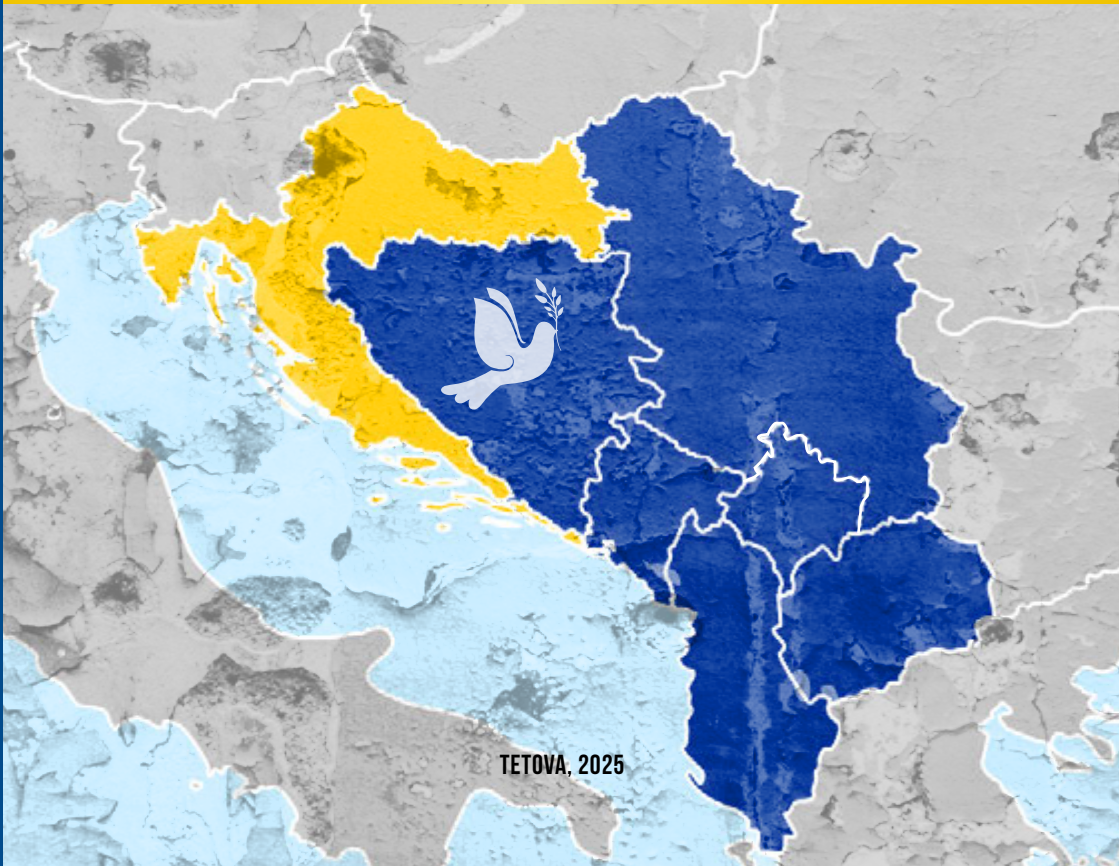




THE FUTURE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AFTER RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE: WHAT'S NEXT?



TETOVA, 2025



Center for Peace and Transcultural Communication
University of Tetova

THEMATIC BOOK

“The Future of the Western Balkans after
Russian Aggression in Ukraine: What’s Next?”

The thematic book “*The Future of the Western Balkans after Russian Aggression in Ukraine: What’s Next*” offers a comprehensive exploration of the geopolitical, economic, and social dynamics reshaping the Western Balkans in the wake of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Through a multidisciplinary approach, this collection of essays and analyses examines the ripple effects of the conflict on the region’s stability, European integration prospects, security frameworks, and internal challenges such as migration, governance, and ethnic tensions.

Prominent scholars, policymakers, and regional experts provide insights into the shifting alliances, the role of NATO and the European Union, and the renewed importance of the Western Balkans in global geopolitics.

The book also delves into how the war has prompted a reassessment of energy security, disinformation campaigns, and democratic resilience across the region.

This volume not only identifies the risks and opportunities that lie ahead for the Western Balkans but also serves as a call to action for fostering peace, cooperation, and sustainable development in a fragile yet pivotal part of Europe.

It is an essential resource for academics, decision-makers, and anyone seeking to understand the future trajectory of the region in an increasingly interconnected and volatile world.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations	10
Foreword	11
Russian Aggression on Ukraine and its impact on the Western Balkans	17
<i>Sonja Biserko</i>	17
SPP: Pro-Russian Orientation is a Historical Commitment	24
The Serbian Orthodox Church and Russophilia	28
Russia and NATO in the Balkans	34
Serbia and the War in Ukraine	37
Identity of Serbia	40
Recent Developments	42
In conclusion	46
References:	49
Is the Sun setting on the West?	54
<i>Daniel Serwer</i>	54
Introduction	54
The Global Context: Ukraine and the Future of Liberal Democracy	55
Serbia: The Linchpin of Regional Instability	56
The EU's Role: A Crisis of Commitment	57
Macedonia's Choice	57

The Way Forward	59
Conclusion	60
The Ukrainian Conflict and Challenges to the Regional Cooperation in South-East Europe	62
<i>Fatmir Xheladini</i>	<i>62</i>
Russia's Malign Activities in the South East Europe	65
Political and Military Influence	66
Disinformation, Division, and EU/NATO Obstruction	68
Exacerbating Ethnic and Political Divisions	69
Undermining EU and NATO Integration	70
Countermeasures and Regional Cooperation	71
Strengthening Resilience	71
Regional and International Cooperation	73
Conclusion	73
References:	75
Economic and Political implications in the Western Balkan after the Russian Aggression in Ukraine	77
<i>Bardhyl Dauti</i>	<i>77</i>
Introduction	77
Economic Implications	79
Trade relationships between Ukraine, individual WB countries, Russia, and the United States	80
Political Implications	87

Regional integration policies of the Western Balkan countries.	97
Berlin process vis a vis Open Balkan	97
Conclusion	100
Advocating for Truth in North Macedonia: Challenges and Imperatives in a Fragmented Information Landscape	105
<i>Edlira Palloshi Disha</i>	<i>105</i>
Conclusion	112
References:	113
Reporting Ukraine: Reflections on the War and Its Broader Implications	115
<i>Tim Judah</i>	<i>115</i>
Contextualizing the Conflict	115
Parallels with the Balkans	116
Lessons for the Western Balkans	116
Technology and the Changing Nature of War	117
Geopolitical Interconnectedness	118
Conclusion: What's Next?	119
Unpacking Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans	120
<i>Florian Qehaja</i>	<i>120</i>
Kosovo's Stance on Russia's Unprovoked Aggression in Ukraine	124

**Geopolitical Repercussions of the Russian Aggression on
Ukraine for the Western Balkans: Security Challenges and
Integration Prospects 125**

Albulena Halili 125

Geography, Identity, and Geopolitics: Russia's Vision for
Eurasia 126

The Structure of the World Order: Multipolarity and
Strategic Narratives 128

The War in Ukraine and Europe's Security Vision 131

The Western Balkans: In the Line of Fire 132

References: 136

**The Geopolitisation of Enlargement and the role of the EU
values in the transformation of the Western Balkans 138**

Klodiana Beshku 138

Introduction 139

Enlargement policy after the War in Ukraine 144

The Western Balkans and the EU: Making both ends
meet through the absorption of EU values 148

Conclusions 154

References: 156

Regional Cohesion or Fragmentation?

Media Narratives in the Western Balkans in

Response to Russian Aggression 160

Donika Kamberi 160

Introduction 161

Theoretical Framework	163
Methodology	164
3.1 Instruments	166
3.2 Data Collection	168
Results	169
Conclusion	180
References	182
“Reflections on the future of the Western Balkans in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine- presenting three main scenarios”	183
<i>Nenad Čanak</i>	<i>183</i>
Introduction	184
Russian Victory Scenario	185
Ukrainian Victory Scenario	186
Ceasefire Scenario	187
Conclusions	188
Russian Hybrid Warfare in the West Balkans.....	189
<i>Ivana Stradner and Peter LaBelle</i>	<i>189</i>
Conclusion	197
Contributors	199

Abbreviations

EU European Union

EC European Commission

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

UN United Nations

US United States of America

WB Western Balkans

SOC Serbian Orthodox Church

SPP Serbian Progressive Party

ROC Russian Orthodox Church

IPAP Individual Partnership Action Plan

IMF International Monetary Fund

CIA Central Intelligence Agency

GDP Gross Domestic Product

VMRO-DPMNE Internal Macedonian Revolutionary
Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National
Unity

SDSM Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

IRI International Republican Institute

R2P Responsibility to protect

KFOR Kosovo Force

NIS Naftna industrija Srbije [the Petroleum Industry of
Serbia]

Foreword

By the Director of the Center for Peace and Transcultural Communication

It is with great pride and deep appreciation that I present this important thematic volume, “*The Future of the Western Balkans after Russian Aggression on Ukraine: What’s next?*” In this book, leading scholars, policymakers, and regional experts come together to offer invaluable insights into the pressing issues that define the future trajectory of the Western Balkans in the wake of Russia’s aggression on Ukraine. For over two decades, the Western Balkans have been on the path toward EU integration, yet meaningful progress toward accession remains elusive. However, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has reshaped their European prospects, introducing new dynamics and challenges.

The war has dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape, and its reverberations are keenly felt across Europe, with particular implications for the stability, security, and prosperity of the Western Balkans.

The contributions in this volume are both timely and necessary. They provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing the region—from political and economic shifts to the renewal of security and defense frameworks. These essays delve into the region’s

European integration process, the impact of shifting alliances, the importance of NATO and the EU, as well as the broader implications of migration, governance, and ethnic tensions.

What sets this collection apart is the depth of analysis and the quality of the contributions, which reflect the authors' profound expertise and their commitment to fostering a better future for the region.

I commend each of the authors for their rigorous research and thoughtful reflections. Their contributions not only enrich our understanding of the current landscape but also help illuminate pathways to peace, cooperation, and resilience in a region that has historically faced great challenges. I would like to express my special appreciation to each one of them for their insightful perspectives, which offer a roadmap for tackling the complex issues at hand.

In addition to the publication of this book, we recognize the need for continued dialogue and critical analysis in the years to come. The situation in the Western Balkans is fluid, and ongoing monitoring of regional threats and challenges is essential for fostering peace and progress. The *Center for Peace and Transcultural Communication* at the University of Tetova envisions the creation of a regular monitoring mechanism, aimed at reporting on such timely issues, ensuring that the region remains a focal point for scholarly attention and policy development.

Regular reporting on these challenges will be critical to understanding the evolving security, political, and economic dynamics of the Western Balkans, and ultimately, to safeguarding peace and stability in the region.

As we look to the future, this book serves as a vital reference point for those interested in understanding the complexities of the Western Balkans and the broader European context. It is my hope that it will contribute to informed policy-making and constructive dialogue, both within the region and on the global stage.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all who contributed to this book and to those who will continue to engage with its contents as we collectively work towards a peaceful and prosperous future for the Western Balkans.

Donika Kamberi

As the Ukrainian Ambassador to the Republic of North Macedonia, it is both an honor and a privilege to present this thematic book, born from the reflections and discussions during the international scientific conference titled —The Future of the Western Balkans after Russian Aggression on Ukraine – What's next? held in June 2024 where I was invited as a key-note speaker to address Ukrainian story.

Ukraine is enduring an unprecedented war of aggression by the Russian Federation, and as we mark the third year of this conflict, the consequences of Russia's actions are felt far beyond our borders. The rippling effects on global security—encompassing food, energy, nuclear, and information security—are being experienced by nations across the world, including those in the Western Balkans. This conference explored these concerns, examined the geopolitical ramifications, and addressed the future of our region in the context of Russia's unprovoked aggression.

Ukraine, as we continue to defend our sovereignty and territorial integrity, is also standing as a vanguard of democratic values. The stakes are not only about Ukraine's survival but also about the preservation of peace, security, and the international order as enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

In these challenging times, we are grateful to the international community, including North Macedonia, for its unwavering support in providing military assistance and humanitarian aid, as well as welcoming displaced Ukrainians seeking refuge from the horrors of war.

The discussions held at the conference were pivotal, highlighting not just the immediate challenges, but also the longer-term strategic implications for the entire region. The Western Balkans, like Ukraine, faces complex geopolitical realities, and the outcomes of this war will shape the region's future for generations to come.

This book is a valuable contribution to this ongoing dialogue. It brings together insights from experts, policymakers, and scholars who have collectively shed light on the ways in which Russia's war against Ukraine reshapes global dynamics and what steps we, as nations that uphold the values of freedom, justice, and democracy, must take to counter these threats.

The collaboration between the countries of the Western Balkans and Ukraine remains crucial. Together, we must remain steadfast in our support for Ukraine, for the principles of international law and for a just peace.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the **Center for Peace at the University of Tetova** for its active role in fostering these crucial discussions and for its dedication to promoting peace, security, and academic collaboration.

As we move forward, let us remember that the future of the Western Balkans and Ukraine are intertwined—both our stability and prosperity depend on our collective commitment to defending sovereignty, promoting peace, and securing the future for generations to come.

With sincere gratitude for the invaluable contributions of all those involved, I hope that the discussions from this

conference and this book will continue to inspire meaningful action towards a better, peaceful, and united future.

Larysa Dir

Ambassador of Ukraine to North Macedonia

Russian Aggression on Ukraine and its impact on the Western Balkans

Sonja Biserko

Russia's aggression against Ukraine was a specific catalyst for its presence in the Western Balkans and Serbia, in particular. Of all the European countries Serbia stands out as the only country to side with Russia, although it has voted for the UN resolutions supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

It has been a specific balancing tactic vis-à-vis the Western political community, which has since been lost. Sitting on several chairs, which Serbia skillfully practiced during the last decade, boiled down to the Russian and Chinese chairs.

Russia's expansion to the Balkans takes place at the time when the countries in this region are still unconsolidated and vulnerable and have incomplete identities, thus being susceptible to influence and pressure. Russia has started to develop the instruments of public diplomacy with a view to simultaneously strengthening the influence of its soft power. As an important strategic point towards Europe, Serbia is, in the Kremlin's view, suitable for an "experimental farm", where Russia's entire growing power can successfully manifest itself because for more it is already well positioned in Serbia.

Although it relies formally and existentially on the European Union, pro-Russian sentiment is dominant among the majority of Serbian citizens. In public and cultural life, the Russian presence is most distinctively demonstrated by the presence of the representatives of the Russian political, scientific, cultural and spiritual (church) elites in the media, including gatherings (most often devoted to geostrategic and historical topics).

The main aim of the Russian presence in the Balkans is to obstruct and directly thwart the expansion of NATO (the example of the Russian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the European Union. Intensive infiltration into the most sensitive parts of the Balkans started after the annexation of Crimea and the imposition of Western sanctions, and reached its peak after the aggression against Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia relies on historical, cultural and religious ties, which are greatly exaggerated by propaganda and diplomacy, as well as the skillful use of soft power. Since 2005, Moscow has been actively integrating itself into the international media market. At that time, the television channel *Russia Today* was founded and became very influential. It was followed by *Sputnik* in 2014. Russia also hires numerous Western PR agencies and well-known world figures and supports both right-wing and left-wing movements and parties.

Serbian pro-government media have become, without reservation, an extended arm of the Russian penetration and

widest possible presence in the political space and life of Serbia. This especially became apparent in the days and months after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This is one explanation why there is such a strong Russian narrative that is comparable to the Russian Federation itself.

The main link with Russia is resistance to liberal values, including human rights ideology. The main critics of human rights ideology are the Russian Orthodox Church and, in the Balkans, the Serbian Orthodox Church. Orthodox theologians and certain churches do not have an affirmative attitude towards the modern concept of human rights. It is considered a product of the West, its liberal values and individualism. As it is pointed out, it is overemphasized, individualized and absolutized and imposes itself on completely different cultural, social and political environments.

Russia systematically fuels tensions in the region, and its activities were also observed in Macedonia during the referendum on the name change, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina where it supports Milorad Dodik in the prevention of institutionalization at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Montenegro, it supported the failed coup and then intensified the media campaign through Serbian media and certain politicians, political parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). Its opportunities in Serbia are the greatest, since it has deeply infiltrated the SOC, security services, academic community, culture, influential

people, political parties, right-wing movements and non-governmental organizations, not to mention politicians.

The Russian Embassy with its agile Ambassadors actively participates in the political and social life of Serbia by promoting Russian-Serbian friendship. The former Russian Ambassador Chepurin has emphasized, among other things, that “the mission of the Russian and Serbian peoples is to be the bearers of the Orthodox civilization identity together with other Orthodox nations”.¹

This thesis has been very successfully spread by Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, who is a frequent guest in Belgrade and enjoys great respect in the academic community.² During his lectures in Belgrade, Dugin emphasized that “the center of the world is in Serbia”, and that “whoever controls Serbia controls the Balkans; who controls the Balkans controls a huge Mediterranean strategic

¹ “A. Čepurin, Srbi i Srbija u očima ruskog ambasadora“, *Večernje novosti*, Belgrade, 2019, p. 134.

² On the occasion of the murder of his daughter Darya Dugina, a group of 50 Serbian intellectuals sent a letter of support to A. Dugin in which, among other things, it was written that he always spoke of Serbs in superlative terms and that he was “fascinated with their resistance to the Western power centres, claiming that the Serbs have paid such a high price because they stand as a bulwark of the Slavic and Orthodox world. Therefore, they should be counted for in the future creation of a single Eurasian integration entity. In moments when Serbs were fighting for bare survival, when they were bombed with depleted uranium and when they were ostracized from the international order, Alexander Dugin was one of those who encouraged them, raised their self-confidence and told them that the future could look very different“.

region. That is the geopolitical axiom for which Serbs have paid so dearly in their history”.³

Dugin further points out that Serbia’s national interests are protected by “a strong army, neutrality and an active policy in organizing an all-Balkan defense and security system”. He believes that one should not be limited exclusively to the territory of Serbia, because one should think globally which means, at least in terms of the Balkans and then Eastern Europe, with access to Eurasia and the Middle East. A strong Serbia – strong and independent Balkans.⁴

Moscow has also skillfully instrumentalized Serbia’s frustration over defeat and unfulfilled aspirations in the region. It has supported its interpretation of the breakup of Yugoslavia (denying any Serbia’s responsibility). Thus, Ambassador Alexander Chepurin writes: “Like the Russians in the Russian Empire and later in the Soviet Union, the Serbs in Yugoslavia constituted a state-building nation. After the disintegration of both states, a huge number of Serbs and Russians found themselves outside their countries and are still subjected to discrimination and, occasionally, persecution”.

Russia’s penetration has also been facilitated by the fact that after 2006 and 2008 the European Union (EU) and the

³<https://www.scrhttps://standard.rs/2022/09/01/grupa-srpskih-intelektualaca-uputila-pismo-podrske-a-duginu/ibd.com/document/62897651/Aleksandar-Dugin-Srbija-Je-Centar-Sveta>.

⁴ <https://iskra.co/srbija/aleksandar-dugin-geopolitika-je-srpska-sudbina/> .

United States (USA) disengaged themselves from the Balkans due to the financial crisis, Brexit, migrant crisis and, finally, COVID-19 pandemic. This has turned the Western Balkan region into the island of instability which is capable of permanently generating crises and wider upheavals in Europe. In its foray into the Balkans, Moscow is particularly pointing to the perniciousness of liberal reforms, that is, the Western concept of democracy in which it has been met with understanding by local authoritarian leaders who resist an organized modern state. So, Ambassador Chepurin, when it comes to Serbia, points out that “liberal reforms, that is, the policy of ‘Westernization’ from 2000 to 2010, brought about the collapse of the Serbian welfare state, deindustrialization and general decline”.⁵

Russian soft power is especially extensive and utterly sensitive in certain sectors of the economy – primarily in the energy sector. Its influential presence is also felt in the media through which disinformation is spread, as well as in the activities of the Church, intelligence network, ultra-right parties and nongovernmental organizations. It uses a very thoughtful narrative about a shared history and fraternal relations with the predominantly Orthodox countries, about the mystical messianic role and the like.

In an analysis of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy it is stated that the narratives used by Serbian elites and pro-

⁵ “A. Čepurin, “Srbija i Srbi u očima ruskog ambasadora“, *Večernje novosti*, Belgrade 2019.

government media during 2020 and 2021 show that pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives play a role in the enslavement of the state. By forcing such narratives, Serbian elites promote themselves to the domestic public, strengthen their control and prolong the status of a captured state.⁶

Although almost all Western Balkan countries have been the target of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns over the last years, it has not been recognized as a security issue at the local level. In Serbia, the explanation for this is that the Progressives government has been their main promoter through the media under its control.⁷

Russia's increasingly visible malignant and destabilizing presence in the Balkans has prompted the comeback of the Western international community to the Balkans, especially after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Due to the fragility of the Western Balkan countries, their security has been once again called into question. However, this concerns not only the Balkans, but also Europe. Russia's possibilities to help Serbia militarily are extremely limited, since the latter is surrounded by NATO members. So, for example, they prevented the flight of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's plane over their territories, thus thwarting his visit to Belgrade. Nevertheless, Russia can maintain tensions in the region, as it happens now in Kosovo.

⁶<https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/rusija-i-kina-prijatelji-i-braca-zarobljene-drzave-analiza-narativa-u-funkciji-zarobljavanja-drzave/>

⁷ The Helsinki Committee has been warning about this malignant influence since 2014.

Only the synergy and joint action of the United States, European Union and NATO can bring about the completion of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and permanently neutralize the destabilizing potentials of Serbia and Russia.

SPP: Pro-Russian Orientation is a Historical Commitment

Pro-Russian orientation has always existed in Serbia and has had a mythical character, so to speak. However, the relationship with Russia in the second Yugoslavia was balanced. Only with the arrival of Slobodan Milošević did that relationship deepen and much was expected from Russia during Serbian war adventures. However, neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin met Milošević's expectations. This does not mean, however, that there were no contacts with certain circles in the army and security services. Milošević's brother (Borislav) was also an important contact. He was a KGB associate even at the time when he served in the Yugoslav embassy in Moscow during the 1970s. After the end of his term, he remained there without informing anyone about it. After Milošević, Vojislav Koštunica, Boris Tadić, the military leadership and many others continued close cooperation with Russia. According to the "democratic authorities", Serbia's foreign policy relies on four pillars: Russia, China, the United States and the European Union. According to many analyses, even the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić is linked to the Russian services. It

is true that the democratic government handed over the most important energy resource, Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), to Russia, which was previously agreed by Milošević and the army. Russia now controls the entire energy system in Serbia and it can be said that it represents a kind of “energy annexation”.

