

Reporting Ukraine: Reflections on the War and Its Broader Implications

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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.