant, thanks to the Kremlin's media influence it looks as if the country's cooperation with Russia takes priority.

With the same objective in mind, Moscow tries to affect domestic politics by using local proxies, especially as regards turning points and during watershed events. The episode of Macedonia (FYROM) trying to establish a new pro-Western government in 2017 was ‘a classic case study of Moscow’s disruptive tactics in former Yugoslavia’, explains Bechev. For Russia, it means ‘taking advantage of indigenous problems to score points against the Europeans and Americans and thwart their effort to steer events on the ground’. It is very important that proxy groups were mentioned in the *Rival Power*, as they represent one of the channels through which Moscow exercises its influence. Russia, Bechev holds, sponsors protest movements and social activists, but also ultranationalist and extreme rightwing parties that oppose NATO and the EU in Southeast Europe.

Although the EU membership remains the ultimate destination of the Western Balkan countries, it does not exclude their relations with Russia. In terms of rivalry in the backyard of Southeast Europe, Russia continues to present an alternative to the EU and keeps undercutting the rules set forth by the West. In spite of the EU’s existential crisis, Bechev states, it still holds some allure thanks to its enormous market and foundational narratives. Last but not least, Bechev finishes, in my opinion, with a provocative and truthful statement that ‘from Belgrade to Ankara, from Sofia to Budapest, dysfunctional democracies, state capture, and the backslide to authoritarian politics are, on the whole, homegrown ills, not an outcome of a sinister Muscovite plot’.

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