However, the deepened pro-Russian orientation coincides with the coming of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) to power (2012), which systematically promotes Russophilia. In a parliamentary debate, the then President of the Republic, Tomislav Nikolić, said: “Should one day the question arise as to whether we want to be a colony of the European Union or any organizational part of the Russian Federation, I would immediately vote for the latter option”.⁸

Russian President Vladimir Putin decorated Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić with the Order of Alexander Nevsky for a great contribution to the development of cooperation between the two countries (2019). This decoration is rarely awarded to foreigners. The meetings of the two Presidents were as frequent as their telephone conversations. Even now, during the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Vučić occasionally speaks with President Putin, whereby they exchange their views on the situation in Ukraine and Kosovo. It was agreed that Serbia would be regularly supplied with gas and that a three-year contract

⁸ <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/nikolic-evropa-ucjenjuje-rusija-pomaze-srbiji/070511033>.

would be signed (as agreed in May this year) On that occasion, the two Presidents confirmed their desire to strengthen a strategic partnership based on the traditionally close ties between the peoples of the two countries.⁹

The meeting of the Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, this summer came as a surprise to many. On that occasion, Vulin emphasized that he was sorry that Lavrov could not visit Serbia in June and that "by banning Minister Lavrov's official visit to Serbia all principles of international law have been violated and trampled".¹⁰ Sergey Lavrov said that the dialogue between Serbia and Russia was gradually progressing at all levels despite a complex international situation. As he especially pointed out, Vučić and Putin communicate via phone, compare their views and coordinate their steps.¹¹

Vulin also met with other officials such as Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu who, on that occasion, awarded him with a medal for his services in the promotion of defense cooperation between Serbia and Russia.¹²

⁹<https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1121201/vladimir-putin-aleksandar-vucic-snabdevanje-gasom>.

¹⁰<https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/314874/Vulin-u-Moskvi-Lavrovu-hvalio-prijateljstvo-Vucica-i-Putina-Rosteh-delegaciji-delio-medalje.html>.

¹¹<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/lavrov-vucic-i-putin-se-cuju-telefonom-uporedjuju-pozicije-i-uskladjuju-korake/>.

¹²<https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/314874/Vulin-u-Moskvi-Lavrovu-hvalio-prijateljstvo-Vucica-i-Putina-Rosteh-delegaciji-delio-medalje.html>.

Since 2012, the social patriotic movement “Immortal Regiment” has been organizing a march to honour the memory of war victims every 9 May, on the Day of Victory over Fascism in Russia, which has also spread to other countries. In 2019, it was also organized in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš and eight other cities in Serbia.

It is a part of a wider process of transforming the culture of remembrance in Serbia and an attempt at historical revisionism by manipulating war victims from 1945 to 1999, and equating the victims of collaborators with those of the anti-fascist movement. That is, to relativize the crimes of the Chetnik movement during the Second World War and Serbia’s responsibility for the wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In that pro-Russian project, the West and NATO are depicted as an aggressor and enemy in the war in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, while the march of the “Immortal Regiment” in Niš was led by the Hague convict General Vladimir Lazarević, who led the war against the Alliance.¹³

¹³http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/javno_menjenje_decembar_18.pdf.

The Serbian Orthodox Church and Russophilia

For both Serbs and Russians, Orthodoxy is firmly tied to the building of the state and, in both cases, played a strong integrative role in the preservation of national identity during numerous severe state crises. The revitalization of religion took place primarily through the politicization of religion, that is, in the context of a collapsed identity (socialist) framework by reaffirming the traditional ethnic and confessional patterns in order to homogenize identity within a national framework. The sacralization of national identity was strengthening the power of political elites, while at the same time enabling religious elites to finally return in the public sphere and recover at least a part of their lost privileges.¹⁴

The strongest and deepest connection with Russia is maintained through the Russian Orthodox Church, which the recent events have proven (the processions in Montenegro in 2022 and the processions in Belgrade against the Pride Parade in Belgrade in 2022).

The Russian Orthodox Church is characterized by its distinctly conservative values. Together with the government, it conducts its aggressive policy vis-à-vis the neighbourhood and, as in the case of Ukraine, justifies the war of aggression against it. Patriarch Kirill, Putin's close associate, considers the war in Ukraine to be a shield against

¹⁴ Srdjan Barišić, "Uloga Srpske pravoslavne crkve u profilisanju državne politike", Potka srpskog identiteta, Helsinki Committee, Belgrade, 2016.

the West which is, in his opinion, decadent, especially because of its acceptance of homosexuality.¹⁵ Pope Francis' attempt to advise Patriarch Kirill not to be a "ministrant" of the Kremlin has failed, because Patriarch Kirill has responded by justifying the war.¹⁶

During a three-day visit to Serbia in mid-November 2014, Patriarch Kirill stated that, when "a Russian comes to Serbia, he really feels at home" and that "the community of faith and culture, very close historical ties and our common blood shed for our common victories firmly bind our nations together".¹⁷

The Serbian Orthodox Church also played an important role in the mobilization of the Serbian people for the changes planned by Serbia following Tito's death. It actively supported the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also known that the Serbian Orthodox Church never recognized the "AVNOJ borders", considering them to be communist and therefore unsustainable in the new circumstances. After 2000, it received a huge public and media space and participated in shaping a new value system where it plays a dominant role.

The theological shaping of the public space in Serbia began after 2000, when Orthodoxy with political pretensions began

¹⁵<https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/papa-franjo-je-nazvao-partijarha-kirila-putinovim-ministrantom-stigla-reakcija-ruske-pravoslavne-ckve/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Patrijarh postao najglasnija opozicija", *Danas*, 18 October 2011.

to shape the social space, thus endangering the right of others to their own identity. The secular values of civil society – democracy, civil society, pluralistic discourse, secular and religious tolerance and individual human rights – are rejected.

During the 1990s, the SOC was dominated by the ideology of saintsavaism, represented by the Obraz Fatherland Movement, Saint Justin the Philosopher and Dveri Movement. The syntagm of that ideology is – one nation with one religion in one state.

The majority of right-wing groups and intellectuals stand for the “saintsavic identity of the Serbian people”, as the support on which “all victories and hopes for the recovery of Serbia are based”. The dominant nationalist elite strongly resist the reform of the state and society under the pretext that it will destroy the Serbian identity.

The finishing work on the construction of the Temple of Saint Sava is characterized by a manifest form of intensive cooperation between Russia and Serbia, that is, between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Even the painting of the Temple was entrusted to Russia (allegedly due to the lack of funds). The project worth 30 million euros was realized by 300 people from Russia and Belarus.

In 2012, the then Russian Ambassador in Belgrade, Alexander Konuzin, was awarded the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree. The same award was presented to his

predecessor, Ambassador Alexander Alekseyev, in 2008. Many other notable figures were also decorated: Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, Patriarch Alexy II of Moscow and All Russia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize Winner in Literature, Yuri Lushkov, Mayor of Moscow, Sergei Shoigu, Russian Minister of Civil Defence, Emergency Situations and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, and Army General, as well as Boris Kostensko, Managing Director of the world's largest Orthodox TV station, TV Spas in Moscow.

The Russian Orthodox Church supports the Serbian Orthodox Church's stance on Kosovo. During his meeting with the Serbian Patriarch in Moscow, Patriarch Kirill stated that the Russian Orthodox Church agreed with the stance of the Serbian Orthodox Church: "We unreservedly support the just position of the Serbian Orthodox Church on Kosovo and Metohija and will remain in dialogue with the leaderships of Russia and other countries concerning the issue of defending the stance we share with the Serbian Orthodox Church".¹⁸

On numerous occasions the Russian Orthodox Church has also expressed its concern over the Serbian people and the monasteries and churches of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations

¹⁸<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/895527/patrijarh-irinej-trazi-pomoc-ruskog-patrijarha-za-kosovo>.

of the Moscow Patriarchate, has also expressed his hope that such a political solution will be found as will not be unilateral, but will satisfy both parties and that “the Russian Orthodox Church has always consistently supported the Serbian Orthodox Church and its interests in its entire historical canonical territory, including Kosovo”.¹⁹

The Russian Orthodox Church also takes part in Russia’s anti-NATO propaganda. The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Serbian Orthodox Church also poses a risk to European security. The SOC is used here as a tool for destabilization and participation in the political life of certain states, which is a part of the tactics that enables the Kremlin to realize its goals in the Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia), hiding behind the mask of religion, spirituality and protection of Orthodox values.

Metropolitan Hilarion (ROC) supported the SOC in its fight against the discriminatory Law on the Freedom of Religion in Montenegro. He expressed his admiration for the processions and said that it was an attempt to nationalize the church property and transfer it to the noncanonical Montenegrin Orthodox Church. Speaking about the boundaries of church jurisdiction and spiritual centres, he

¹⁹https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti_dana/ruska-crkva-zabrinuta-za-sudbinu-srpskog-naroda-i-svetinja-na-kosovu/379437.

said that they never coincided with the administrative boundaries of the states.²⁰

Metropolitan Hilarion often expressed political views, so that during one of his visits to Belgrade he warned the President of Montenegro, Milo Djukanović, that if he did not reverse his stance on the creation of his own schismatic church, he would end up like the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko.²¹

Journalist Andrej Nikolaidis argues that the “main channel of Russian influence in the Balkans – including the cultural one – is the Serbian Orthodox Church. But it is not the only one. The Russian network is rather wide and ramified and consists of media, corrupt politicians, analysts, NGOs and, finally, useful idiots. In the Balkans, Russian policy – including cultural one – is primarily destructive. It does not offer any new value. Instead, it regrets the so-called “better old times” when, supposedly, “order was known”.

It is authoritarian, conciliar and imperial and combines the Stalinist and nationalist elements. In its interpretation, which is easily and naturally accepted by the local nationalist and

²⁰ Митрополит волоколамски Иларион (Алфејев): Напади на Српску Православну Цркву у Црној Гори је напад на канонско Православље, 4 August.2020, Srpska pravoslavna crkva, accessible at: http://www.spc.rs/sr/mitropolit_vokolamski_ilarion_alfejev_napadi_na_srpsku_pravoslavnu_crkvu_u_crnoj_gori_je_napad.

²¹ Mitropolit RPC poručio: Đukanović će proći kao Porošenko, 26 May 2020, Standard, accessible at: <https://www.standard.co.me/politika/skandalozno-mijesanje-ruske-crkve-u-unutrasnje-stvari-crne-gore-jukanovic-ce-proci-kao-porosenko/>.

clerical elites – both Orthodox and “hardcore” Catholic ones – “the West and its culture are a sum of evils and transgressions against God’s Commandments and traditional morality”.²²

Russia and NATO in the Balkans

Apart from the subjugation of Ukraine, NATO and the Western model of democracy have become Russia’s main war aims. Only a few years ago, Russia declared that the expansion of NATO in the Balkans (meaning Bosnia and Serbia) was against the Russian interests. This coincides with the radicalization of an anti-NATO campaign in Serbia, inspired by Moscow through *Sputnik* and other media present in the region. The Serbian media, especially those under Aleksandar Vučić’s control have taken over this wholeheartedly.

After the fall of Slobodan Milošević and democratic changes, Serbia opted for EU membership, which is officially still its aim. In 2003, Serbia became a member of the Council of Europe and in 2006 it entered into the Partnership for Peace with NATO. Since then, cooperation with NATO, especially the United States, United Kingdom and Norway, has been progressing and deepening. In 2016, the Serbian Parliament took the decision to increase cooperation with NATO, which was followed by the

²² <https://zurnal.info/clanak/meki-uticaj-uz-pomoc-djece-crkve-motorista-i-laznih-humanitaraca/23420>.

ratification of the *Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) between the Republic of Serbia and NATO*.

Although Russia did not explicitly oppose NATO membership, it pointed to its interests. So, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Serbia, Alexander Konuzin, said: “We will respect any decision you will make, but we count on Belgrade to respectfully approach our thinking that joining NATO will pose a threat to Russia’s security.”²³

One of the Russian arguments against Serbia’s NATO membership is that it will give legitimacy to NATO’s intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, which Russia experienced as “the final humiliation” by the West. Also, one of the arguments is that the intervention was not approved by the UN Security Council. Russia then changed its military doctrine and foreign policy concept, which coincided with Putin’s coming to power.

Kosovo is the only legal argument used by Russia for the possible vetoing of Kosovo’s membership in the United Nations. Serbia, on the other hand, holds Kosovo as an argument for seeking compensation in the Republic of Srpska, arguing that it too has the right to self-determination. In Serbia there is no awareness that the Kosovo issue is being resolved without Russia, which does not show any desire to participate in it and make any gesture to have it settled in

²³<https://milanmilenkovic.wordpress.com/2013/05/07/zasto-je-rusija-protiv-clanstva-srbije-u-nato/>.

Serbia's favour, as the broadest public in Serbia unfoundedly but boundlessly believes.

Although military cooperation with NATO is at a very high level, Serbia also maintains intensive military cooperation with Russia. As Defence Minister Vulin and Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko have pointed out, it is at a "historical high".²⁴

At the end of 2013, Serbia and Russia signed an agreement on military cooperation. In accordance with this agreement, the two armies started to plan joint military exercises and the first one to be carried out was "Srem 2014" at the "Nikinci" training ground near Sremska Mitrovica. It is interesting to note that this exercise was carried out during the first days of Russian Patriarch Kirill's visit.

Commercial cooperation has been carried out for more than ten years. The purchase of Russian weapons has become dominant, while military exercises, training and Russian donations to Serbia have already become an established practice. However, the Russian request to open the office of the Russian Ministry of Defence within the Serbian Ministry of Defence did not go through.

In its analysis, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy points out that military cooperation between Serbia and Russia is often presented in a hyperbolic way by pro-government media for the purpose of self-promotion. However, the

²⁴<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/479325/vojna-saradnja-srbije-i-rusije-na-istorijskom-vrhuncu.php>.

inconsistencies concerning military cooperation with Russia are often not objectively conveyed to the public. Such an example is Russia's donation of six MIG-29 fighter jets to Serbia in 2017. Although this transaction was formally qualified as a donation, Belgrade still had to pay Moscow \$185 million for their repair.²⁵

Serbia and the War in Ukraine

Since the beginning of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has intensified its diplomatic and other efforts in the Western Balkans, which the West perceives as the most vulnerable region for Russia's possible new actions. Western media and analysts have even speculated about the possibility of its opening a second front in the Balkans. There are two reasons for such Russian behaviour: to harm and compromise the EU and NATO and expand Moscow's sphere of influence in Europe.

There are numerous statements by Russian Ambassadors in the region which are also the threats to local leaders. Thus, the Russian Ambassador in Sarajevo, Igor Kalbukhov, with whom Milorad Dodik has an excellent cooperation, threatened Bosnia and Herzegovina on several occasions should it consider joining the EU. At the same time, Moscow warned the EU to stop "colonizing" the Western Balkans. Attacks on High Representative Christian Schmidt, whom

²⁵<https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/rusija-i-kina-prijatelji-i-braca-zarobljene-drzave-analiza-narativa-u-funkciji-zarobljavanja-drzave/>.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called “a fraud because he does not have an international power of attorney”, have also been intensified.

Serbia’s position on Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is getting clearer. Namely, apart from voting for the UN resolution reaffirming the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemning aggression, Serbia has sided with Russia in every respect. The expectations that Serbia would impose sanctions against Russia, at least limited ones, have been dashed. Aleksandar Vučić has expressly rejected Scholtz’s “harsh request” to impose sanctions against Russia.²⁶

President Vučić claims that Serbia will not change its attitude towards sanctions, which it took at the beginning of Russian aggression. He said: “That is our policy and we do not think of changing our policy at the moment. I think that our hitherto policies have proved to be wise, despite all hardships we have had to endure”.²⁷ At a joint conference with Borut Pahor in Slovenia, he stated that “Serbia is obliged to adopt the European foreign policy immediately before joining the EU, but none of them have yet informed

²⁶ <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/509396/Solc-na-ostar-nacin-trazi-da-se-prikljucimo-sankcijama-protiv-Rusije>.

²⁷ <https://www.pecat.co.rs/2022/08/srbija-nece-razmisljati-o-uvodjenju-sankcija-rusiji-tvr-di-vucic/>.

Serbia that it is about to become its member nor does it seem that they are planning to inform us”.²⁸

Russian Ambassador Botsan-Kharchenko publicly admonishes Vučić and claims that “Vučić will not change his stance on sanctions against Russia”. He points out that “pressures and attempts to force Belgrade to turn its back on Russia exist and will exist”, but “on the basis of Vučić’s official statements and personal contacts with him, there is reason to believe that Vučić’s approach regarding the rejection of anti-Russian measures is very stable and principled, and will remain so”.²⁹

He holds that Serbia’s orientation towards the European Union is not questionable, but the problem is that the West has confined its demands from Belgrade on its European path to three of them: joining the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions, recognition of Kosovo’s independence and curtailment of the ties with the leadership of the Republic of Srpska”.

He also holds that these “requests are the most sensitive and absolutely unacceptable for Belgrade.”³⁰ In essence, such statements feed the Serbian aspirations and expectations that Russia will enable their realization.

²⁸ <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/61092/vucic-posle-sastanka-s-pahorom-kako-da-objasnim-narodu-ako-uvdemo-sankcije-rusiji-stavite-se-nekad-u-nase-cipele/vest>.

²⁹ <https://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/region/374380/vucic-nece-promijeniti-stav-o-sankcijama-rusiji.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

Despite the pressures from both sides, Belgrade still has a perception of its geostrategic relevance, which is only partially true. The geopolitical importance of Serbia has been significantly reduced by its surroundings dominated by NATO members. However, the potential for instability lies in the fact that the Russian services are functioning unhindered, not only in Serbia, but also in Bosnia and Montenegro.

Serbia has political significance for Russia, because from its territory it is possible to exert influence on the situation in the region, especially through the Serbian Orthodox Church. The recent crisis in northern Kosovo erupted and quickly died out, because no one wanted its escalation. For several months now, Belgrade has been fuelling tensions in northern Kosovo and demonizing the Kosovo Prime Minister saying that he is preparing a pogrom of Kosovo Serbs. It is obvious that Russia is fuelling the tensions that have caused the crisis.

Identity of Serbia

All post-communist societies have gone or are going through an identity crisis. In that sense, as Milan Subotić points out, the politics of history is an integral part of “identity politics”, the importance of which is proportional to the crisis of self-understanding the community as well as the attempts to

resolve that crisis by formulating and imposing an essentialist collective, most frequently, national identity.³¹

Serbia is probably one of those countries which are faced with great obstacles in its own self-definition: on the one hand, it reckons with its socialist legacy and Yugoslavia and, on the other hand, with the war legacy of the 1990s. An important role in the creation of the new identity of Serbia is also played by Russia, whose presence on the cultural and political stage is increasingly prominent and influential.

Russia feeds Serbian frustration and the thesis that Yugoslavia was a Serbian delusion. The same goes for the thesis about artificially created nations such as, for example, Macedonians, Bosniaks and Montenegrins. At the same time, the influential pro-Russian conservative bloc strengthens the Russian component in the Serbian identity, that is, contributes to the “Russization of the Serbian nation”, with the thesis about the superiority of Orthodox civilization, Byzantine heritage, Slavism and mutual historical assistance. At one time Nikita Bondarev, a Russian expert on the Balkans, pointed out in a letter to the Serbian opposition that “the most important achievement of Aleksandar Vučić is that during his rule Russophilia in Serbia became mainstream. Today, the criticism of Russia and Vladimir Putin in Serbia is equal to political suicide”.³²

³¹ Milan Subotić, *Napred u prošlost*, Fabrika knjiga, 2010, p. 13.

³² <https://www.vesti.rs/Intervju/Nikita-Bondarev-Zasto-podrzavamo-Vucica-2.html>.

In addition, Serbian nationalists have a distinctly anti-Western stance that stems, inter alia, from the understanding that the West's interest is to disintegrate the Serbian national space, that is, prevent the creation of a single Serbian nation state, which will be a strong Balkan political unit relying on Russia.

The dominant part of the academic community, apart from being illiberal, pins high hopes in Russian support when it comes to the realization of the "Serbian World" concept. As a neologism, the "Serbian World" came into use in 2013, following the example of "Russian world".

Recent Developments

The war in Ukraine has cast a completely different light on the EU enlargement process, because the candidate countries are asked to take a concrete stance on whether they support the war in Ukraine or not. The EU has become more cautious vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and insists on the harmonization of their stance with its foreign policy.

Russia's invasion has made EU and NATO expansion an imperative. However, EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have made little progress, and whilst Bosnia has now been granted candidate status, its ethnic leaders have been unable to find basic consensus. The Western Balkan countries have also been offered funding under a new €6 billion growth plan, which is conditional on implementing reforms. The EU hopes this initiative will

promote economic convergence between the EU and the Western Balkans.

Meanwhile, Belgrade has continued to play its game among the four competing powers—the U.S., EU, Russia, and China—all the while hoping for Trump's return to the White House, which it perceives would allow it to finalize the partition plan.

Western engagement in the region currently operates on two parallel levels. The first is an effort to bring Serbia closer to the West through economic and military agreements, perceived as part of Serbia's strategic integration into the Western sphere. This is best illustrated by the recent visits of Chancellor Scholz³³ and President Macron³⁴ to Belgrade. Serbia signed an agreement with France to replace old Russian MiG aircraft with Rafale jets. Previously, it had reached an agreement with the EU and Germany on lithium exploitation for the production of batteries for electric cars. Serbian Foreign minister Djuric signed an agreement with the US on strategic cooperation in the field of energy in Serbia³⁵.

The second level involves a heightened NATO presence in the region, with an increase in NATO forces and the

³³<https://apnews.com/article/germany-serbia-lithium-scholz-vucic-114befbdab762c829b98616e94b99a0d>

³⁴<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/29/serbia-signs-deal-to-buy-french-fighter-jets-as-macron-visits-belgrade/>

³⁵<https://www.state.gov/united-states-and-serbia-sign-agreement-on-strategic-cooperation-in-energy/>

construction of new bases in Albania and Romania. Serbia is now surrounded by NATO countries, and vigilance from NATO, the CIA, and other security services has intensified. The visit of the CIA director William Burns³⁶, along with NATO's deputy secretary general Boris Ruge³⁷, though not publicly addressed in Serbia, clearly had a preventive focus. David Kanin, a former CIA analyst and now a professor at Johns Hopkins University, pointed out that the Burns visit was, among other things, aimed at preventing any escalation in the next 70 days, that is, until the U.S. elections.

Serbia's military cooperation with NATO is far more intensive than its cooperation with Russia, signaling its increasing alignment with the West both economically and in terms of security. Several global media outlets have analyzed President Vučić's ability to balance between various, often opposing, international actors. Some have argued that the recent agreements with Macron and Scholz represent a 'European moment' for Serbia, though skepticism remains regarding the strength of democratic and pro-European forces in the country.

