

## Is the Sun setting on the West?

*Daniel Serwer*

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### 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.