

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

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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.