The international security concerns increased after the Banjska incident³⁸. President Vučić has lost the trust of the

³⁶ <https://n1info.rs/english/news/former-serbian-ambassador-cia-chief-came-to-serbia-to-warn-of-consequences-for-destabilization/>

³⁷ https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/news_228309.htm?selectedLocale=en

³⁸ The Banjska attack was an armed assault carried out by Serb militants against the Kosovo Police which took place in the village of Banjska, North Kosovo, on 24 September 2023

Western international community following the Banjska incident and electoral fraud in December. Mounting pressures from the West (and likely Russia) have resulted in the radicalization of his rhetoric and threats, indicating his unease

However, Russia controls the Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), and China, through the Zijin Mining Group, owns 63 percent of RTB Bor, the country's largest mining company.³⁹ Vučić has also opened Serbia to the Arab world. The United Arab Emirates have invested millions of dollars in the Belgrade Waterfront project, which has been followed by various controversies.⁴⁰

³⁹<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rizici-balansiranje-vucic-rusija-kina-zapad/33111550.html>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

In conclusion

In essence, Serbia does not have foreign policy nor has it so far adopted a foreign policy strategy in the Parliament. Its foreign policy is an expression of its frustrations and inability to accept the new reality. The foreign policy based on four pillars (the European Union, China, Russia and the United States) indicates that Serbia has not yet taken a stance on its future. The policy that led to the brutal disintegration of Yugoslavia is still in effect. The “Serbian World” concept is actively carried out in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Serbia’s sticking with Russia means the preservation of a clerical-totalitarian system that generates fear of the difference and preserves the status quo. The state and the Serbian Orthodox Church systematically promote and suggest such an attitude. Kosovo is only used as a bargaining counter by both Serbia and Russia. In fact, they abuse it. . Given its fundamental anti-liberal and anti-Western stance it is challenging to foresee Serbia's next steps. Opening up and advancing such a society will require substantial patience and effort.

Serbia’s security and economic interests are tied to the West. Serbia is already surrounded by EU and NATO member countries and is, as a lonely island, waiting for changes in the geostrategic relations that will enable the realization of its aspirations and the leading role in the region. If Serbia does not take a clear stance on Russia, it will suffer serious

consequences, which will affect its economic survival, foreign direct investments and economic and social progress in general.

Russian policy sabotages the progress of the Western Balkans towards the EU, trying to preserve the dysfunctionality of the Western Balkan countries. Because the Russian role in the Balkans is not significant with respect to economic involvement, with the exception of the energy sector. Russia is a mirror of the failed transformations and transitions in the Western Balkans. The alliance with Russia is based on frustration and resistance to the values on which modern Europe is based. The Serbian public, which mostly still supports both Russia and Putin, fails to understand and think about what the relations with the EU mean for Serbia and where Serbia will be if the relations with it are terminated, from visas to investments, for example.

Only so long as the Balkan countries believe in the military presence of the United States in Europe, the progress of European integration and leaning towards the West are a guarantee for the sustainable stability and security of the region. Otherwise, the Balkans still have the potential for armed conflicts, especially if the Russian malign influence continues to be present.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo need a path to NATO membership, while the pro-Western forces in Montenegro need stronger support in order to remove pro-Moscow nationalists who are promoted by the Serbian President.

The Western Balkans need clear and prompt measures and geopolitical decisions by Brussels, such as those which were once made in the case of Bulgaria and Romania (it is evident now how far-sighted and effective they were).

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Is the Sun setting on the West?

Daniel Serwer

Introduction

The war in Ukraine has become a defining moment for liberal democracies worldwide. It challenges not only the sovereignty of a nation but also the foundational principles of the West: rule of law, individual rights, and collective security. While the conflict unfolds on the battlefields of Eastern Europe, its repercussions are felt far beyond, particularly in regions like the Western Balkans, where fragile democracies and unresolved ethnic tensions create fertile ground for external interference.

In this context, the question arises: *Is the sun setting on the West?* This question is not merely rhetorical; it reflects the growing anxieties about the resilience of liberal democratic systems in the face of rising autocracies, internal divisions, and global crises. The interconnectedness between the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the dynamics of the Western Balkans offers a lens to examine how the future of democracy may be shaped.

This chapter explores the vulnerabilities of the West, focusing on the challenges posed by resurgent nationalism, authoritarian leadership, and external meddling, with an emphasis on their implications for the Western Balkans. It also highlights the vital role of strong institutions, civil

society, and transatlantic cooperation in preserving and advancing the values of liberal democracy in an era of uncertainty.

The intersection of history, current geopolitics, and regional dynamics has never been more critical, especially as the implications of Russia's aggression in Ukraine reverberate across the Western Balkans.

This brings me to today's central question: *Is the sun setting on the West?* By the West, I refer to liberal democracies that safeguard individual rights through open political systems, independent judiciaries, and a commitment to collective security and economic cooperation.

Let me be clear: my answer is *no*. But this optimism requires nuance because the challenges faced by liberal democracies today are substantial.

The Global Context: Ukraine and the Future of Liberal Democracy

Russia's invasion of Ukraine represents not just an attack on a sovereign nation but an assault on the post-Cold War international order. The consequences of this aggression extend far beyond Kyiv. They test the resolve of NATO, the European Union, and their allies to defend democracy, the rule of law, and the principle of territorial integrity.

For the Balkans, the war in Ukraine is not a distant conflict—it is a harbinger of potential instability. The Kremlin's strategy to stoke ethnic nationalism and exploit

weak governance structures has already found fertile ground in the region. This tactic mirrors its approach in Ukraine, where Russia uses disinformation, proxies, and direct aggression to undermine democratic institutions.

The stakes for the West are high. A victory for Ukraine is essential not only for its survival but also for the credibility of liberal democracy worldwide. Conversely, a partitioned or weakened Ukraine would embolden revisionist powers, including Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić, and encourage further destabilization in the Balkans.

Serbia: The Linchpin of Regional Instability

Serbia under Vučić has become a regional hub for ethnic nationalism and irredentism. Despite initial hopes for reform, Vučić has entrenched autocratic rule, curtailed media freedom, and aligned Serbia increasingly with Russia and China. His government's influence now extends beyond Serbia's borders, with significant sway over political developments in Montenegro and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kosovo remains a primary target for Vučić's ambitions. Recent escalations—including violent incidents in northern Kosovo—demonstrate Serbia's continued attempts to challenge Kosovo's sovereignty and NATO's authority in the region. These actions serve both domestic and external purposes: consolidating Vučić's power at home and advancing Russian interests abroad.

The parallels with Ukraine are stark. Just as Moscow seeks to undermine Kyiv's sovereignty, Belgrade aims to destabilize its neighbors to achieve dominance over the region. Both rely on ethnic divisions, propaganda, and the manipulation of international norms.

The EU's Role: A Crisis of Commitment

The European Union, once a beacon of hope for the Balkans, is facing its own challenges. Rising populism and nationalism within member states threaten to undermine the EU's ability to act decisively. Countries like Hungary and Poland have already deviated from core EU principles, and upcoming elections in France and Germany could further complicate the Union's stance on critical issues like Ukraine and the Balkans.

A divided or hesitant EU would embolden autocrats in the region. It would also jeopardize the Western Balkans' Euro-Atlantic aspirations, leaving a vacuum for Russia and China to fill. The EU must reaffirm its commitment to enlargement and provide clear incentives for reform. Without this, the promise of integration could falter, and with it, the region's stability.

Macedonia's Choice

In my book "From War to Peace in the Balkans, the Middle East and Ukraine" I wrote "*Like other Balkan countries,*

Macedonia behaves like a bicycle. Without forward motion, it tends to fall over.”

North Macedonia exemplifies the difficult but rewarding path of Euro-Atlantic integration. Despite internal challenges and external pressures, it has maintained its commitment to NATO and the EU. However, the country is not immune to the region's broader trends. Ethnic tensions, economic struggles, and external meddling remain persistent threats.

Russia's influence, often channeled through proxies like Vučić, aims to exploit these vulnerabilities. Macedonia must resist such pressures by strengthening its democratic institutions and fostering interethnic harmony. Its success as a multiethnic democracy is not only crucial for its own future but also for the stability of the Balkans as a whole.

The Way Forward

The war in Ukraine has crystallized the struggle between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. For the Balkans, this is not an abstract conflict—it is a lived reality. The region stands at a crossroads, with one path leading to integration with the West and the other to renewed instability and authoritarianism.

To prevent the sun from setting on the West, the Balkans must prioritize:

Strengthening Institutions: Independent judiciaries, free media, and accountable governments are essential to countering autocratic tendencies.

Fostering Civil Society: A vibrant civil society can serve as a bulwark against extremism and corruption.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation: Collaboration among Balkan states is key to resisting external interference and building a shared future within the Euro-Atlantic community.

The international community, particularly the EU and the US, must also do its part. Supporting Ukraine's sovereignty is inseparable from supporting stability in the Balkans. Both are critical to upholding the principles that define the West.

Conclusion

The challenges are immense, but so too are the opportunities. By choosing democracy, inclusion, and integration, the Balkans can secure their place in a stable and prosperous Europe. The sun is not setting on the West—it is rising with each act of resistance against tyranny and each step toward a more inclusive and democratic future.

The unfolding events in Ukraine and their ripple effects across the Western Balkans have illuminated a stark reality: the battle for liberal democracy is far from over. This struggle is not confined to any single nation or region but is a defining challenge for the West as a whole.

The Kremlin's aggression in Ukraine and its exploitation of ethnic nationalism in the Balkans reveal a clear strategy to undermine democratic systems, erode trust in international institutions, and sow division among nations. For the Western Balkans, these challenges are both external and internal. Leaders like Aleksandar Vučić, bolstered by Russian and Chinese influence, exploit weak institutions, media manipulation, and unresolved historical grievances to consolidate power and stoke ethnic tensions. These dynamics threaten not only the democratic progress of individual states but also the region's broader Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Yet, the future is not predetermined. The Western Balkans has a choice: to succumb to the forces of division and authoritarianism or to strengthen their commitment to

democracy, inclusivity, and regional cooperation. This choice requires active engagement from both local leaders and the international community. NATO and the European Union must reaffirm their support for the region, providing not only security guarantees but also clear and tangible pathways to integration. Equally, civil society and democratic institutions within the Balkans must rise to the occasion, countering disinformation, fostering interethnic harmony, and holding leaders accountable.

The war in Ukraine serves as a powerful reminder that sovereignty, democracy, and peace are hard-won and easily threatened. The Balkans can draw valuable lessons from Ukraine's resilience and the unwavering support it has received from the transatlantic alliance. By aligning with these principles, the region can resist authoritarian encroachment and build a future rooted in stability and prosperity.

Ultimately, the survival and success of liberal democracy depend on the collective efforts of nations, institutions, and individuals. The sun has not set on the West—it shines whenever and wherever people stand up for the principles of freedom, justice, and equality. For the Western Balkans, this moment is an opportunity to reaffirm their place in a united and democratic Europe, contributing to a legacy of peace and shared progress.

The Ukrainian Conflict and Challenges to the Regional Cooperation in South-East Europe

Fatmir Xheladini

In a changing geopolitical global landscape, the most recent conflict that has stirred the interest of the global political elite is the Russian aggression on Ukraine. The conflict as many other conflicts that history has attested is driven by misperceptions on key contesting issues of political interest, the influence of one over another and historical interpretations of events that national memories of those involved diverge on their respective interpretations. The full-scale conflict between the Russian Federation and an independent Ukraine, like many other historical conflicts, is fueled by politics of interest, influence, and identity. This is also true in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict due to their geographical proximity and historical-political entanglement.

Though the recent conflict and attempted aggression over Ukraine have their roots in 2014, tensions between the two can be traced far back in history to the inception of both nations as organized entities in the Middle Ages. Despite the seemingly peaceful separation following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's agreement to recognize Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state, political tensions

persisted between their governments. These tensions escalated into direct armed conflict when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and supported separatist movements in Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, leading to prolonged fighting in the Donbas area and resulting in over 14,000 deaths by 2021.⁴¹

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces in 2022 shocked Europe and the world. The European continent had experienced a prolonged period of peace since World War II, with post-Cold War European discourse centering on economic cooperation and adherence to international norms.⁴² After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia and European countries aimed to expand cooperation, particularly in economic matters. Western investments flowed into the struggling Russian economy, fostering mutual trust and technological exchange.

Given this extensive collaboration, the notion that Russia was drawn into conflict by NATO's expansion into its sphere of influence appears inconsistent with historical developments.

⁴¹ "Russia's War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict," inss.ndu.edu, available at: <https://inss.ndu.edu/Publications/View-Publications/Article/3010403/russias-war-in-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict/>

⁴² "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia," cfr.org, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>

Security cooperation between NATO and Russia also flourished in the post-Soviet era. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security laid the groundwork for collaboration in counterterrorism, arms control, and peacekeeping.

This cooperation expanded further in 2002 with the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), allowing both parties to discuss security concerns on equal footing. The NRC initially met monthly at the ambassadorial level, semi-annually at the ministerial level, and occasionally at NATO summits. One tangible outcome of this cooperation was Russia's facilitation of NATO logistical support for operations in Afghanistan.

Despite these efforts, the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia marked a turning point in NATO-Russia relations, prompting NATO members to reassess their stance. Meetings of the NRC became increasingly irregular after 2009 as trust eroded. The situation further deteriorated after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the NRC ceased functioning entirely.⁴³

Several factors have strained NATO-Russia relations. The consolidation of power under Vladimir Putin marked a return to a Soviet-style bureaucratic legacy, conflicting with

⁴³ "NATO-Russia Relations: The Background," nato.int, available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2003-NATO-Russia_en.pdf

the Euro-Atlantic vision of cooperation. Russia's ideological framework perceives the European Union and NATO in geopolitical terms, viewing them as extensions of Western dominance aimed at undermining Russian authority in its neighborhood. The open aggression against Ukraine in 2022 starkly revealed the strategic and ideological divide between Russia and Western nations.⁴⁴

Russia's Malign Activities in the South East Europe

The Western Balkan region has historically been in the spotlight of crisis management by interested regional organizations such as the EU, NATO, and the UN, due to its history of ethnic strife, making it a viable ground for influence by external parties. Russia has not been an exception in this regard and has continuously employed different strategies to expand its influence in the region. Through a combination of economic activity, political manipulation, and disinformation, Russia seeks to challenge Western Balkan countries' integration efforts into the EU and NATO, thereby destabilizing the region.

Russia has supported political entities that share similar ideologies and rhetoric, particularly regarding NATO and EU integration aspirations in the Western Balkans. The

⁴⁴ "Russia's War Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences," tandfonline.com, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10758216.2024.2343640>

outbreak of conflict in Ukraine has intensified Russian activities, further complicating the path of these countries into the EU and threatening the fragile stability in the region.⁴⁵

Political and Military Influence

One of Russia's primary strategies to exert political influence in the Balkans is maintaining close ties with individuals, governments, and political parties that oppose the values promoted by the European Union. The EU champions integration and cooperation as a means of achieving stability in the Western Balkans.⁴⁶

A notable example is the establishment of the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center, opened in 2012 in Niš as an intergovernmental organization. Russia has supported Serbia through various mechanisms, including military assistance, political allegiance, and diplomatic backing, particularly on the issue of Kosovo's non-recognition. This alliance has enabled Russia to maintain substantial political influence in Serbia, where many political figures advocate for closer ties with Russia rather than full EU integration.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Nimmo, B. *Propaganda and Disinformation in the Western Balkans: A Growing Concern*. European Council on Foreign Relations. 2018

⁴⁶ European Parliamentary Research Service. "Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans," 2023.

⁴⁷ Bechev, Dimitar. "Russia in the Balkans: Great Power Politics and Local Response." *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2019.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia's influence is primarily exerted through the entity of Republika Srpska and its leader, Milorad Dodik. Dodik promotes Russian interests, portraying himself as a pro-Russian political leader in the Western Balkans and frequently threatening the stability of the political system established to end the bloody conflicts of the early 1990s. Russian support for Dodik has strengthened his position as a pro-Russian separatist figure within Bosnia's complex federal system. He has repeatedly challenged the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and called for the secession of Republika Srpska, moves that could destabilize the region. Moscow's backing of such rhetoric is designed to undermine EU efforts to foster regional stability and integration, deepening divisions among Bosnia's ethnic and political groups.⁴⁸

Additionally, Russia has provided military support and training to these countries, ensuring that their armed forces maintain alignment with Russian interests. This military cooperation has hindered Balkan states' NATO aspirations, as Serbia, in particular, perceives its military ties with Russia as crucial to national security.

⁴⁸ Bieber, F. "Secessionism and Russian Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Southeastern Europe Journal*, 44(1).2020

Disinformation, Division, and EU/NATO Obstruction

A less visible but equally pernicious aspect of Russia's influence in the Balkans is its extensive use of disinformation and propaganda. Russian media outlets and social media platforms have been employed to spread narratives that undermine trust in Western institutions like the EU and NATO, portraying them as antagonistic forces bent on destabilizing the region. Russian-backed disinformation campaigns frequently target key political leaders and activists advocating for EU and NATO integration, framing them as traitors or foreign agents.⁴⁹

In Serbia, for instance, Russian state-controlled media have consistently depicted the EU and NATO as primary threats to the country's sovereignty and stability, while presenting Russia as a protector of Serbian interests.² This narrative has resonated with a significant portion of the Serbian public, particularly among those who view NATO's bombing campaign during the Kosovo War in 1999 as an unjust aggression. Such messaging, combined with historical grievances, has made it difficult for pro-European forces in the region to gain a foothold, further delaying the Western Balkans' integration into European structures.⁵⁰

⁴⁹NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. "Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment," 2018.

⁵⁰Jovanović, S. "NATO and Serbia: The Legacy of 1999 and Contemporary Narratives." *Journal of Balkan Studies*, 23(2).2021

Russia's disinformation campaigns also target countries like Montenegro, where pro-Western political parties have struggled against a wave of anti-NATO sentiment fueled by Russian media outlets. By promoting divisive and nationalist rhetoric, Russia has sought to stoke ethnic and political tensions, making it harder for these countries to establish stable, pro-European governance and secure their path to EU membership.

Exacerbating Ethnic and Political Divisions

The Western Balkans remains a region plagued by deep ethnic and political divisions, a legacy of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Russia has strategically exploited these divisions to foster instability and resistance to European integration. By supporting nationalist and separatist movements, Russia has deepened the cleavages between ethnic groups, which in turn weakens the region's ability to build strong, cooperative political frameworks necessary for EU accession.⁶

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia's support for Republika Srpska has exacerbated ethnic tensions between Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs.⁷ By backing the secessionist agenda of Milorad Dodik, Russia has made it more difficult for Bosnia to function as a unified state, undermining the EU's efforts to promote stability and peace in the region.⁸ Similar dynamics can be observed in Kosovo, where Russia's

steadfast support for Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's independence has perpetuated the territorial dispute, preventing Kosovo from gaining broader international recognition and slowing its integration into European and international institutions.⁵¹

Moreover, Russia's actions have undermined efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and good governance. By perpetuating nationalistic and ethnic narratives, Russia has obstructed cooperation between Balkan states, particularly in areas such as trade, energy, and infrastructure development. This fragmentation has made it harder for countries in the region to move forward on key EU accession reforms, as political leaders often prioritize nationalistic interests over regional cooperation.

Undermining EU and NATO Integration

Perhaps the most direct consequence of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is its persistent efforts to block the region's integration into the EU and NATO. By fostering pro-Russian sentiment, manipulating political processes, and supporting anti-EU factions, Russia has delayed the accession of several Western Balkan states into European structures. This delay not only prolongs the region's political instability but also prevents the Balkans from fully benefiting from the economic growth, security guarantees,

⁵¹ Clingendael Institute. "Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro," 2023.

and democratic reforms associated with EU and NATO membership.⁵²

Russia's strategy of supporting anti-EU political parties has been particularly evident in Montenegro and North Macedonia, where Russia has backed pro-Russian candidates who oppose NATO membership.¹³ In Montenegro, this opposition culminated in a 2016 coup attempt, which was allegedly backed by Russian operatives.¹⁴ Similarly, in North Macedonia, Russia has sought to destabilize the government's pro-EU and pro-NATO stance by supporting nationalist factions that reject these European integration aspirations.

Countermeasures and Regional Cooperation

Addressing Russian malign influence and misinformation requires a coordinated and multi-faceted approach, both within North Macedonia and across the region. A combination of societal resilience, cybersecurity measures, regional partnerships, and energy diversification is essential to counter disinformation and enhance national security.

Strengthening Resilience

Building societal resilience to misinformation is crucial for reducing its impact. This includes:

⁵² Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. "Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans," 2023.

Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy among citizens enables them to identify and resist disinformation. Educational institutions should integrate media literacy into curricula, and public awareness campaigns should promote fact-checking and responsible media consumption.

Supporting independent media outlets that provide accurate and balanced reporting, free from political or external influence, is essential. This can be achieved through financial assistance, legal protections, and international partnerships that reinforce journalistic integrity.

Empowering civil society organizations to monitor and expose disinformation campaigns fosters public awareness and strengthens democratic resilience. Initiatives such as fact-checking platforms and investigative journalism collaborations can play a crucial role.

Given the prominence of online platforms in disseminating misinformation, robust cybersecurity measures are critical. North Macedonia should:

- I. Invest in cybersecurity infrastructure and modernize digital defenses.
- II. Train personnel in cybersecurity best practices and threat detection.
- III. Collaborate with international partners to counter digital threats, including NATO and the EU's cybersecurity agencies.
- IV. Implement stricter regulations for online platforms to enhance transparency and accountability.

Regional and International Cooperation

The transnational nature of Russian influence necessitates enhanced regional cooperation. The Western Balkans can benefit from:

Joint Initiatives: Conducting joint counter-disinformation campaigns and training programs for journalists and policymakers. These initiatives should focus on media literacy, fact-checking, and counter-narrative strategies to effectively address misinformation. Regional workshops and simulation exercises can also help governments and media professionals respond to emerging threats more efficiently.

Strategic Partnerships: Strengthening collaborations with NATO, the EU, and other international organizations to leverage expertise, funding, and technological resources. This includes developing cross-border information-sharing networks, supporting investigative journalism initiatives, and ensuring a unified response to propaganda campaigns. Additionally, fostering diplomatic engagement with international allies can help reinforce democratic institutions and uphold the rule of law.

Conclusion

The geopolitical dynamics surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict are indeed complex and deeply rooted in history. As mentioned, the conflict isn't just about territorial disputes or immediate political interests; it is heavily shaped by

misperceptions, historical narratives, and identity politics. Russia's actions toward Ukraine—starting with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and culminating in the full-scale invasion in 2022—reveal a broader struggle for influence and control, both regionally and internationally.

This broader struggle is mirrored in Russia's actions in the Balkans. The use of political, military, and disinformation strategies to prevent countries in Southeast Europe from integrating into the European Union and NATO demonstrates Russia's ongoing efforts to preserve its influence in the region. The support for anti-EU and anti-NATO factions, alongside disinformation campaigns, has kept several Balkan states mired in political instability, making it harder for them to move toward European integration.

Russia's strategic support for political figures such as Milorad Dodik in Bosnia, or the backing of Serbia on the Kosovo issue, illustrates how Russia leverages deep ethnic and political divides to its advantage. By exacerbating tensions in these countries, Russia not only delays their EU and NATO integration but also hinders regional cooperation, which is crucial for long-term stability.

The situation in both Ukraine and the Western Balkans highlights the ongoing struggles for influence and sovereignty in a rapidly changing global order. As external actors, such as Russia, continue to challenge the political integrity of these regions, fostering resilience at the local and regional levels, while maintaining robust international

partnerships, is essential for ensuring long-term stability and sovereignty.

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Economic and Political implications in the Western Balkan after the Russian Aggression in Ukraine

Bardhyl Dauti

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, stunned the European geopolitical landscape due to the involvement of the EU and NATO standing on the Ukrainian side. This war caused many casualties, migrations, a crisis in the Russian and Ukrainian economies, as well as in other economically related countries, and new diplomatic dealings (Kolarski, 2022). Due to the involvement of many external actors in the war, other potential countries could also emerge into the conflict, especially the allied countries (Lachert 2022). Some of these countries have well-established political ties with Russia and others with NATO and the EU. The Western Balkan (hereafter WB) countries could be affected by the Ukrainian war, due to the heterogeneous nature they have on the grounds of political and economic ties with Russian Federation *vis a vis* the EU and NATO.

On economic grounds, the Russian influence in the WB is manifested on energy sector, where Serbia imports almost 90% of its needs through Russian gas with North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina being even more

dependent, thus making these countries highly vulnerable to political destabilization (Stojkovski 2020; Vale 2022).

On political grounds, we can outline the founding of a “*Russian Serbian humanitarian center*” in Nis in 2012, which does observe the region moreover in a political context rather than a humanitarian one. Since the establishment of this center, the political initiatives to the EU approximation path, denoted by the “*Berlin process*”, of the WB region started to weaken significantly and be replaced by other potential solutions, like the “*Serbian World*” and “*Open Balkan*”, which started to shake the EU shape of the region. Both of these policies were oriented toward expanding Serbian-Russian influence for building up a new regional integration policy of the WB region, with more first-hand Serbian and second-hand Russian presence. This discussion paper will try to address a comprehensive explanation of the impact of the war of Ukraine on WB countries in geopolitical and economic contexts and will try to outline the key moments in internal and regional relations.

Economic Implications

From the economic point of view, the WB region may suffer from the downward projections of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2024 and 2025 and the years beyond. In 2021 or just before Russia launched its aggression over Ukraine, the GDP growth in the WB was 7%, while after the crisis the downward trend from 2022 which was recorded at the level of 4.2%, it was reduced to 3.9% in 2023 (IMF, 2024). Inflationary pressures constitute the second important economic channel through which the Ukraine crisis is felt in the WB, mainly because of significant disruptions in the global supply chain, where the WB region is part of this chain with high import dependency ratio. These pressures could be noticed moreover on industrial and agricultural production. The global increase in the price of energy and cereals worsened the economic conditions of the WB region. The statistical data provided from the World Bank on energy trends, claim that out of 40% share of European energy consumption, 27% is imported from Russia and Ukraine which at the same time together constitute 25% of world exports of wheat and cereals (World Bank, 2025a). The WB countries are importers of energy and cereals to a considerable extent and therefore, they may suffer significantly from inflated imports, in which case they will agonize from a decrease in aggregate demand, manifested through the decline of industrial and agricultural output, investments, and consumption. The high import dependency ratio of the WB countries can worsen the indicators of the

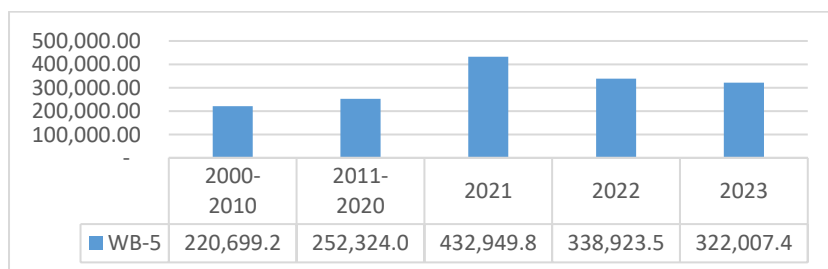
external macroeconomic sectors such as the trade deficit and balance of payments. More precisely, the deficit in the current account which records national transactions in the name of unilateral transfers, income and trading of goods and services, includes energy and important inputs for the economic survival of key economic sectors in the WB region, such are industrial inputs, agriculture inputs, and tourism services. This current account deficit, which in the annual period 2020-2022 because of the impact of COVID-19 was 4.2% in the WB countries, is projected to be 6.2% in the 2025 and beyond, because of the additional impact of the Ukraine crisis (Dauti, 2024).

Trade relationships between Ukraine, individual WB countries, Russia, and the United States

In this section, we illustrate the dynamics of bilateral trade flow at the export and import levels between Ukraine and individual WB countries, as well as between Ukraine and two competing countries on a global scale, the USA and Russia. The data contain detailed information on the country's exports and imports during three periods, the decade covering the yearly period, 2000-2010, the coming decade 2011-2020, and the last three years, 2021, 2022, and 2023. Focusing on Figures 1, 3, and 4, where the Ukrainian export performance to WB countries is outlined, an upward trend of export performance to WB countries is delineated, from the first to the second decade, reaching its peak in the year of 2022. Most of these exports, above the level of 40

percent, were oriented toward Serbia, during each observed period, followed by North Macedonia and Croatia. As concern to the export performance of Ukraine toward the USA and Russia, a significant share of these exports was addressed to Russia just before the conflict started, up to the year of 2022, whereas in the year of 2023, as outlined from figure 2 and 4 the recorded Ukrainian exports were completely linked with the USA.

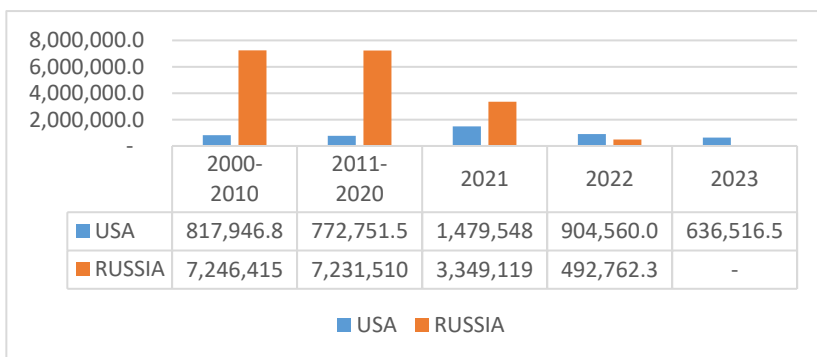
Figure 1: Gross Exports of Ukraine in the selected individual WB countries



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are expressed in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

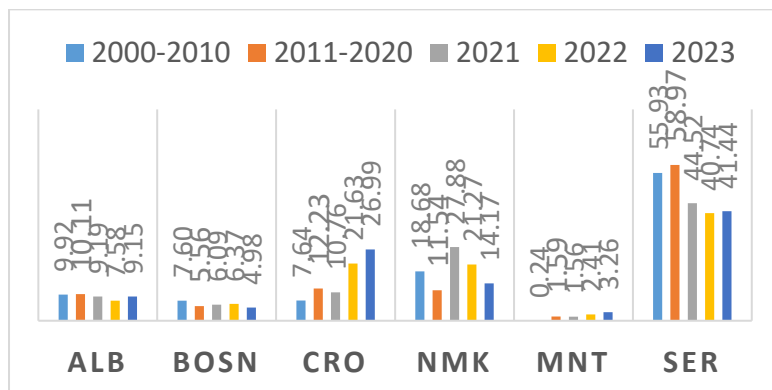
Figure 2: Gross Exports of Ukraine in Russia and the USA



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are expressed in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

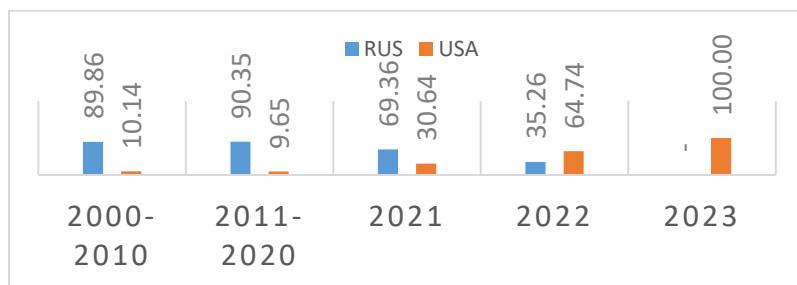
Figure 3: Exports share of Ukraine in individual WB countries, as a share of total Ukraine exports to WB group countries.



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation.

Note: The values are expressed in percentage terms of Ukraine exports in individual WB countries, in relation to general Ukraine exports to all WB countries, on the referred period. Exports are measured in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

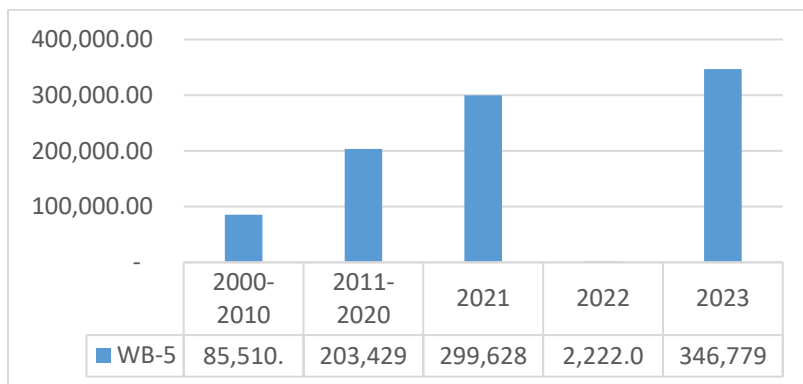
Figure 4: Exports share of Ukraine in Russia and USA, as a share of total Ukraine exports to both countries.



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are expressed in percentage terms of Ukraine exports in individual countries, in relation general Ukraine exports to all both countries, on the referred period. Exports are measured in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

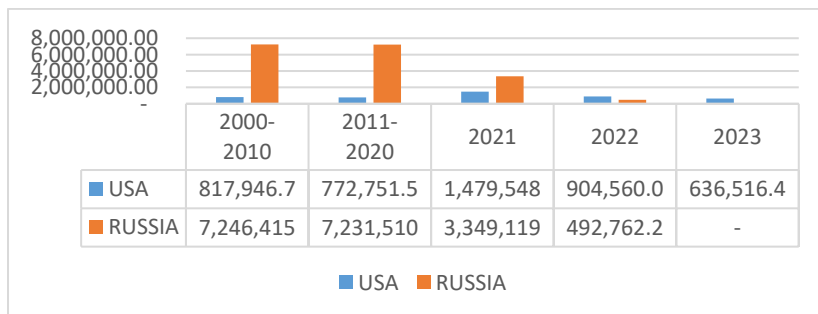
Figure 5: Gross Imports of Ukraine from WB-5 countries



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are measured in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

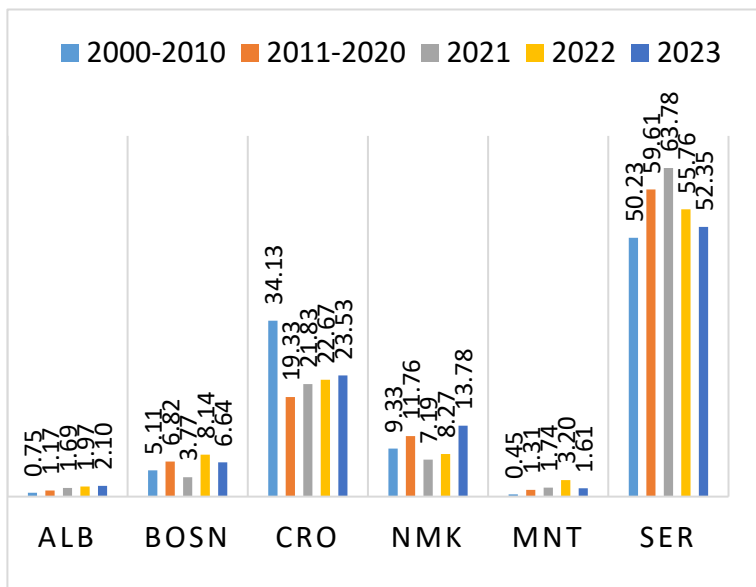
Figure 6: Gross Imports of Ukraine from Russia and USA



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are measured in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

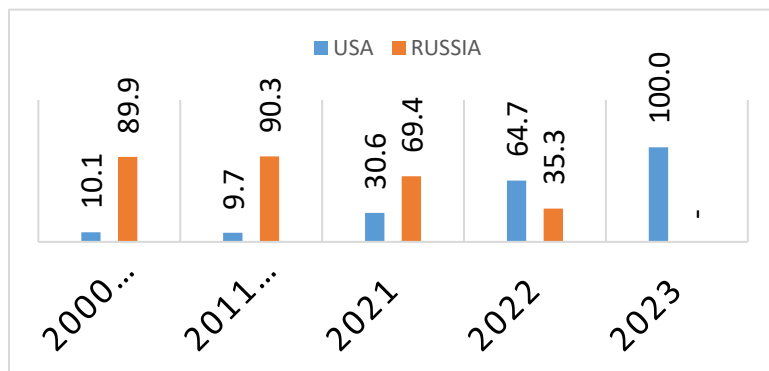
Figure 7: Imports share of Ukraine from individual WB countries, as a share of total Ukraine imports from WB group countries.



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are expressed in percentage terms of Ukraine imports from individual WB-5 countries, in relation general Ukraine imports from WB group countries, on the referred period. Imports are measured in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

Figure 8: Imports share of Ukraine from individual countries of Russia and the USA, as a share of total Ukraine imports from both countries



Source: World Bank (2024b) - WITS (World Integrated Trade Solution) and author's calculation

Note: The values are expressed in percentage terms of Ukraine imports from individual Russia and the USA, in relation to general Ukraine imports from both countries, on the referred period. Imports are measured in 1000 USD dollars according to WITS methodology.

The same trend can be observed on the grounds of Ukrainian imports from WB countries, in general, and at the individual level, as well as the Ukrainian imports from Russia and the USA, where a high Ukrainian import dependency ratio is recorded from Serbia, on the basis of WB countries, and from the USA in relation to Russia, on a global context, especially in the year of 2023, after the start of Ukrainian war (Figures 4-8).

Political Implications

The new geopolitical borders of Europe during the last decade were significantly challenged by the circumstances of various crises, such as: the Russian territorial expansion in the east, the BREXIT phenomenon in the west, the immigration crisis coming from the southeastern part, and the Chinese investment platforms in infrastructure and geostrategic projects, initially coming through the most breakable region in the background of institutional fragility, such as the WB region, to follow up other parts of consolidated Europe, later on. Considering these circumstances, the European Union with accelerated steps shall integrate within itself its missing puzzle, the Western Balkans, to save and strengthen its geopolitical borders on the south-east side, against the above-mentioned challenges. The expansion strategy of the EU *vis-à-vis* the WB shall not constitute a fiscal burden for European taxpayers, due to the facts that WB region in terms of surface area and number of inhabitants it is 20% smaller than Romania, while on the grounds of GDP per capita it is three times poorer than Hungary, which is often politically undisciplined within the EU. The potential benefit of the EU by integrating its missing puzzle, the WB region, is the additional access to the warm waters of the Adriatic and the Ionian seas, making this access impossible for Russia and its regional proxy, mainly Serbia.

The Russian Federation, through Serbia as proxy player in the region, in the recent past attempted to destabilize the WB region through its geopolitical project of the "Serbian World", which in concrete terms was manifested through the attempt to organize a coup in the state in Montenegro, to destabilize North Macedonia during the referendum for the country's membership in NATO and is still applying its ongoing efforts to reduce the state unitarist character of Kosovo and pushes forward political efforts for institutional destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia, with its destabilizing tendency toward the above-mentioned countries, significantly constrains the integration path of the WB region in the EU, through its multi-diverse games within its *fourfold dilemma*, by manifesting a constant desire for Russian weapons and Chinese investments on one hand, and cyclical willingness for European subsidies and American tolerance, on the other hand. In this view, in the geostrategic plan, Serbia serves as a political mirror of Moscow and Beijing for Brussels and Washington and vice versa as a political mirror of Brussels and Washington for Moscow and Beijing, to gain political benefits from both East and West.

Table 1: The Matrix of the political ties between individual WB countries and Russia vis a vis EU and NATO.

	Russia	EU and NATO
Albania	<p>Albania imposed economic sanctions on Russia and banned Russian aircraft from its airspace.</p> <p>Voted at the UN General Assembly to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council.</p> <p>Russia added Albania to its “enemy list”</p>	<p>Albania has been a NATO member since 2009.</p> <p>The Kuçova base is NATO's biggest project in Albania in the last decade.</p> <p>As of October 2024, Albania aims to be ready for accession by 2030.</p> <p>Fully coherent with NATO policies on regard to Ukraine war</p>
Bosnia and Herzegovina	<p>a complex internal political system consisted with three constituent people: Bosnians, Croats and Serbs who see differently the situation in Ukraine.</p> <p>Republica Srpska, an entity of</p>	<p>Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Bosnians are pro-Western oriented.</p> <p>Dodik opposes the entry of Bosnia and Herzegovina into</p>

	<p>Bosnian Serbs oriented towards Russia and strongly opposed to NATO membership.</p> <p>The Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dodik, has strongly supported Russia and opposed sanctions</p>	<p>NATO, whose negotiations have been ongoing since 2008.</p> <p>The representatives of Bosnian Croats and Bosnians, supported the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion as well as the EU sanctions against Moscow</p>
<p>Montenegro</p>	<p>Significant presence of Russian real estate in the country. Russia citizens own or co-own 18,906 real estate properties and 3.9 million square meters of land</p> <p>Officially, sanctions over Russia haven't been imposed yet.</p> <p>Ongoing conflict between "Serbian parties in favor of</p>	<p>NATO member since 5TH of June 2007.</p> <p>Candidate European Union (EU) member state in 2010.</p>

	Russia” and “pro-Western” parties in favor of NATO	
Serbia	<p>Enhanced historical and cultural ties attributed to common Slavic roots, language and religious similarities.</p> <p>Serbia refused to apply restrictive measures towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea.</p> <p>Russian veto against Kosovo ambitions to join the UN Security Council enhances the political ties between Serbia and Russia.</p>	<p>As a candidate country, it is often treated as one that does not follow EU interests.</p> <p>Serbia follows international law principles, supports Ukraine’s territorial integrity but has not imposed sanctions on Russia.</p> <p>Serbia has not prohibited Russian planes from flying over its territory. Due to the European ban on the flight of Russian planes, the only current air connections</p>

		between Europe and Russia are via Belgrade and Istanbul.
North Macedonia	<p>Joined EU economic sanctions, condemning Russia's invasion, and banned Russian aircraft from using its airspace.</p> <p>The public opinion, captured mostly by the thirdly ranked political party representing ethnic Macedonians, are pro Russia oriented, due to raised Euroscepticism resulting from changing name as one of the EU measures, but with no significant improvements in its EU path.</p>	<p>Joined NATO in 2020, after fixing out the name dispute with Greece.</p> <p>The public opinion captured by the political parties representing ethnic Albanians which constitute one third of total population (at about 28-30 percent of total population), are pro-western oriented, support NATO in relation to Russia and EU convergence path of the country.</p> <p>Bulgarian veto on opening accession talks in 2020, toward the EU is evidently growing is</p>

		considered as an EU betrayal of North Macedonia, a fact which fuels the public opinion toward Russia.
Kosovo	Putin used Kosovo independence on his claims for justifying the annexation referendums in eastern Ukraine, which on the other side angered many Serbian nationalists, who see it as legitimizing Kosovo's independence.	NATO has been leading a peace-support operation in Kosovo – the Kosovo Force (KFOR) – since June 1999. Currently recognized by the EU as a potential candidate for accession

Source: Anastasakis (2022); Dunai (2022)

The learned lesson from the eastward enlargement of the European Union in 2007, could serve as a milestone for another expansionary political enlargement of the EU toward Western Balkan, which can significantly overcome the weakness of institutional performance of WB countries and at the same time avoid the threats that are coming from Russia, which could potentially be manifested in the Balkan

throughout its most allied WB country, Serbia. Well integrated small WB countries into the EU could make the EU richer in terms of political ties and more strongly positioned toward the eastern threats that are coming from Russia.

As shown in Table 2, the WB countries are heterogeneous in nature with respect to integration agenda. Advancing regional cooperation in the Western Balkan is one of the priority paths towards common progress and integration in the European Union, for some of the WB countries, like: Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia, who have already shown their constant positive attitudes toward Brussel. The BREXIT phenomenon, as a concern for the Western side of the EU political border, left the two major political and economic superpowers within the EU, like Germany and France with coalitions with small states (Kurecic, 2017). At the same time, larger and mid-sized economies are influencing the destiny of Europe with the help of the USA as a geopolitical leading country on a global scale.

Table 2: Regional integration policies of the Western Balkan region.

Continent or the region of the world	The level of regional economic association/integration	Important regional military alliance(s) and/ or political associations	The previous and present, mostly stable or declining influence of a dominant/contender state	The rising and ambivalent influence of a contender state or a regional power
The Western Balkans	Free-trade area: CEFTA. Declared wish to join the EU (all states) and NATO (all minus Serbia)	NATO (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro) +Kosovo in cohesion with NATO security policies.	The EU The United States	Russia (Serbia)

Source: Kurecic (2017).

Leaving the WB region outside the political borders of the EU, could raise the ambitions of new global competitor countries geopolitically, toward this region. The challenger states globally, primarily Russia and China, with the WB countries as a missing puzzle of the EU, could form a risky cooperation throughout regional groupings of the WB countries, in an alternative format to the EU agenda, and hence create a common cause by forming predetermined voting positions on a world level. Therefore, the EU integration of the WB region is immediate for stopping other soft powers to emerge in the region.

Although, small EU states have limited capability to protect their national interests in case they decide to act politically on their own within an integrated political structure with big EU states, the scholars of international relations point out that small EU countries could construct a well-based political influence within the EU structure, subject to becoming EU members sooner rather than later. Therefore, the EU convergence path of the WB countries shall be motivated furthermore, by the EU itself as a guide for strengthening the south-eastern part of the EU political border. In addition, the WB countries could benefit in a much better way on political and economic grounds, by being subject to political engineering by the big two EU countries, Germany and France, on an alliance with the global players like USA and UK, rather than being subject to other experiments, by other unknown players in the town like Russia and China.

Regional integration policies of the Western Balkan countries.

Berlin process vis a vis Open Balkan

The Berlin process to Open Balkan was moreover seen as a vital and functional initiative relative to the EU integration agenda of the WB region, having regard the inclusivity that the Berlin process has on its framework policies, where, the individual WB countries are exposed to political duties that they should fulfill for relaxing the inter-state relations, strengthening the internal democratic capacity of the institutions, improving rule of law and enhancing the economic performance of the private and public sector. The Open Balkan initiative was considered as an experimental initiative for the regional integration agenda of the WB countries, locally motivated by Serbia. The process of the Open Balkan initiative can be recovered, if the political ideas of the integration of the Western Balkan states into the European Union weaken significantly. In this framework, the Open Balkan process could be anticipated as a substitute and not a complement to the Berlin process, creating a parallelism political concept to the Berlin process when it comes to the regional integration policy of the Western Balkan countries, supported by the EU.

In general, the paralleled political processes which may be in a replacement competition by default are not expected to produce institutional stability for the peoples and states

which are part of them, regardless of the political and territorial conjuncture within which they operate. Perfect examples for this are the dissemination of Yugoslavia and the USSR. The Open Balkan, on the other hand, is also not self-sufficient for the creation of institutional capacities that promote collective well-being, due to the lack of financial and political resources. In this regard, we can paraphrase the Croatian member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Željko Komšić, who said "*The Open Balkans is worth zero euros, while the Berlin Process costs 30 billion euros*". This statement suggests that Komšić sees the Open Balkans as an initiative from which no financial component or benefit comes, compared to the significant financial investments and potential benefits associated with the Berlin Process and direct EU involvement.

From the economic point of view, "Open Balkan" would enable the domination of the leading national economy on the foundation of competitive advantage to other economies, and in this line stands Serbia, which has a size and economic growth three times higher than the regional average and five times stronger than Albania and North Macedonia (other claimed participants in the Open Balkan initiative). In this setting, Serbia would benefit from the low price of production factors (labor, land, and capital) of the participating economies in the Open Balkan, and consequently would gain cost related advantages on the basis of economies of scale and scope, thus buying the Balkan production factors, which could make Serbia

dominant in terms of regional aggregate supply and record significant growth associated with lower inflation. The remained economies of other participants within the Open Balkan structure, like North Macedonia and Albania, for example, in order to move away from the selling position of their production factors, could potentially be forced to apply restrictive import policies for the Serbian goods and services, simply to stimulate domestic production and this would be accompanied by reductions in potential output and an increase in demand-derived inflation, because the resources of the affected countries would be significantly marginalized for generating economic growth. In this perspective, the dependency rate of the suffering economies of North Macedonia and Albania on Serbia exports, in a second cycle of economic activity, would potentially rise significantly.

Concerning the inequalities that may arise due to limiting the integration policies of the Balkan region, within the Balkan peninsula, as defined by the case of “Open Balkan”, we can deduce that the Balkan mini-regional economic integration policies are not an alternative solution for the integration of the Western Balkans region in the European Union and therefore small regional integrations are not expected to produce sustainable prosperity in the long run. Also, the undersigned mini-regional integration policies on vigorous political and economic grounds, would be one-sided and bias in favoring the development, due to the absence of mutual control mechanism on the decision-making

processes of the participating states on political grounds, and hence not uniform in promoting the general comprehensive economic development for all participating countries in the Open Balkan, on equal basis.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion in Ukraine has resulted in many political and economic effects worldwide. Consequently, the WB region gained more attention for the US and the EU. Russia intended supremacy throughout its proxy player, manifested over regional political initiative of "Serbian World"⁵³ and "Open Balkan", as well as Chinese investment platforms demonstrated through soft economic powers⁵⁴, mostly in state infrastructure projects, inter-linked with Russian pretended political dominance over the region, could make the WB region a risky place for the future of its inhabitants. Hence, leaving the WB region for a long-lasting period on the 'waiting room for the EU entrance with no backward

⁵³ Serbs are the closest partners of Russia (both those living in Serbia and Republika Srpska – one of the two entities comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina). It has strong ties to individual Serbian leaders and also exerts influence in the region through Serbian media outlets and the Orthodox Church.

⁵⁴ The ideological objective of China over the unintegrated countries of the Western Balkan region into the EU, is to promote the "Chinese way" of public life as an alternative solution to Western liberal democracy. China attempts to present its economic rise and technological achievements as a product of its political system, which in turn presents it as an example for the Western Balkan countries (which to some extent shows fragility on the grounds of rule of law and democracy) to follow.

exit door out of this pretended EU entrance door'', could become risky for the Western World, leaving space for some other fragile political and institutional initiatives in the region, which could come into force in terms of the will for a multipolar world that is becoming increasingly popular lately, with new players in the'' global political town'', like Russia and China.

In the opposite of the Russian proxy player in the WB region, namely Serbia, who through the initiatives of the' 'Serbian World'' and' 'Open Balkan'', manifest an experimental''Russian roulette integration policy'' of the WB region, the already well-established EU initiative for the WB region, namely' 'Berlin process'' shall be enhanced furthermore.

In terms of regional alliances, to stop Serbia devastate the EU convergence path of the WB region, the EU and the USA shall strengthen their political ties with their closest ally in the region, namely Albanians⁵⁵ (Albanians living in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia), as a predominant nation in the three countries, so as to accordingly attract the three countries at once, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, respectively to their gravity political point, Brussels. This could potentially have a positive effect on the Serbian nation, as well, on the second political stage, and help them to overcome the Russian tendencies imposed by Russia over

⁵⁵ Albanians are the only nation in the three Balkan states where they predominantly live (Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia) who do not view Belgrade as a regional leader.

Serbian state politics. Subsequently, the general Serbian public, (civil society and academia) and the Serbian orthodox church may potentially shift the Serbian national strategies toward the Western civilization, established by the USA and the EU. In this instance, the whole WB region would benefit in the long run, politically and economically.

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Advocating for Truth in North Macedonia: Challenges and Imperatives in a Fragmented Information Landscape

Edlira Palloshi Disha

In today's world, when digital media is so prevalent in our everyday lives, it is more crucial than ever to understand how it affects our thoughts, choices, and interactions with others.

As digital platforms take over as the main information sources, they influence not only our beliefs but also how we see the truth. With a constant flow of information, viewpoints, and infomercials, it's easier to fall into echo chambers, where we are only exposed to concepts that support what we already believe. This makes it more difficult to discern fact from fiction and affects what we support, how we participate in public debate and our political preferences. In a world where information is accessible yet frequently unreliable, it is crucial to be vigilant in order to make decisions that are well-informed and represent an actual knowledge of the issues that matter most.

Promoting the truth becomes more challenging in a time of constant information overload. The challenge is even more critical in North Macedonia, where public discourse is

shaped by political polarization, media fragmentation, and malign influences. The distinction between fact and opinion is frequently confused in this context due to the rapid dissemination of false information and low levels of trust in institutions. In this situation, promoting the truth entails more than just stating the facts; it also entails actively interacting with a polarized and diverse audience, encouraging critical thinking, and returning confidence in the institutions that influence public opinion.

The first question we should ask is: **What does it truly take to advocate for the truth in North Macedonia?**

Given that North Macedonia is characterized by high levels of populist communication, low levels of trust in media and institutions, and a high level of social media use—with almost 56 percent of the total population aged 18 and above active on social media. —we can say that North Macedonia has all the preconditions to be vulnerable to disinformation as highlighted by the scholar Humprecht and collaborators. Moreover, North Macedonia's strategic orientation often struggles to find a path between the West and the East. Russian influence manifests through direct support from political figures, dissemination of pro-Russian narratives, and efforts to sway public opinion against Western alliances like NATO and the EU.

According to opinion polls conducted by the International Republican Institute, support for EU integration is lower among Macedonian citizens, and strong commitment is consistently shown by the Albanian population in North

Macedonia, followed also by Albania and Kosovo citizens. This also highlights the deep divisions and fragmentation within society, both ethnically and ideologically. The media is similarly divided along ethnic and political lines. This suggests that the social information space is a mirror of our divided society. However, this disruption is further deepened by nationalistic narratives spread on social media and intensified during the most decisive times in North Macedonia.

When speaking about foreign influence, North Macedonia is embedded and integrated into its population through political parties, influencers, and their media channels. Key narratives promoted by Russian sources included discrediting democratic institutions, undermining the Euro Atlantic values, and amplifying nationalistic narratives within North Macedonia's society.

In a yet-to-be-published study, I found that 78 fact-checked articles from May 2024 mostly contained disinformation about the conflict in Ukraine. Following this, the most common topics were anti-West and anti-EU sentiments, anti-government movements, opposition to the Prespa Agreement and its implications, etc. These are corrected articles by fact-checkers who anybody can read online, however, their viewership is low in comparison to the original articles disseminated with false information.

In this election cycle, we witnessed a high level of polarization with nationalistic narratives fueling fear and hatred among Macedonian citizens. Prominent narratives

included claims of “Albanization” of the state, assertions that Macedonians are becoming "second-class citizens" in "their own country," and allegations that constitutional changes are being imposed under a Bulgarian dictum.

Having this in mind, **If the information space is fragmented, where to advocate for the truth?**

Digital media offers a space to share and advocate for our beliefs. But how can you make an impact in society through data-driven research in a space overloaded with all kinds of information, where each of us is surrounded by our echo chambers that social media algorithms enable, where the receiver of the information can be also the agent of the information and vice versa?! In a study conducted in 2020 for my master's thesis, I was intrigued to see how politically affiliated individuals behave and are affected by disinformation. Researching the topic of confirmation bias, which means that people access and accept information that confirms their prior beliefs about a specific topic, made me very pessimistic about the potential for making an impact. The results of the study showed that politically affiliated individuals are more affected by political disinformation regarding their own and their opponent's political party. They believed their affiliated political party's disinformation, if it had a positive context, and believed the disinformation about their opponent's political party if it had a negative context.

Moreover, when it comes to elections, disinformation campaigns increase their activities to deliberately confuse

voters, reduce participation, and undermine trust in democratic values and institutions.

Sensationalism and clickbait culture have overtaken the public sphere, where providing space for constructive and objective ideas from different perspectives that would have helped opinion formation is no longer an effort. Now, Edward Bernay's "Engineering consent" is more applicable than ever, reducing cost, shortening time, and exerting rapid influence through the use of micro-targeting tools.

According to the International Election Observation Mission for this election cycle 659,077 EUR donations from individuals and legal entities. Out of this sum, 87 percent was accounted for by the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition.

According to the Meta Ad Library, during the period of 18 April-4 May, political parties spent a total of 100,951 EUR on advertising, with the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition spending 44,485 euros and the SDSM-led coalition spending 25,014 euros.

This data underscores the critical role of social media in shaping political discourse and influencing voter behavior in the country.

In these conditions, when voter preference is engineered unconsciously, there is doubt whether they will support the future democratic government or not. This depends on whom and for whom they have been influenced. With all these continuous efforts, how can we be sure, and how can

we say that citizens are ready to make rational choices in future elections? Well, I think this is obvious now.

Why is speaking and pursuing truth essential today?

By making this question, we immediately associate it with the concept of post-truth.

The post-truth era is characterized by blurring the facts and arguments and prioritizing emotions and feelings which replace objective truth by drawing subjective conclusions. Having said that, fragile societies are always the target of information manipulations through emotional incentives that happen either in the media, by politics, or by certain groups that aim to disorient and deepen the division of an already divided society.

In a focused study that was recently published, I researched 54 news pieces from four media outlets to examine how they reported on constitutional changes in North Macedonia during a specific period. This study included both Macedonian and Albanian language media. The results showed that Macedonian language media outlets, which were part of this research, reinforced the opposition's statements about the constitutional changes, by not offering different viewpoints and perspectives to the audience. This phenomenon aligns with the agenda-setting principle, wherein media coverage prioritizes certain issues while diminishing the prominence of others, leading to a lack of attention to diverse perspectives and influencing public discourse on a specific topic.

This rhetoric has characterized the entire period of public discourse on constitutional changes, diverting the audience's focus from the main aspects and essential information regarding these changes. Simultaneously, it has incited divisions by encouraging the public to take sides, either in support of or against them. This polarization of public discourse has obstructed the inclusion of diverse viewpoints and well-informed decision-making.

Moreover, if we speak about the lack of institutional and media trust, it's concerning to note that in a recent opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), citizens of North Macedonia show a higher level of trust in religious institutions in 2024 compared to state institutions or the media. This level of trust in religious entities has increased since 2022.

Democracy is valid only when it involves the participation of a reasonably well-informed electorate, as Brian McNair also writes. The inclusion of educated and well-informed citizens in decision-making is more than necessary in a pluralistic democracy. Information disorder affects democracy and has long-term consequences in sowing doubt and confusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's reflect on three key questions that highlight the challenges we face in North Macedonia when it comes to information disorders and informed citizenship.

Firstly, advocating for truth requires a committed effort to counteract misleading narratives and to enable diverse perspectives. In a society where external and internal malign influences often blur common sense, the responsibility to uphold truth becomes not merely a journalistic and research duty but a societal imperative.

Secondly, the spread of different information pieces and the dominance of digital echo chambers create big obstacles to sharing unbiased information. Despite these challenges, digital platforms offer opportunities for meaningful discussions. As responsible citizens and scholars, we should use these platforms wisely to share well-researched facts and help raise awareness about critical thinking.

Third, today, emotions overshadow facts, threatening democracy. It's crucial to value truth and keep the public informed. It's vital to rebuild trust in institutions by asking for transparency and accountability. Our goal is to create a society where truth is valued, informed decisions are made, and democracy is strong. The journey ahead may be tough, but with determination and commitment, we can work toward increasing societal resilience and improving social cohesion.

In the end, let's remember that seeking the truth is more than gaining knowledge; it's the foundation of our freedom.

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Reporting Ukraine: Reflections on the War and Its Broader Implications

Tim Judah

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not merely a conflict over territory; it is a battle with global implications, shaping security frameworks, geopolitical alliances, and socio-political dynamics well beyond its borders. The Western Balkans, a region historically marked by war and division, finds itself entwined in these developments—through both direct consequences and echoes of its past struggles.

Contextualizing the Conflict

The war in Ukraine did not begin on February 24, 2022. Its roots lie in a protracted history of imperial ambitions and national resistance, intertwined with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's subsequent struggle for sovereignty. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Donbas were precursors to the full-scale invasion, showcasing Russia's intent to restore its empire.

Zbigniew Brzezinski's adage— "*Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire*"—remains crucial to understanding the stakes.

For the Western Balkans, this historical context resonates. The echoes of great-power politics, the manipulation of

ethnic and national identities, and the contestation over territorial sovereignty are stark reminders of the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

Parallels with the Balkans

The question of identity—central to the Ukrainian conflict—finds strong parallels in the Balkans. Just as Vladimir Putin insists that Ukrainians are an extension of Russians, denying their distinct nationhood, similar narratives have plagued the Western Balkans. In Montenegro, for instance, divisions persist between those identifying as Montenegrins and Serbs, sometimes even within families. In North Macedonia, debates over national identity, often influenced by external actors, remain contentious.

Ukraine's struggle to redefine its identity post-2014 mirrors the Balkans' journey of self-definition after the wars of the 1990s. Language and cultural affiliations, often politicized, have become battlegrounds for asserting sovereignty. The forced choices Ukrainians faced after 2014—whether to identify as Ukrainian or Russian—are akin to those faced by communities in Bosnia, Kosovo, and beyond during the Yugoslav wars.

Lessons for the Western Balkans

Ukraine's war has profound implications for the Balkans, particularly in terms of security. The invasion has underscored the fragility of peace in regions with unresolved

disputes and highlights the dangers of revisionist agendas. NATO's role in stabilizing the Balkans is more critical than ever, as Russia seeks to expand its influence in the region through political, economic, and hybrid means.

The response of Western allies to Ukraine—while significant—also exposes challenges. The delay in providing military aid, coupled with debates over territorial concessions, reflects the difficult balance between supporting sovereignty and managing broader geopolitical risks. This mirrors the dilemmas faced during the Balkan conflicts, where delayed interventions often prolonged suffering and complicated post-war reconstruction.

Technology and the Changing Nature of War

A striking feature of the Ukraine war is the speed at which technology is reshaping the battlefield. From the use of drones to advanced surveillance systems, this conflict represents a new era of warfare. For the Balkans, which still grapples with the legacies of conventional warfare, this evolution raises questions about preparedness and adaptation.

Drone warfare, in particular, has democratized conflict, lowering the cost of inflicting significant damage. In a region like the Balkans, where tensions still simmer, such technologies could disrupt fragile peace arrangements or embolden actors seeking to destabilize the status quo.

Geopolitical Interconnectedness

The war in Ukraine has also intensified the geopolitical competition between the West and Russia, with the Western Balkans caught in the crossfire. Russian disinformation campaigns, energy dependencies, and political interference aim to exploit divisions and undermine Euro-Atlantic integration. The destabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the stalling of Serbia-Kosovo normalization talks, and heightened tensions in Montenegro are all exacerbated by Russia's influence.

Conversely, Ukraine's resilience and the unity of Western allies offer hope. The Balkans can draw lessons from Ukraine's ability to galvanize international support, resist aggression, and reinforce its national identity. For the EU and NATO, the war is a reminder of the strategic importance of integrating the Balkans fully into the Euro-Atlantic fold.

Conclusion: What's Next?

As the war in Ukraine evolves, its outcomes will reverberate across the Balkans. The region must prepare for a future shaped by the recalibration of global alliances, the increasing role of technology in warfare, and the persistent threat of authoritarianism. For the West, Ukraine's fight is not just about defending a nation but about upholding the principles of sovereignty and self-determination—values that are equally vital for the Balkans.

The interconnectedness of these regions is a stark reminder that no conflict exists in isolation. As Ukraine fights to secure its future, the Balkans must also confront its vulnerabilities and seize the opportunity to align more closely with democratic and European ideals. The stakes could not be higher—for Ukraine, the Balkans, and the world.

Unpacking Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans⁵⁶

Florian Qehaja

Russia's actions in the Western Balkans have been daunting and detrimental to the region's progress and its path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Russia proactively challenges the existing set of values in the Western Balkans while supporting autocratic regimes (namely in Belgrade and Banja Luka) and its proxy groups, including elements of the deep state.

To recall, the region has largely embraced values of liberal order, democracy, and the rule of law. The Republic of Kosovo, the Republic of Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Federation) almost unequivocally embrace these values. Outside of the EU itself, there is no other region than the Western Balkans that is subject to learning and approximating the EU value system. Even the mindset of the new generation is aligned with these values. Hence, it is important for the EU to understand that citizens in the Western Balkans are well-prepared, perhaps even more so, to align with these universal

⁵⁶ This paper reflects the opinions/assessment of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the institution currently affiliated to.

values. The region's skilled labour force is both culturally and contextually more prepared to adjust to the EU *modus operandi*.

Yet, Russian unprovoked aggression in Ukraine and its proactive spoiling through its proxies in the region have had detrimental effects on the region's path towards the EU and NATO. This has encouraged radical elements to demonstrate non-Western sentiment and challenge long-standing investments in peace and security.

Truly, the EU enlargement fatigue was exploited by Russian elements to embolden Euroscepticism; however, it did not fundamentally shape public sympathy and the overall embracement of shared values. For example, while human rights protection is a core value in the Western Balkans, it is quite the opposite in Russia. Building anti-corruption mechanisms and culture is a constant goal, despite many shortcomings, whereas in Russia, corruption is the norm.

In short, increased Russian malign influence in the Western Balkans has led to:

- Increased autocracy;
- Serbia's (allowed) flexibility to align with the EU, Russia, and China;
- Exploitation of Western appeasement policies, first to Russia and until recently to autocrats in the region, mainly Serbian President Vučić;
- Widespread disinformation;

- Weakening of civil society, resulting in a disillusioned and ineffective agent of democratization.

The Western appeasement policy towards Russian actions and Balkan-based autocrats' highlights one of the largest shortcomings in Europe's foreign policy. This policy has been to the detriment of a value-based system, where realpolitik has been prioritized. Russia does not present a viable alternative even to most allies in the region. Yet, despite the sanctions, it continues to have the potential to act as a spoiler. According to the International Republican Institute (IRI) survey of May 2024, 46% of Serbian respondents declared that Russia is the strongest ally of Serbia. Disinformation continues to be one of Russia's most potent tools, exercised mainly through Belgrade-based tabloids, not merely Sputnik or similar Russian outlets.

The goal of Russian disinformation is to:

- Depict Western investments in the Western Balkans as failures;
- Exploit conservative sentiments concerning LGBTQ+ and other liberal dimensions promoted by the West;
- Invest in revisionism regarding the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and NATO's role;
- Portray a false narrative on Ukraine.

Russian influence in the Western Balkans is context-dependent. Russia planted its seeds for years, and only in recent years have we seen its aggressive involvement. Russian military and security influence can be easily

documented, with the so-called humanitarian center in Niš being a relevant example. The center is notably known to be a hub of Russian intelligence that aims to exploit every opportunity to challenge the investments made to date in the region, when it comes to peace, security and stability.

A classic example of hybrid actions, serving the goal of Russia in the region, is the Banjska terrorist attack. The operation of a heavily armed Serbian group in northern Kosovo led to an ambush that killed a Kosovan police officer and wounded two others. In response, the Kosovo Police launched a professional operation that eliminated three terrorists and exposed the group led by notorious terrorist Milan Radoičić, known to be a long-standing criminal in northern Kosovo with direct links to Serbian President Vučić and Russian elements in Serbia. The goal of this terrorist formation was to create a new circumstance on the ground to trigger a disproportionate reaction from Kosovo law enforcement authorities, potentially leading to civilian casualties and damage to the Orthodox Monastery. It also aimed to involve over-reaction by the state of Kosovo in terms of potential deployment of Kosovo Security Force in the northern part of Kosovo that would potentially result in confrontation with KFOR presence. The goal of the terrorist action coincided with Russia's spoiling agenda, and intelligence pointed out the group's links to elements of the Serbian deep state and Russian presence in Serbia. Although the action failed, it demonstrated the unprecedented scale that could lead to a rapid escalation of the security situation

in Kosovo. The action, apart from classified as terrorist, implied the prerogatives of aggression having in mind the group has been trained and prepared by the Serbian state security apparatus, in different military training facilities throughout Serbia.

Kosovo's Stance on Russia's Unprovoked Aggression in Ukraine

The Republic of Kosovo supports Ukraine's cause for freedom and peace, in the strongest possible terms. It has aligned 100% with the EU and US foreign policies and sanctions towards Russia. Kosovo has provided shelter to Ukrainian journalists and lifted visas for Ukrainian passport holders. Conversely, it has imposed a strict visa policy for Russian passport holders (who are no longer allowed to enter with Schengen visas or EU residence permits as before). The country has provided lethal and non-lethal aid to Ukraine and is part of the Ukraine Contact Group. Additionally, Kosovo signed a memorandum with Lithuania on demining in Ukraine.

Geopolitical Repercussions of the Russian Aggression on Ukraine for the Western Balkans: Security Challenges and Integration Prospects

Albulena Halili

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has profoundly unsettled the global geopolitical landscape, precipitating significant shifts in strategic alignments and security dynamics. As Russia seeks to expand its influence and challenge the Western primacy in the international order, the Western Balkans have emerged as a pivotal arena where these geopolitical tensions converge. The region, with its historical ties to Russia and ongoing political and ethnic challenges, faces heightened vulnerability in the face of external pressures, particularly from Russia. This analysis aims to elucidate how the ongoing conflict has reshaped security perceptions, military strategies, geopolitical alignments, and integration processes in the Western Balkans. Specifically, it examines the evolving role of Russia in the region, the security implications for local states, and the prospects for EU and NATO integration as a strategic response to these shifting dynamics. Through this lens, the Western Balkans' future trajectory is explored,

emphasizing the region's critical role in the broader geopolitical competition between Russia and the West.

Geography, Identity, and Geopolitics: Russia's Vision for Eurasia

Russia's "perpetual geopolitics" as analyzed in an article in *Foreign Affairs* written by Stephen Kotkin forms the foundation of the country's current strategic approach. Kotkin argues that Russia's foreign policy is shaped by a deep-rooted, historical geopolitical vision that seeks to restore Moscow's traditional sphere of influence. Central to this vision is Alexander Dugin's concept of 'Euro-Asianism' which seeks to reintegrate territories of the former Soviet Union, as well as Eastern Europe, Manchuria, and the Orthodox Slavic Balkans, extending Russia's reach as far as the shores of the Indian Ocean. This expansive vision reflects not only a historical desire to impose a Russian sphere of influence but also a broader aspiration to restore Russia to its traditional geopolitical position, centered on Eurasia as a key region of influence. The idea of Russian expansionism, framed through the lens of a 'civilization under threat' has been reinforced in recent years through actions such as the annexation of Crimea, and finally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These actions embody Russia's desire to reclaim its historical territories and reassert its dominance in the post-Soviet space, reinforcing the idea of Russia as a powerful civilizational force.

Russia's security worldview is closely intertwined with its geographical realities, which play a significant role in shaping its foreign and security policies. As the largest country in terms of landmass, with land borders on all four sides, Russia perceives itself as uniquely vulnerable to external threats. This geographical context has historically shaped the country's perception of security, fostering an aggressive approach to creating buffer zones, particularly along its western borders. Scholars like Keir Giles have highlighted the central tension between Western principles of state sovereignty and Russia's imperatives for territorial control. As Giles explains, Russia's approach to its neighbors reflects a belief that, in order to ensure its security, it must exert control and dominance over substantial areas beyond its borders. This mindset contrasts sharply with Western norms, which emphasize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, especially those on Russia's periphery. According to Giles, there is a fundamental conflict between Western notions that the states on Russia's periphery should be sovereign, independent, and able to determine their own future, and Russia's view that it must control these regions to secure its strategic depth. This tension reveals the significant difference in how Russia and the West conceptualize security and the role of sovereignty in international relations.

Russia's vision for Eurasia is both a reflection of its historical geopolitical aspirations and a response to its self-perceived geographical vulnerabilities. This vision is

actively pursued through policies that seek to extend Russian influence across key territories and regions. Russia's security doctrines, which emphasize territorial control and strategic depth, remain at the core of its approach to the world. The clash between these doctrines and Western principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity continues to fuel geopolitical tensions, particularly in the context of Russia's neighboring states.

The Structure of the World Order: Multipolarity and Strategic Narratives

The concept of multipolarity occupies a central place in the foreign policy narratives of Russia and China, serving as a counterpoint to the perceived dominance of a Western-led global order. Both powers promote the decline of unipolarity in favor of a more balanced international system, arguing that the era of Western hegemony is giving way to a diverse, multipolar world. For Russia, this vision of multipolarity is more than a geopolitical strategy—it is a civilizational project. Through carefully curated narratives, Russian geopolitical thinkers emphasize a stark dichotomy between Russia and the West. The West is framed as morally decadent and culturally fragmented, while Russia portrays itself as the bastion of traditional values and a distinct civilizational identity.

Two intellectual figures, Alexander Dugin and Sergei Karaganov, stand at the forefront of Russia's multipolar vision, offering the ideological underpinnings for Moscow's

global strategies. Dugin, often referred to as "Putin's grey eminence" or "Putin's brain" has theorized the foundation of a "Euro-Asian empire." This empire, as Dugin envisions it, would unite non-Western nations under Russia's leadership to resist what he perceives as Western neo-imperialism. By positioning Russia as a civilizational pole, Dugin's vision reinforces the idea of a global struggle between civilizations rather than states, elevating Russia to the role of a central leader in this ideological contest.

Karaganov complements Dugin's framework by developing the concept of the "global majority," a coalition of non-Western nations united in opposition to Western dominance. In a detailed 55-page foreign policy document, the most significant since the Primakov Doctrine, Karaganov articulates a strategy to "de-Westernize" the world by weaponizing alliances in the Global South. He portrays the West as a demographic and cultural minority, arguing that its decline provides an opportunity to forge a new, anti-Western bloc. For Karaganov, Russia's leadership in this global coalition is not only a geopolitical imperative but also a moral one, aimed at countering the perceived injustices of Western neo-imperialism.

The geostrategic implications of this multipolar vision are evident in Russia's actions on the international stage. The 2008 war in Georgia, annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine represent key moments in a broader pattern of aggression aimed at reasserting Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space. These actions also align closely

with Dugin's ideological framework, which seeks to reconstitute a "Russian world" that transcends national borders and integrates territories into a unified civilizational bloc. Beyond the immediate regional context, these incursions signify Russia's determination to dismantle the unipolarity that characterized the post-Cold War era.

According to Karaganov, by 2021, Russia's foreign policy had entered a new phase that can be characterized as the "constructive destruction" of its prior relations with the West. This approach signals a deliberate effort to reshape the international order by undermining Western influence while solidifying Russia's role as a central actor in the emerging multipolar world. Through a combination of ideological narratives and geopolitical maneuvers, Russia is positioning itself as a key architect of a global order where power is distributed among multiple poles, each with its own cultural and civilizational identity.

The War in Ukraine and Europe's Security Vision

For Russia, the war in Ukraine represents more than just a territorial conflict—it is viewed as a proxy war between the West and the rest of the world, with existential stakes. The framing of this conflict highlights the zero-sum nature of the situation: Russia perceives a loss in Ukraine as not only a geopolitical setback but also a critical blow to its strategic vision. This existential threat prompts the possibility of further escalation, as Russia seeks to secure a form of victory, viewing any compromise as detrimental to its broader objectives. The expectation among Russian leadership is the eventual partition of Ukraine, which would allow Moscow to reshape the region in line with its Eurasian ambitions.

This perception of the war aligns with Russia's security vision, which envisions a Europe without U.S. influence. Moscow's strategic objectives involve diminishing Western dominance in the European security architecture and reinforcing the idea of a Europe that operates independently of NATO and U.S. influence. This is part of a broader vision for an "Arc of Instability," which stretches from Armenia and Moldova to Georgia and the Western Balkans, encompassing key regions such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. By maintaining control over these areas, Russia aims to prevent further NATO expansion and preserve its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

Central to Russia's strategy is the application of the "Gerasimov Doctrine," which emphasizes the use of asymmetric warfare, including hybrid tactics that combine conventional military force with cyber warfare, disinformation, and other non-traditional strategies. This reflects Russia's perception of NATO enlargement as a direct threat and its strategic aim of countering Western influence through unconventional means. The war in Ukraine, in this sense, is not merely a military engagement but a manifestation of the broader struggle between competing visions of European security. Russia's actions underscore the strategic clash between its vision of a multipolar world, where it plays a leading role, and the West's commitment to preserving a rules-based international order that emphasizes state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic values.

The Western Balkans: In the Line of Fire

The Western Balkans remain a critical theater for Russian geopolitical ambitions and identity narratives. The region's historical ties to Russia—rooted in shared Slavic origins, Orthodox Christianity, and a long-standing tradition of political and cultural connections—serve as a significant foundation for Moscow's influence. These cultural and religious commonalities are particularly potent in conservative populations that are skeptical of Western liberalism and democratic norms. Russia has adeptly leveraged these identity connections through its cultural

diplomacy, presenting itself as the defender of traditional values and an alternative to Western influence. This strategic engagement aims to challenge the West's efforts to integrate the region into European institutions and to foster a pro-Western orientation.

In 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry identified the Western Balkans as being “in the line of fire” due to their historical, cultural, and political ties to Russia. He specifically highlighted Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo, alongside the Baltic states, Georgia, Moldova, and Transnistria, as regions particularly vulnerable to Russian influence and interference. This assessment has only gained more significance in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Russia has increasingly sought to destabilize European peripheries to secure its strategic objectives. The geopolitical contest over the Western Balkans reflects broader tensions between Russia and the West, as Moscow perceives the region as a critical front in its effort to challenge NATO's expansion and the European Union's influence.

Key challenges to regional stability include:

- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** The Dayton Agreement, which established a fragile multiethnic governance framework, faces existential threats due to Milorad Dodik's secessionist rhetoric. Dodik, backed by Russian support, has undermined efforts at maintaining Bosnia's territorial integrity, further destabilizing the region and complicating its

European integration process. His calls for the Republika Srpska to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina have heightened ethnic tensions and revived fears of a return to violent conflict.

- **Kosovo:** Serbia's strategic manipulation of Kosovo Serbs, often under Moscow's influence, continues to destabilize the fragile peace in the region. Russia has consistently supported Serbia's position on Kosovo, blocking its recognition in international forums and offering political, diplomatic, and military support. This involvement not only reinforces Serbia's stance but also serves to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty, making any lasting resolution to the Kosovo issue increasingly difficult.
- **North Macedonia:** The Ohrid and Prespa Agreements, which played a crucial role in resolving ethnic tensions within the country, addressing bilateral disputes with neighboring states, and securing NATO membership, now face increasing challenges from pro-Serbian and pro-Russian factions domestically. These factions, which seek closer ties with Russia and Serbia, are actively working to undermine the agreements, creating internal instability and complicating the country's path toward full European integration. This opposition poses a significant threat to both regional peace and the broader geopolitical order in the Balkans.

The Western Balkans thus remain a region of strategic importance for Russia, whose influence in the area continues to be driven by historical, cultural, and political considerations. Moscow's ability to exploit regional divisions, manipulate ethnic identities, and undermine the sovereignty of states through hybrid tactics—including disinformation campaigns, political interference, and support for separatist movements—has ensured that the region remains in a state of geopolitical flux. In this context, the Western Balkans represent both a battleground for Russian malign influence and a key vulnerability in the broader European security landscape.

EU and NATO Integration: A Strategic Imperative

Despite the considerable external pressures confronting the Western Balkans, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has underscored the urgent strategic necessity of integration into the European Union and NATO. This ongoing war has laid bare the region's vulnerabilities in terms of both security and political stability, emphasizing the critical importance of robust Western engagement. Strengthening governance and institutional resilience is a cornerstone of this effort, requiring governments to enhance transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. By fortifying their capacity to resist hybrid threats such as disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks, these institutions can better safeguard the region's stability.

Equally vital is the promotion of regional cooperation, as the resolution of bilateral disputes and ethnic tensions is essential to prevent external actors like Russia and China from exploiting these divisions. Regional initiatives must focus on fostering dialogue, deepening economic integration, and promoting peaceful conflict resolution, thereby laying the foundation for enduring stability. Accelerating the process of EU and NATO integration remains the linchpin of this strategy. Membership in these institutions would not only provide the region with stronger security guarantees but also encourage democratic governance and economic growth. By embedding the Western Balkans more firmly within the European framework, the EU and NATO can ensure that the region evolves into a cornerstone of peace and security amid an increasingly turbulent world.

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The Geopolitisation of Enlargement and the role of the EU values in the transformation of the Western Balkans

Klodiana Beshku

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2024 brought a total transformation in the EU Enlargement policy. It was finally linked to the geopolitical interests of the Union, bringing added attention to the region of the Western Balkans.

The European Union has launched a Growth Plan, very similar to the Marshall Plan, aiming at the economic convergence of this area with the rest of the Union.

Still, this plan only mentions the importance of adapting the EU norms by these countries' societies, without going into details. The social absorption of EU values -often neglected in scholarship dealing with the European integration of a country or a region- appears as a crucial element in the elevation of the candidate country in the EU standards. The assumption in the basis of this article is that despite the implementation of the entire body of EU legislation (acquis communautaire) before they can join and an institutional and economic revamping of the WB, the social absorption of the EU norms by their societies is of major importance to the WB for them to become an effective part of the EU club and

to counter corruption, strengthen rule of law and refrain political clientelism and state capture in their respective countries.

Introduction

Russia's military invasion of Ukraine of 24th of February 2022 brought a major shift in global geopolitics⁵⁷ which was reflected in the revival of the rhetoric in support of the enlargement to the WB⁵⁸. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine created a critical juncture⁵⁹ and an abrupt geopolitical momentum able to "define a new path for the EU Enlargement"⁶⁰. The immediate response of the EU after this war was to place enhanced attention on its spheres of

⁵⁷ Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, „Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know it” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute.

⁵⁹ Davide Denti, “A New Geopolitics for the Western Balkans, a Thessaloniki Moment for the Eastern Partners, and a New Big Project for Europe. The Effects of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on the EU's Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policies” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p.46.

⁶⁰ Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, “The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture. Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 56.

influence, therefore, speeding up integration in the Western Balkans granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 and a year later to Georgia. What was achieved between 2022 and 2024 in terms of Enlargement was far more than a decade before when Enlargement was put in standby mode. Negotiations were opened with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022, Kosovo submitted its application for EU membership in December 2022, access negotiations were opened with Ukraine and Moldova in December 2023, visa-liberalization with Kosovo occurred in January 2024 and access negotiations were opened with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024, as well.

In the immediate aftermath of this war, there was little hope that the substance of the Enlargement would have changed and that there was a real willingness in Brussels to consider enlarging the Union seriously.⁶¹

Although declarations of High representatives of the EU institutions were in favor of the EU accession of the Western Balkans and something started to move positively in this regard starting from 2023, doubts about actions besides the symbolic meaning of these changes remained. There was a rational concern that both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans would end up re-engaging in the same kind of slow-burning formal accession negotiations they

⁶¹Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 3.

conducted in the past, expecting a different result.⁶² A low capacity of adaptation from both sides was likely to make things change only in their appearance, not in their essence in a region challenged all the time by illiberal domestic forces. To prove concerns wrong, the European Union adopted a 6-billion-euro Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in December 2023⁶³, like a Marshall Plan for the region which has imposed an ambitious plan for the Western Balkans: To accelerate the socio-economic convergence of the Western Balkans to the EU with the aim to make these countries ready for a new sort of membership within 2030.

The Growth plan is based on the “reform to invest” principle. It has four main pillars - Enhancing economic integration, boosting of Common Regional Market, accelerating fundamental reforms, and increasing financial assistance to support the reforms.⁶⁴ - where the Western Balkan countries should base their reform Agenda Plans and seven priority areas of action the EU offers to these countries. The facility

⁶² Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, “Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know it” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 6.

⁶³ European Commission, *2023 Communication new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, 7 November 2023 at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en accessed in December 2024.

⁶⁴ European Commission, *New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, Brussels, 8.11.2023 at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf accessed in December 2024.

is the financial pillar of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans that is going to cover the period from 2024 to 2027 and is expected to provide up to €2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans to the EU's six Western Balkan partners.⁶⁵ after delivering effective reforms. Although the EU through the facility states that the main aim of the facility is to “support Western Balkan partners’ alignment with the EU’s values, laws, rules, standards, policies and practices, with a view to future EU membership, as well as their progressive integration into the EU single market and socio-economic convergence with the EU”⁶⁶, there is no precise road map for how the alignment with the EU norms can be achieved. The only element where this alignment is based is the request for the implementation of effective reforms by the Western Balkan countries. Thus, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans proposed by the EU aims at the Western Balkans countries and their societies to align with the EU values through reforming their institutional and market capacities. It does not delve into the question of how the EU values should be adopted, absorbed and interiorized by these societies. This article deals with the importance of the social absorption of EU values as an instrument in addition to the

⁶⁵ Council of the EU, *Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans adopted* Press release, 7 May 2024, at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/07/reform-and-growth-facility-for-the-western-balkans-adopted/> accessed in December 2024.

⁶⁶ European Council, European Parliament, Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, Brussels, 25 April 2024, article 3, p. 32 at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/PE-80-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

institutional and democratic consolidation of an EU candidate country.

The social absorption of EU values -often neglected in scholarship dealing with the European integration of a country or a region- appears as a crucial element in the elevation of the candidate country in the EU standards. The assumption in the basis of this article is that despite the implementation of the entire body of EU legislation (*acquis communautaire*) before they can join and an institutional and economic revamping of the WB, the social absorption of the EU norms by their societies is of major importance to the WB for them to become an effective part of the EU club and to counter corruption, strengthen rule of law and refrain political clientelism and state capture in their respective countries. Basing all the hopes on the reforms will not be enough, since reforms alone will not do the rest. According to Welzel's human emancipation theory, socio economic development, urbanization, mass education, a rising sense of existential security, and promising life prospects, all foster emancipative values⁶⁷.

These values closely resemble several domains of the EU values. Of course, economic development and democratic consolidation through reforms bring more opportunities in terms of self-realization and post-material values, but if

⁶⁷ Christian Welzel, (2013). *Freedom Rising: Human empowerment and the quest for emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

adapting to the EU values is left in its natural flow, entering the EU could take ages before applying.

Enlargement policy after the War in Ukraine

The Enlargement policy of the EU has profoundly changed after Russia's aggression war in Ukraine. Official sources confirm that the enlargement process gained new momentum throughout 2023 and 2024⁶⁸. The EU now uses Enlargement as a part of the wartime policy kit⁶⁹ which has security goals as its main priority serving the geopolitical agenda of the European Union. Western Balkan countries experienced a revival of the EU attention in their direction, nevertheless, same as before the war, the EU does not seem ready to engage in further enlargement judging by its multiple crises and the high inflation it is going through due to the war in Ukraine.

Consequently, among others, the Head of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, has been three times on a diplomatic visit in the Western Balkans since the war has sprouted until 2024. On 24-25 March 2022, the European

⁶⁸ European Commission, 'Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package' at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en. Accessed 20 December 2024.

⁶⁹ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, "Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know it" in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute, p. 7.

Council adopted conclusions on the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, security and defence, energy, economic issues, COVID-19, external relations and the election of the President of the European Council. “The European Union reiterates its commitment to the European perspective of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans”⁷⁰ and in August 2023, Charles Michel, proposed 2030 as the year when the EU and its candidates should be ready for enlargement⁷¹.

In November 2023, the European Commission adopted a New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans with its €6 billion Reform & Growth Facility (2 billion grants and 4 billion cheap loans) to narrow the socio-economic divergence of the countries of this region to the EU member states for the period 2024-2027. Later on, the President of the European Commission, Von der Leyen, embodied both Enlargement and Geopolitics in her speech at the end of 2024 by stating that “the tense geopolitical context makes it more compelling than ever that we complete the reunification of our continent, under the same values of democracy and the rule of law”⁷². It was the crystal-clear moment when

⁷⁰<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/25/european-council-conclusions-24-25-march-2022/>

⁷¹ European Council, “Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum”, 28 August 2023.

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charlesmichel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>

⁷² European Commission, ‘Commission adopts 2024 Enlargement Package’ (Press Release, 30 October 2024) <https://neighbourhood->

Enlargement met Geopolitics and Geopolitics met alignment with the EU values officially and in practice. By the end of 2024, the Fundamentals cluster and the External Relations one were opened with Albania between October and December 2024. Having met the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters, Montenegro is on the way to provisionally closing further negotiating chapters and Serbia fulfilled the benchmarks to open the cluster on Competitiveness and inclusive growth. In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In this context, it has become very important for the Western Balkan countries to keep the pace of becoming such an important geopolitical area for the EU. They have committed to going through important structural transformations and reforms to take real advantage of the Growth Plan.⁷³ The Western Balkan countries complete the European Union once they become its members, but membership will never happen if the standard of living and democratization will not be levelled up in these countries if

enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en

Accessed 20 December 2024.

⁷³ Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Commission approves Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, paving way for payments under the Reform and Growth Facility, News article, 23 October 2024 at https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-approves-reform-agendas-albania-kosovo-montenegro-north-macedonia-and-serbia-paving-way-2024-10-23_en accessed in December 2024.

the countries will not be part of the club geographically, institutionally and in their mindset and system of values.

Commissioner Von der Leyen stated that Enlargement is a top priority in Tirana in October 2024. Enlargement is now linked to the security of EU borders and the completion of its territory – its territorialization. “Once skeptical capitals like Paris or the Hague, which had put obstacles in place that contributed to an enlargement “stalemate” form for the 2018-2022 period, seem now to embrace the view that the Union’s expansion is a geopolitical imperative”⁷⁴. The geopolitical importance of the region is even more prominent since the EU is not enlarging to the WB, but it encapsulates them.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, this kind of geographical union is not enough. On the EU’s side, bilateral problems, democratic backsliding, socioeconomic malaise, the strengthening of far-right parties, and the insecurity related to the block's ability to function with more than 30 members are only some of the fears from the EU side.⁷⁶ On

⁷⁴ Ioannis Armakolas, Alexandra Voudouri (2024). *Relaunching Enlargement: How Will it Affect the Western Balkans? Evolution and Prospects of European Policy*, European Institute of the Mediterranean Publications.

⁷⁵ Klodiana Beshku, “The War in Ukraine: Europe’s Geopolitical Momentum. Will the Western Balkans Take Advantage of It?” in Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil (Eds.) (2023). *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Global Governance Program, European University Institute (EUI). ISBN:978-92-9466-408-2, pg. 26.

⁷⁶ Ioannis Armakolas, Alexandra Voudouri (2024). *Relaunching Enlargement: How Will it Affect the Western Balkans? Evolution and*

the Western Balkans side, the fight against corruption, political clientelism and containment of state capture is such an emergency. In this direction, adaptation with the EU values will help in the fight against these phenomena and in the consolidation of the rule of law in these societies.

The Western Balkans and the EU: Making both ends meet through the absorption of EU values

The EU is not only a security provider or a security seeker but also an economic union and a community of values. According to Habermas' theory going through one of his books on the EU, a large consensus on the set of fundamental values is crucial for the sustainability of the EU as a democratic community and may provide democratic legitimacy in the absence of a shared demos. Furthermore, the EU “has framed itself as a global actor by exporting norms not soldiers...and by not imposing this consent”⁷⁷. To be part of the European Community, the Western Balkans need to internalize the EU values together with their gradual economic and institutional integration into the club since “the more states reject EU values, the more their otherness is reified as geographical remoteness”⁷⁸. Accession

Prospects of the European Policy, European Institute of the Mediterranean Publications.

⁷⁷ Jan Zielonka, (2008). “Europe as a global actor: Empire by example?”, *International Affairs*, 84 (3):471–84. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00718.x.

⁷⁸ Cristian Nitoiu and Monika Sus (2019). “Introduction: The Rise of Geopolitics” in “The EU’s Approach in its Eastern Neighbourhood”, *Geopolitics*, 24:1, 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2019.1544396.

candidates need not only to implement the entire body of EU legislation (Acquis Communautaire') before they can join but also to effectively internalize and absorb the EU values to be able to strengthen the rule of law and counter corruption, strengthen the rule of law and refrain from political clientelism and state capture in their respective countries. If not aligned with the EU values, future membership of a state in the EU is not denied but postponed for an unknown period. "Europe thereby becomes a temporal as opposed to a spatial category – everyone can be European at some later stage of development. This later stage is crucial, as becoming European always happens at a later stage"⁷⁹ and it may take too long before the EU membership happens, even if the country is in place with the formal accomplishments. By doing so, instead of Enlargement being "part of an ongoing process of constituting Europe as a place of attraction rather than conflict, as centred on its soft security values rather than a hard security enemy template" (O'Brennan 2006: 162), Enlargement risks being transformed into a tool to serve the populism or politics of member countries, transforming the whole stabilization and association process in a simple way to keep the western Balkans on track but with no advancement on the European path and serving the authoritarian regimes.

⁷⁹ Ole Wæver (2000). "The EU as Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders" in Kelstrup M. and Williams M. C. (Eds.), 2000. *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community*, London and New York: Routledge.

The legal basis for EU enlargement is Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union which states that “any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union”. In 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty introduced the requirement for applicant countries to respect EU values, outlined in Article 2 TEU. The values on which the EU is founded, according to the Treaty on the European Union, include “respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities [. . .] pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity”. Values, as stated in Article 2, are not just lofty ideals but have the status of legally binding principles and the EU has put the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in charge of monitoring the infringements of Article 2 values in member states, but the Union does not have certain leverage in promoting and enforcing these values in its candidate states. The sanctions, in this case, have to do with a halt in financial aid and programs by the EU side or sanctions for non-alignment with these values, but there is not a clear road map of how to make these values intrinsic in the candidate countries' societies.

The Growth Plan sets the stage for the Western Balkans in a designed roadmap on which the region could move on to approach the EU by doubling its economy in the next five years. However, the economic and societal convergence with the EU is not enough for the WB part. The countries of

the region have to, in parallel, change the political style of the ruling parties by staying away from old habits like the practices of corruption and political clientelism to gain and retain power for themselves, and, on the other hand, the civil society within these countries has to move forward in changing the society's mindset to not follow these practices. There should be a triple strategy for encountering these phenomena based on a gradual taking part in the decision-making bodies of the EU, an institutional and economic revamping of the WB and a totalization of the social absorption of the EU norms by the WB Countries' societies. The staged accession model: By breaking the accession process into four distinct stages, this model offers candidate countries a series of achievable goals that should help drive reforms and align their legislation, policies and institutions with EU legislation, standards and policies. Each stage is designed to reward progress along 33 chapters, with increased funding and access to EU institutions, creating an incentive for candidate countries to continue their reforms, but it does not give any indicator of how these reforms stick with the society nor any guarantee if the reforms are going to work in the long term.

In the European Commission's Reports on Albania and Serbia, we can read: "The EU's founding values include the rule of law and respect for human rights. An effective (independent, high-quality and efficient) judicial system and an effective fight against corruption are of paramount importance, as is the respect for fundamental rights in law

and practice”⁸⁰. Rule of law is one of the Growth Plan's seven initial priority areas.⁸¹, but the Plan perceives its accomplishment in terms of reforms. “Accelerating fundamental reforms, including on the fundamentals cluster, supporting the Western Balkans' path towards EU membership” is one of the Growth Plan's four pillars.⁸². The approach is clear: The absorption of EU values will become natural once the right reforms are implemented, and the rule of law will be on the right track. Thus, the focus has shifted to timely, efficient and inclusive implementation of these reforms, not to how much they will stick within the Western Balkans’ societies.

Enlargement is not officially considered to be linked to the EU’s strategy and interests but whenever it suits a member

⁸⁰ European Commission, Albania 2024 Report, Brussels, 30.10.2024, p.28, at:https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-87489058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf accessed in December 2024.

European Commission, Serbia 2024 Report, Brussels, 30.10.2024, p.28, at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

⁸¹ European Commission, New growth plan for the Western Balkans, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 8.11.2023 at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf

⁸² *Ibid.*

state its activation suddenly becomes exclusively linked with European values and the lack of advancement in this regard becomes a reason for halting the enlargement process to a certain country, as in the case of Albania and North Macedonia throughout 2018-2022⁸³. Political changes in eastern and central Europe before and in the Balkans now are “a learning process in which the locals come into contact with Western norms and thereby learn to behave in a more European manner. Within this process, accession countries are taught the community values and norms and must prove their willingness and ability to internalize them”⁸⁴.

However, we must keep in mind that member nations internalize EU values at different speeds. According to a study in this direction, internalization of EU values is linked with traditional religious fault lines that continue to differentiate Europe, thus in the following order from fastest to slowest:

(1) Protestant, (2) Catholic, (3) Ex-communist and (4) Orthodox countries. Western Balkans belong, for sure to the third group, not including the religious debate and the cultural superiority debate here, thus, the internalization

⁸³ Klodiana Beshku, “The accession impasses for Albania and North Macedonia and their effects on the European Integration of the Western Balkans” in *Memories, Identities and Current Conflicts – Mapping Challenges of EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans*, (Eds.) Irena Ristić and Marko Milenković, Milan: Wolters Kluwer CEDAM, 2024.

⁸⁴ Noel Parker, “A theoretical introduction; Spaces, centres and margins” in Parker N. (Ed.). (2008). *The Geopolitics of Europe's Identity: centres, boundaries and margins*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

of the EU norms tends to be portrayed in time if specific measures will not be taken into account through education platforms and national policies.

Conclusions

In the last decade, the EU has been facing the politicization of Enlargement, nationalization of Enlargement, nationalization of decisions within the European Council, EU fatigue, low capacity of absorption of Enlargement etc. In 2019, Mark Rhinard wrote about “A classification of policy making in the European Union” which meant “crisis-oriented methods for arriving at collective decisions. These methods prioritize the early identification of the next crisis, specific kinds of actors and technologies, abbreviated decision-making procedures and new narratives on the *raison d’etre* of European integration”⁸⁵.

Nevertheless, crises only challenge the self-portrayal of the European Union as a community of shared values since the debate on this issue keeps revolving.

As described above, the Western Balkan region should take advantage of this geopolitical momentum by strengthening its resilience capacities and by building a sustainable democratic environment for its citizens so that the end of the war in Ukraine -hopefully, will end soon for the best of

⁸⁵ Mark Rhinard, (2019). “The classification of Policy Making in the European Union”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Volume 57, Issue 3.

humanity- could not provide a scapegoat for the lowering of its geopolitical importance towards the European Union. To do so, the WB countries need the EU to be harsher to their political elites -since the EU is an elitist project- and this is where the EU-WB play roles intertwined.

Here we have a classical vicious circle: If the EU is not very demanding to the WB countries' political elites, these countries will not do good on their European integration path, if they do not do well on this path, the region becomes of less security provider and community member and the EU loses its interest in having these countries into the club -apart from a war momentum or third country aggression that could jump in. But this momentum can be over in some years. Is the EU-WB relationship going to go back to its premises?

The geopolitical momentum could be over from one moment to the other, but what will remain if not for the society's desire of these countries to live in a European standard country in terms of politics, economy and community values?

That is the only real engine of European Integration and these countries must make every effort to keep it switched on and working.

This could be achieved only if importance is given to the European Integration of the Western Balkans not only as a political achievement but as a crucial process of capacity building and transformation by the Western Balkans' side. In this regard, not only strengthening the rule of law and

opening and closing of chapters is important, but the social absorption of EU values and their internalization become of crucial importance. The EU is a very complex entity multilayered by national interest and embracing the Western Balkans as member states would be of particular and strong challenge for the EU. This implies that the full membership of the Western Balkan countries in the EU may not be underway in a short-term perspective. The good news is that they are back on track in this process, but without credible promises of membership in a reasonable timeframe, the future of the accession process will likely continue for a very long time, surely after 2030.

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Regional Cohesion or Fragmentation? Media Narratives in the Western Balkans in Response to Russian Aggression

Donika Kamberi

This study explores media sentiment across the Western Balkans in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, tracing its historical, political, and geopolitical underpinnings. By conducting a sentiment analysis of 425 media articles published between February 2022 and December 2023, the research examines five key hypotheses related to national differences, domestic political climates, media bias, regional cohesion, and EU affiliation.

The findings reveal a clear divide: countries with closer historical and political ties to Russia, such as Serbia, exhibit a more neutral or even supportive media stance, whereas staunchly pro-European nations like Albania and North Macedonia strongly condemn Russia's actions. However, beyond national alignment, the study also highlights the profound influence of internal political dynamics, regional alliances, and media bias in shaping public discourse.

While common geopolitical challenges foster a moderated sense of regional cohesion in the Western Balkans,

Eastern Europe displays a sharper fragmentation, with polarized narratives reflecting diverse historical and political contexts. These insights underscore the intricate interplay between historical legacies, political orientations, and regional dynamics in shaping media portrayals of global conflicts.

Introduction

The Western Balkans has increasingly become a focal point for understanding the dynamics of media sentiment and its correlation with historical and political affiliations in light of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The discourses of media across countries reflect diverse narratives influenced by long-standing ties, geopolitical alignments, and domestic political climates. With its unique historic backdrop balancing the contemporary challenge of a global world, understanding the ways in which media represent the idea of Russian aggression can form the basis for some convincing analysis of public opinion and policy making.

By examining sentiment polarity across the Western Balkans, the research seeks to determine whether countries with strong historical and political ties to Russia tend to express more neutral or supportive sentiments, compared to those nations more aligned with European orientations.

It further investigates whether shared historical experiences or geopolitical alignments result in a unified regional media response, or if fragmentation prevails. These findings are crucial for understanding how historical relationships and political allegiances shape media discourse, providing deeper insight into public opinion and the nature of public discourse in the Western Balkans during a pivotal moment in global geopolitics.

This study is significant because such a scientific approach is needed to understand how historical ties, the political climate, or cohesion shapes the media sentiment about Russian aggression.

Furthermore, the paper investigates the cohesion or fragmentation of the regions through the question of whether shared historical experiences or geopolitical alignments result in a unified or fragmented media response. These findings are important for understanding how historical relationships and political allegiances shape media discourses and deepening an understanding of the nature of public discourse in the Western Balkans during a pivotal moment in global geopolitics.

Theoretical Framework

Media sentiment analysis provides valuable insights into how public opinion is shaped regarding critical geopolitical events, such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine. By examining the tone, language, and framing of media coverage, we can better understand the narratives that influence public perception and decision-making in response to these events.

Past studies emphasize the crucial role that media narratives play in shaping perceptions in regions with complex historical backgrounds and political affiliations. For instance, it has been argued that “media narratives of conflicts often reflect deep-seated political ideologies and historical relationships between nations, which, in turn, shape both national and regional opinions” (Entman, 2004). In analyzing media framing in news coverage of foreign conflicts, Tsfati and Cohen (2019) found that media in countries with close historical ties to major powers, such as Russia, tend to remain more neutral or supportive.

Moreover, media framing acts as a powerful agency of insight and public opinion. As indicated by Tankard's 2001 study, the representation of war through either victimization, heroic, or aggressive frames affects public views where 72% of its researched audiences believe their

attitudes and insights are determined through the tone and framing set forth by news articles.

For instance, a study by Ladd 2012 indicated that media sentiment on global conflicts is often fragmented in countries with high political polarization, further polarizing the opinions of the general public. The media bias can also be influenced by environmental and contextual factors. A study by (McChesney 2004) showed that economic factors and ownership of media houses determine the framing of international events, where private owners are more likely to have a significant discrepancy in framing than state-subsidized media. These studies together form the importance of examining media narratives within the Western Balkans, a region where historical relationships with both Russia and the West create a unique and complex environment for media discourse during the ongoing Ukrainian conflict.

Methodology

This study employs a non-experimental, correlational research design to find the relationship between environmental factors and media sentiment toward Russian aggression in Ukraine across the Western Balkan countries. The non-experimental is most appropriate given the nature of data and the assessment of the

correlation between the variables using the sentiment analysis of media content.

The population of the study consists of all media articles published in each Western Balkan country between February 2022 and December 2023, with the outlet focusing on Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. A sample of 425 media articles was selected using a systematic random sampling technique to achieve variant viewpoints. The sample size is representative, with an appropriate distribution of articles across different media: state-funded, private-owned, and online news, in order to catch a wide range of sentiments and possible media biases.

The sample was chosen in such a way as to reflect the national and regional variations of sentiment. Articles were also further classified according to geopolitical context-pro-Russian, pro-European, or neutral-to examine how the sentiment varies across media outlets with different political orientations. The most prevalent age of coverage in the sample were stories that fell between 18–24 months into the Conflict-February 2022 - July 2023-while the largest number of articles analyzed fell between 25 and 30 months.

This sentiment analysis has been performed by applying text mining techniques, where the main indicators of

polarity will be negative, neutral, and positive to assess the tone of media discourse. The polarity scores for sentiments have been computed by using a software tool, and changes in these polarities were analyzed across countries, political alignment, and regional cohesion.

The results of this study are statistical analyses of sentiment scores across the different countries in the Western Balkans, each testing a series of hypotheses on cross-country variation in sentiment, domestic political climates, media bias, and regional cohesion versus fragmentation. This therefore helps the study to look deep into the complex interaction of historical ties, political orientations, and regional dynamics in setting the media narratives on the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

3.1 Instruments

The main measurement instrument for media sentiment was developed by the author for this study, specifically to analyze media articles from the Western Balkans.

The instrument was initially validated for face validity to ensure it effectively measured the intended construct—the sentiments expressed in the media content. Further refinement through factor reduction analysis demonstrated adequate construct validity for the study population. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity confirmed that

the data met the required significance level, while the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of .78 indicated that the sample size was suitable for conducting factor analysis.

In regard to sentiment analysis, the author utilized the sentiment classification scale for articles in terms of polarity. While operationalizing this instrument, scores have been given ranging from -1 representing the Negative to +1 representing Positive, where 0 has been set for neutral. Internal reliability was measured through the internal consistency analysis test. The outcome yields a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = .86$, reflecting internally strong reliability. This scale was applied to all articles analyzed in order to categorize the tone and sentiment regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Apart from the above variables, environmental factors that affect media reporting-such as political climate, media bias, and regional influences-were measured. For this, 5 questions were adapted on a scale ranging from 1 = No influence to 3 = Significant influence. As the scores go up, it indicates increased perceived influence on media sentiment. The total score on all environmental factors that was highest showed the highest perceived influence of the factors on media narratives.

Data analysis in this study is done with the Python programming language, utilizing various libraries for data analysis, including Pandas for data manipulation, NumPy for numerical calculations, and Matplotlib for visualizing data. These tools made it really easy to handle the data and generate results that will be precise and insightful for media sentiment and the surrounding environmental factors affecting it.

3.2 Data Collection

The data collection for this study was conducted online, as a structured review of articles published in 10 of the most trusted media portals of each Western Balkan country. In this regard, the portals that were sampled include all those that actually reported on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and its repercussions on the respective countries within the region. The articles were collected through the Google search in order to identify relevant media sources and contents on the political, economic, and social implications of the conflict during the study period.

Results

Based on the analysis of the sentiment scores across Western Balkan countries, suggesting that sentiment towards Russian aggression in Ukraine is very different across these nations, data have been largely supportive. In fact, the bar chart below showing the average sentiment polarity for each country depicts differences in how the media in these countries frame the conflict. Countries closer to Russia in historical and political terms, for instance Serbia, have more neutral attitudes, even positive, regarding the action taken by Russia. That would corroborate assumptions about those countries being more permissive or indifferent based on their political and historical framework. Conversely, those countries that have closer affinities with the European Union or NATO, like Albania and North Macedonia, demonstrate more critical and negative attitudes, closer to the West and further away from Russian influence.

The sharp contrast in the sentiment of media reporting also reflects underlying domestic political climates and regional alignments. While the general tendencies come out in the average scores of sentiment, such subtlety underlines the fact that historical relationships with Russia and present political orientations do shape public discourse. This analysis not only confirms the variation in sentiment across the region but also deepens the

understanding of how external political pressures and alliances shape the media portrait of Russian aggression. Therefore, it would be right to assume that countries closer to Russia are more neutral or supportive in their attitudes, while countries with more Western inclinations use more critical wording.

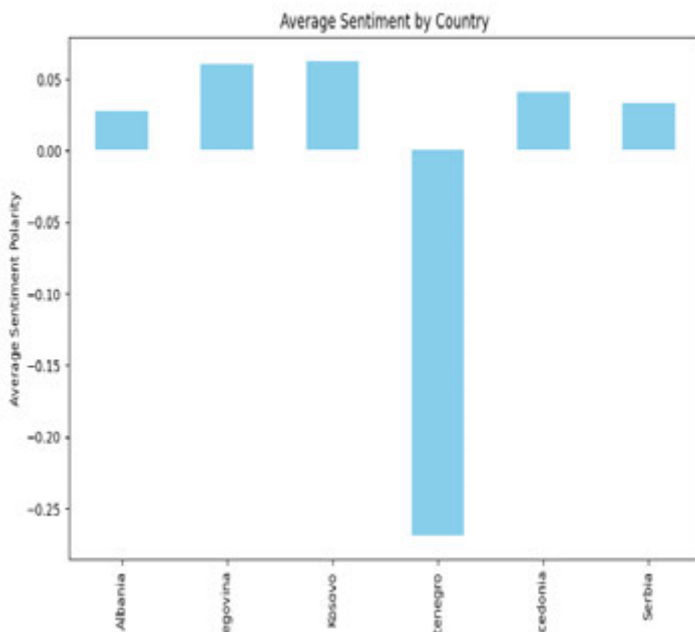


Figure 1. Average Sentiment by Country

The domestic political climate in each Western Balkan country, as it bears on Russian aggression, constitutes an important influential variable for media sentiment. It

would appear from the results that countries that have had political instability or strong pro-European/anti-Russian stances are found to be more critical of Russia. Indeed, statistical results of this analysis confirm a clear variation in media sentiment toward Russian aggression across the different political climates of the Western Balkan countries. Countries with strong pro-European stances, such as Albania, are very critical, with a notably negative polarity. This would seem to align with Albania's firm alignment with the EU and its historical stance against Russian influence. Whereas for countries like Serbia, closer politically and historically to Russia, the sentiment is more neutral or even positive, echoing the pro-Russian narrative present in their domestic media. It would follow that the media sentiment of the Western Balkans is largely set by the political climate: countries closer to Russia are less critical, or even supportive of Russian aggression.

The analysis also shows that countries with political instability, such as Bosnia, show more polarized sentiment. This is probably because of the complex internal divisions, each pulling in different directions and competing external influences. This brings out the influence of local political climates on the tone and direction of media discourses in the region. While the media of countries with strong pro-European or anti-Russian positions tend to be more cohesive and critical, in

countries with a pro-Russian orientation, reporting on events is more neutral, even friendly. Statistical results confirm the association of political orientation with the sentiment expressed in the media, historical alliances, together with the contemporary political situation, thus being determining factors in the way the public perceives world events, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine.

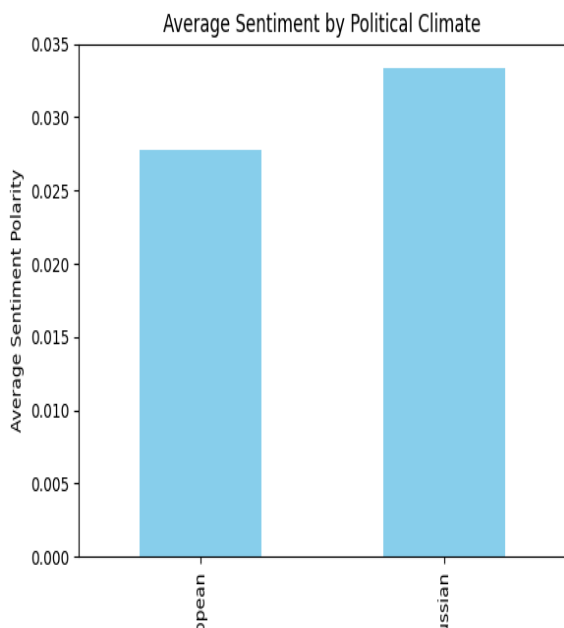


Figure 2. Average Sentiment by Political Climate

The results of the analysis give some interesting insights against the background of the assumption that pro- and

anti-Russian bias within media outlets in each country substantially affects the polarity of media discourse. The average polarity scores for negative, neutral, and positive classes of sentiment are -0.1391, 0.0000, and 0.2021, respectively, indicating that media sentiment across the dataset shows a clear distinction between positive and negative sentiment. On the other hand, the negative and positive categories denote a moderated movement of polarity in opposite directions, while the neutral category holds a zero score, which might express balanced or ambiguous sentiment.

These findings indeed show that media sentiment is polarized, with a noticeable divide into negative and positive sentiments. This polarization goes to confirm the hypothesis that might be contributed to by the media outlets with either strong anti-Russian or pro-Russian bias.

The negative polarity for the negative sentiment category might suggest anti-Russian media sentiment, whereas the positive polarity within the positive sentiment category reflects outlets that are more favorable towards Russia. Overall, the data supports the fact that media bias plays a part in shaping sentiment discourse; further analysis would be needed, though, to correlate these findings directly with political or media bias in specific countries.

This polarization is further brought out by this chart, where there is a clear distinction between the average polarities of each sentiment category, reinforcing the hypothesis.

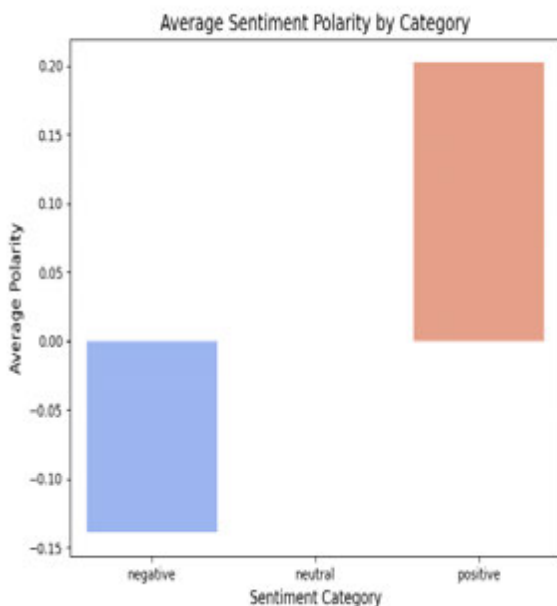


Figure 3. Average Sentiment Polarity by Category

These various levels of cohesion or fragmentation at a regional level, as a response to Russian aggression, are reflected within the media discourse whereby countries with similar historical experiences or alliances reflect either more unified or distinctly fragmented responses.

The chart of average sentiment by region in response to Russian aggression shows varied levels of cohesion or fragmentation. For instance, countries of the Western Balkans like Albania, Serbia, and Kosovo all exhibit a positive but moderated sentiment; a fact that evidences some cohesion within this region. It thus follows that countries from this group represent one historical experience determined by geopolitical factors, like proximity to Russia and historic ties with the European Union, which influences their shared sentiment. The unity of the region perhaps stems from the fact that geopolitical and economic challenges the action by Russia created common ground, usually strengthening the collective position against external threats.

On the contrary, regions like Eastern Europe, represented by countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, are more divergent in their sentiments, probably reflecting the distinct political and historical trajectories of these nations. Ukraine is strongly anti-Russian, while countries like Belarus, with close ties to Russia, exhibit more neutral or even positive sentiments toward Russia's actions.

Further fragmentations in Eastern Europe illustrate how the regional response to Russian aggression is complex because of how historical alliances and political

affiliations preordain various degrees of support or opposition. Overall, the chart supports such observation that in these regions, media discourse shows cohesion and fragmentation side by side, shaped both by historical experiences and present geopolitical alignment.

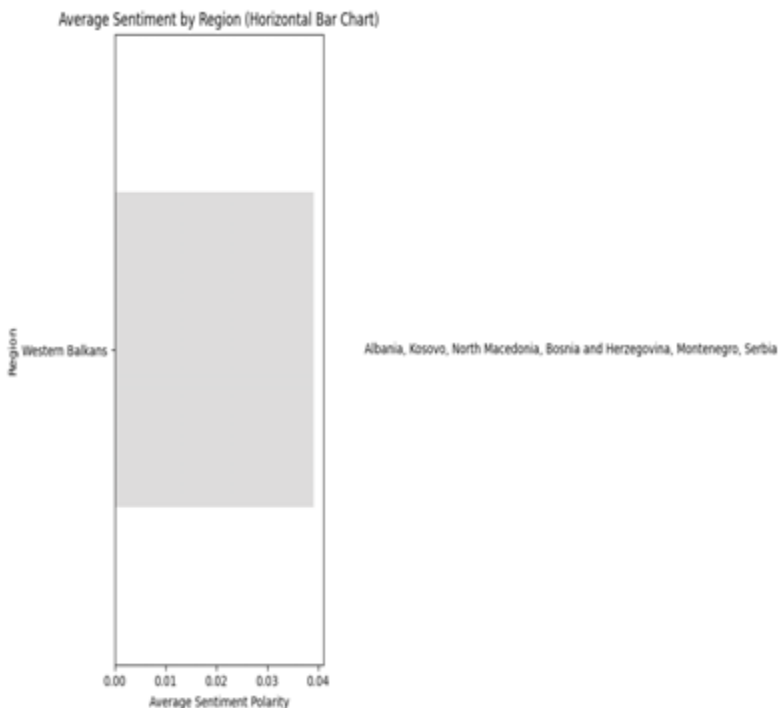


Figure 4. Average Sentiment by Region

This would corroborate the assumption that countries with more intensive relations to either NATO or the European Union exhibit a more critical media attitude towards

Russian aggression in the Western Balkans. The results for NATO members, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, for instance, come out as wholly negative. Because these countries are NATO members, they probably adhere more to Western policies and values, which influences the way their media portray the actions of Russia. The average sentiment scores for NATO-affiliated countries are indicative of media discourses in those countries that were aligned with a wider Western narrative of condemnation, most likely due to shared security concerns and international solidarity against Russian aggression.

On the other hand, when considering the sentiment analysis for EU-affiliated countries, there is a bit of a difference in the situation. While there are countries like Croatia which express more positive trends when compared to their NATO counterparts, other countries like Serbia-although not members of NATO-show leanings toward integration with the EU, represented by more neutral media discourses. The neutral sentiment in these countries can probably be explained by their strategic position within the EU, trying to balance historical ties with Russia with the pressures of aligning to the political stance of the EU. However, the findings indicate that EU affiliation is per se not enough to create a sharply critical media response; several countries

present less negative or even neutral sentiment, especially those with complicated historical ties to Russia.

These findings effectively illustrate how NATO and EU affiliations shape media sentiment. NATO member countries tend to exhibit a more unified and outspoken stance of criticism toward Russia, while consistently upholding the values and alliances of the West. In contrast, EU-affiliated countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, often display more pronounced neutrality or reservation, a stance influenced by both geopolitical factors and historical relationships. This suggests that while NATO and EU membership significantly impact the tone of media discourse, domestic political considerations and historical ties play a crucial role in shaping media sentiment in the region.

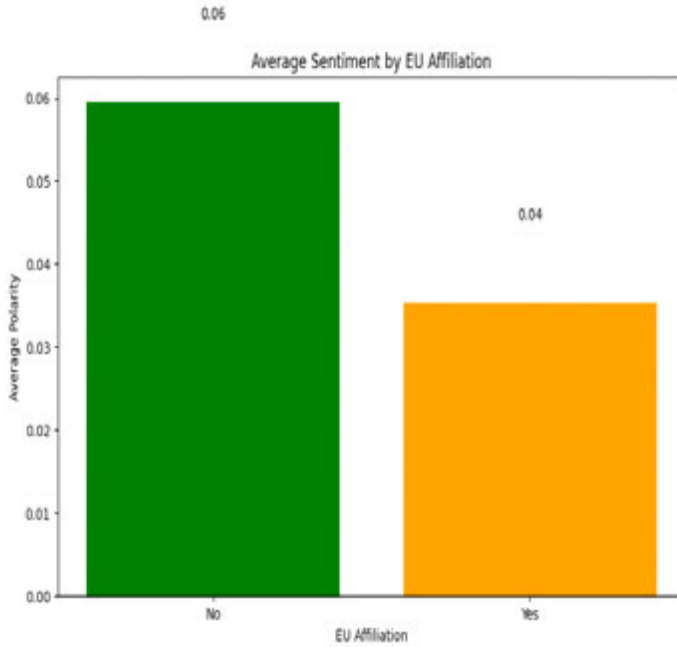


Figure 5. Average Sentiment by EU Affiliation

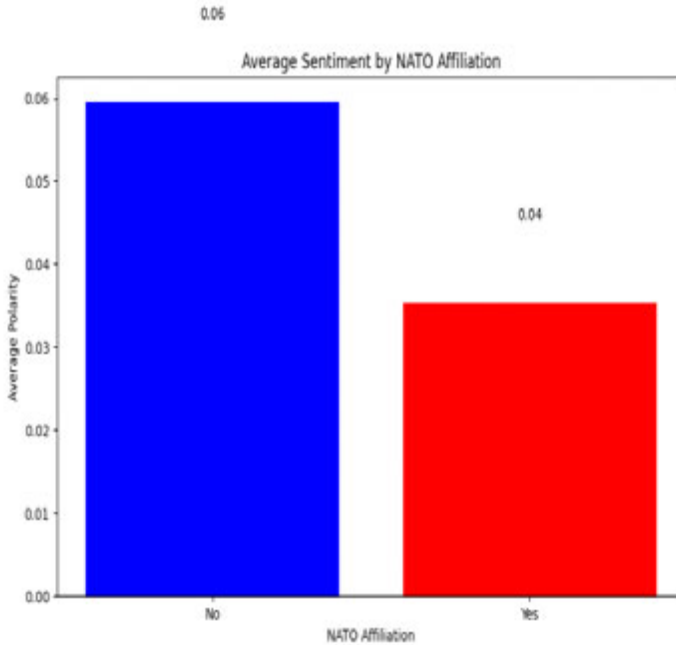


Figure 6. Average Sentiment by NATO Affiliation

Conclusion

The results of the study have identified the great influence that domestic political climates, regional alliances, and international affiliations have on media sentiment with regard to Russian aggression. Countries bound closer to NATO and the European Union, such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, tend to show a more

critical media sentiment toward Russia, reflecting their alignment with Western policies and values. While for Serbia, which is closer to Russia on historical and political terms, media discourses appear neutral or even supportive. That indicates the impact of both domestic political contexts and international relations on media discourses. This also brings into light the level of the regional cohesion and fragmentation variables in response to the Russian aggression: from the generally cohesive yet moderated sentiment in the Western Balkans, driven by the shared geopolitical interests and European aspirations, to a highly different, more fragmented picture that may be seen in Eastern Europe, where countries like Ukraine take a very strong anti-Russian stance, while others, such as Belarus, present more neutral or favorable sentiments. These findings underpin the complex role of historical, political, and regional factors in mediating media sentiment, with international affiliations, historic ties, and domestic political conditions playing a big role in framing media narratives on global conflict.

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“Reflections on the future of the Western Balkans in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine- presenting three main scenarios”

Nenad Čanak

As Croatia and Montenegro face unique situations due to their EU and NATO memberships, respectively the abstract is built on the Western Balkan countries which are outside the EU umbrella and NATO. Russian Victory: If Russia wins, it is likely to try expanding its influence in the Western Balkans, using its intelligence network to support pro-Russian parties, spreading propaganda, and increasing its political and economic influence. This could challenge the region Western integration aspirations. Ukrainian Victory: Conversely, a Ukrainian victory could diminish Russia's influence, as the Western Balkans might receive more support from the EU and NATO, enhancing protection against external influences and bolstering their democratic and economic development. Ceasefire Scenario: A ceasefire leaving parts of Ukraine under Russian control could create a complex situation for the Western Balkans, possibly leading to a frozen conflict and a challenging balancing act between maintaining relations with Russia and aspiring towards Western integration. Conclusion: Regardless of the

conflict's outcome, the Western Balkans; future depends on managing internal capacities and external relations. Strengthening democratic institutions and economic independence, along with international cooperation, are essential for a stable and prosperous future.

Introduction

The Western Balkans, a region historically characterized by political instability and external influence, finds itself at a crossroads due to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has far-reaching consequences, not only for Eastern Europe but also for the Western Balkans. While Croatia and Montenegro have secured their positions within the European Union (EU) and NATO, other Western Balkan states remain outside these structures, making them vulnerable to geopolitical shifts. This paper explores three possible scenarios for the region's future, depending on the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

Russian Victory Scenario

If Russia emerges victorious, it is likely to amplify its influence in the Western Balkans. This influence could manifest in several ways:

1. **Political Manipulation:** Russia has already established strong ties with certain political parties and factions across the region. A victory in Ukraine would embolden these pro-Russian elements, allowing Moscow to exert further control through political channels.
2. **Propaganda and Disinformation:** Russia has been known to employ media influence and disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion. A Russian victory would likely result in increased misinformation, fueling anti-Western sentiment and destabilizing democratic processes.
3. **Economic Dependence:** By leveraging energy exports, direct investments, and financial aid, Russia could further entrench its economic hold over vulnerable Western Balkan states, reducing their ability to pursue independent foreign policies.
4. **Security Risks:** Increased Russian influence could exacerbate existing ethnic and political tensions, leading to heightened security threats and potential destabilization.

Ukrainian Victory Scenario

Should Ukraine achieve victory, Russia's influence in the Western Balkans would likely diminish, ushering in a more favorable environment for Western integration:

1. **Enhanced EU and NATO Support:** A Ukrainian victory would reinforce the credibility and effectiveness of Western institutions, encouraging further enlargement efforts in the Western Balkans.
2. **Democratic and Economic Development:** With Russia's grip weakened, the Western Balkans could receive increased financial and institutional support from the EU and NATO, fostering economic growth and democratic resilience.
3. **Energy Independence:** The region would have greater incentives to diversify energy sources, reducing reliance on Russian gas and oil.
4. **Improved Regional Stability:** A strong Western presence would discourage external interference, creating a more stable and predictable political landscape.

Ceasefire Scenario

A ceasefire that leaves parts of Ukraine under Russian control presents a complex and ambiguous future for the Western Balkans. This scenario would likely result in a prolonged period of uncertainty, affecting the region in multiple ways:

1. **Geopolitical Balancing Act:** Countries in the Western Balkans may struggle to maintain a delicate balance between maintaining diplomatic relations with Russia and advancing their Western integration efforts.
2. **Prolonged Political and Economic Uncertainty:** A frozen conflict in Ukraine could lead to hesitancy among Western actors regarding further enlargement, slowing down the accession process for the Western Balkans.
3. **Continued Russian Influence:** Moscow might continue using hybrid warfare tactics, such as cyber-attacks and economic pressure, to maintain its influence in the region.
4. **Risk of Fragmentation:** The ceasefire scenario could embolden nationalist movements and deepen internal divisions, making regional cooperation more challenging.

Conclusion

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the future of the Western Balkans depends on both internal reforms and external geopolitical dynamics. Strengthening democratic institutions, fostering economic independence, and enhancing regional cooperation are critical for long-term stability and prosperity. The EU and NATO must remain actively engaged in the region, providing consistent support to counter external influences and facilitate integration. By navigating these challenges wisely, the Western Balkans can secure a future that aligns with democratic values and long-term stability.

Russian Hybrid Warfare in the West Balkans

Ivana Stradner and Peter LaBelle

Recent years have seen deepening tensions across the Balkans, as Russia and Serbia have sought to destabilize the fragile situations in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro to their advantage.

Kosovo has never been recognized by Serbia, and remains host to a contingent of peacekeepers from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which freed the territory from Serbian rule in 1999 and administered it until independence in 2008. The unsettled status of relations between the two countries has led to repeated threats of war and challenges to Kosovo's sovereignty.

Since 2021 a series of crises involving the validity of Kosovo and Serbian vehicle license plates has resulted in barricaded roads, closed borders, and attacks by Serbian mobs on Kosovo police. Mayoral elections, boycotted by the Serb parties, brought Kosovo Albanian candidates to office and triggered another outburst of violence, including against NATO peacekeepers, 90 of whom were injured in May 2023. In November 2024 the Kosovo government accused Serbia of being behind the destruction of a canal in northern Kosovo, vital to the country's water and energy supplies.

At the same time, Serbia has carried out an unprecedented buildup of troops and weaponry at the border, carrying out aerial exercises close to Kosovo and threatening repeatedly that the crisis could turn into a war. For instance, in 2022 Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said that Kosovo and Serbia were “on the brink of armed conflict.” Russian government officials have taken the same line: according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “a big explosion is brewing in the heart of Europe.”

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the governing structures set up by the 1995 Dayton Accords have come under increasing strain. This agreement, which brought an end to a brutal three-and-a-half-year war which killed more than 100,000 people, established two autonomous entities under a weak central government: The Serb-majority Republika Srpska and the largely Croat and Bosnian Muslim Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Now the president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, has pushed for it to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In February 2025, a court in Bosnia and Herzegovina sentenced Milorad Dodik to one year in prison and banned him from politics for six years over his secessionist threats. Russia condemned the court’s decision against Dodik and Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that “this persecution of Dodik is a purely politically motivated move that targets Dodik personally and all patriotic forces of Serbia which is inadmissible.” The Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs immediately announced

that Russia is trying “to neutralize threats to inter-ethnic dialogue, peace and stability” in the Balkans.

Russia’s support for Republika Srpska comes as no surprise. Vladimir Putin and Dodik convened in Kazan in February 2024. During this meeting Dodik stated that he is, “trying to discourage any possibility of [Bosnia and Herzegovina] joining the sanctions against Russia.” At the closing of their meeting, Putin awarded Dodik the Order of Alexander Nevsky for his "contribution to the development of cooperation between the Russian Federation and Bosnia and Herzegovina and for reinforcing the partnership with Republika Srpska." Putin and Dodik met again in early June in St. Petersburg at the International Economic Forum. In his opening remarks, Putin told Dodik that, “We [Russia] are grateful to you for what you do in the spiritual sphere, and in supporting our ties through the foreign ministries.”

Cooperation with Serbia has also been important for Dodik. In 2024, he joined the Serbian cabinet in Belgrade for an “All-Serbian Assembly.” Here he and Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic adopted a “Declaration On the Protection of National and Political Rights and The Common Future of the Serbian People,” which focused on the strong historic, political, and economic ties between Serbia and the Republika Srpska.

Though Montenegro’s current leadership seeks to guide the country closer to Europe, here too there has been a history of Russian and Serbian meddling. In 2016 the President alleged that Russia was behind a failed coup aimed at

ousting him from power and preventing Montenegro's accession to NATO. More recently, pro-Serbian parties in the opposition have tried to change Montenegro's citizenship laws in ways which could complicate its relationship with Serbia and make deeper integration with the European Union more challenging.

All of these cases embody a pattern of Russian influence operations across the Balkans, dedicated to sowing chaos, weakening fragile states, and embarrassing or distracting NATO and the West. Several factors motivate Russia's interest in destabilizing the Balkans. By flexing Russia's ability to cause trouble in the region, Putin suggests that he is the only one who can stop it. If Russia is essential to conflict mediation in the Balkans, and only Russia can effectively rein in rogue actors there, Putin makes himself vital to peace in a sensitive corner of Europe - and presumably will seek to extract concessions from NATO or the EU in exchange for cooperation there.

Increasing the salience of conflicts within the Balkans can also help Russia further stretch the unity of the NATO alliance. Already there is significant division among the alliance over the level of support being given to Ukraine; another conflict, this one even closer to home, would strain NATO's consensus-making still further. A hypothetical war over Kosovo, for example, would complicate NATO's role there, especially given that several member countries do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

Russia therefore benefits from instability in the Balkans regardless of outcome: if chaos continues unabated, with the West powerless to stop it, NATO appears to be a “paper tiger,” unable to stand up for its principles and promises. If brought to the table to help solve the problems there, Putin will seek to use them as leverage to extract concessions. And should a hot war actually break out there, even if NATO intervened successfully against Serbia or its proxies that would mean less attention and material support for Ukraine in its ongoing war against Russian aggression.

Russia has other reasons for supporting Serbia and for sowing instability in the Balkans, reasons which tie into its understanding of information warfare. For Putin, the Western support of Kosovo offers an excuse for his occupation and annexation of internationally-recognized Ukrainian territory. If NATO could intervene to guarantee and defend Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, then Russia is justified in its military actions “protecting” the Donetsk and Lugansk “People’s Republics” and later incorporating them into Russia proper. This diplomatic whataboutism (doubly absurd given that Russia has never recognized Kosovo’s independence) helps Russia muddy the waters of the narrative about the war in Ukraine.

Information warfare plays an important role in Russian security thinking. The Balkans has seen numerous examples of this. North Macedonia has been home to numerous Russian troll farms which spread fake news about the 2016 U.S. elections. Russian influence operations campaigns also

targeted North Macedonians ahead of the 2018 referendum which changed their country's official name and cleared their path into NATO. Russian media have further down discord between religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina and egged on the secession of Republika Srpska.

This type of information warfare can be seen in Russia's support for Serbia. Russia has spread repeated claims, picked up by the Serbian authorities, that Western powers are plotting to carry out a "color revolution" or a "Maidan-style coup" in Serbia. Russia and Serbia have merged together and enhanced their mutual paranoia about Western interference, justifying their hostility towards the West.

At the same time, Serbia has welcomed Russian media onto its airwaves. Not only do Sputnik and RT operate freely in the country, but Serbian media have repeated many of its claims. These include the utterly false contention that Ukraine attacked Russia first, as well as conspiracy theories about US-run "biolabs" in Ukraine and Serbia.

Russia's activities in the Balkans have taken place with the tacit or outright approval of the Serbian government of Aleksandar Vucic. Vucic frequently paints himself as a moderate, and has sought to walk a delicate tightrope between Russia and the West, particularly since the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. For instance, Serbia has reportedly sold arms to Ukraine, and voted against Russia at the United Nations General Assembly. However, these have been largely symbolic gestures, and Serbia has aligned with Russia in numerous concrete ways, from refusing to join

international sanctions on Russia to encouraging secession in Republika Srpska.

At the core of the alliance between Vucic and Putin lies the fact that Russia's interests broadly align with those of Vucic and his right-wing Serbian nationalist backers, including the Serbian Orthodox Church. These Serbian nationalists would like to see the return of Serbian control over Kosovo, which they consider an inalienable part of the nation - it was home to numerous Serbian Orthodox monasteries in the medieval era, and is the site of the Battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, a key moment in the Serbian national legend. Some of them also talk about a "Srpski mir," or "Serbian World," incorporating all of the Serbian-populated territories in what are now Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other states. This echoes the narrative of the "Russkii mir" used to justify the Russian expansion against Ukraine.

Even if these expansive goals are never accomplished, however, Serbian nationalists see a benefit in aligning with Russia for domestic political purposes. Cooperation with Russia in the information space strengthens their claim that Western powers are trying to unseat them, thereby painting opposition forces as foreign agents. Side by side with Russia, they can portray themselves as bravely defending the traditional, Orthodox values of Serbia against modern, Western values coming from Europe.

This alignment between Serbian and Russian interests should be understood by policymakers in the West. Symbolic gestures such as a vote in the UN General

Assembly must be recognized as meaningless window-dressing. Europe, in particular, should understand that threatening Serbia's EU membership prospects provides little leverage as long as the Serbian government is happy to avoid the EU's requirements for legal and political reform. Instead, the US and Europe should threaten concrete, targeted sanctions. There is a legal basis for this, following former US President Joe Biden's signature of an executive order allowing sanctions on those who "threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial integrity" of the region.

NATO responded to the flare-ups in 2023 by sending more troops to Kosovo. However, it needs to do more. Learning from Russia's investment in information warfare, NATO should strike back against the Russian and Serbian propaganda machine. Information warfare teams in the Balkans should seek to remind Serbian nationalists that Putin's promises of support are empty: he is distracted by his war in Ukraine and will not be willing or able to help Serbia should conflict erupt. The comparison should be made between Serbia and Armenia, another Russian ally. Despite being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and making official requests for support from its ally, Armenia received no meaningful help from Russia in its recent wars with Azerbaijan. NATO must not cede the information field to Russia.

The West must pay attention to the Balkans and get tough on troublemakers in the region. Otherwise, simmering tensions could break out into outright conflict, further

destabilizing the region, inflicting human costs, and strengthening Putin's bargaining position against NATO over Ukraine.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Western Balkans are caught in a precarious situation, with Russia strategically using hybrid warfare to destabilize the region and undermine Western influence. Through disinformation campaigns, manipulation of religious institutions, and bolstering nationalist leaders, Moscow aims to keep the Balkans in a perpetual state of crisis, preventing their integration into the European Union and NATO. Figures like Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić play crucial roles in furthering these destabilizing agendas, with Russia providing support and maintaining leverage in the region.

The future of the Balkans hinges on the West's ability to counter these hybrid tactics and offer a clear path toward stability and integration. However, as long as external actors like Russia continue to exploit ethnic divisions and political paralysis, the region will remain vulnerable to further fragmentation. The Western Balkans stand at a crossroads—either they can move towards lasting peace and European integration or remain a battleground for external influences and nationalist ambitions, with peace continuing to hang in the balance. The challenge for both regional actors and the international community is to ensure that the Balkans do not

become a frozen conflict zone, where Russia's influence grows unchecked.

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