

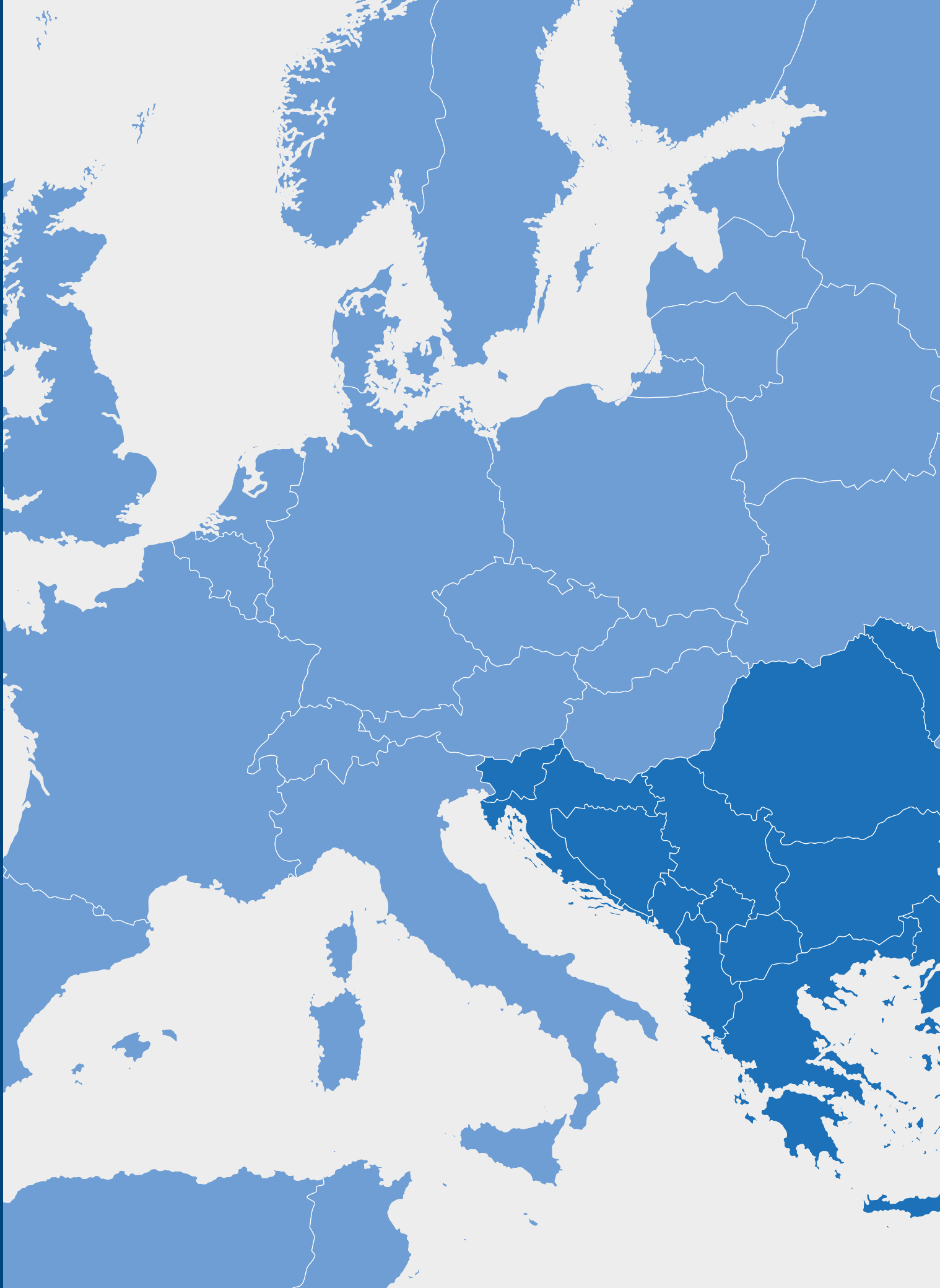
POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS



**THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE:
WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR SOUTHEAST EUROPE?**

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EDITORIAL



War has returned to Europe. Russia's assault on Ukraine, a sovereign European nation, is likely to become the largest European conflict in decades, which has brought back horrors from the past, already taken a catastrophic human toll, and generated a great migration crisis on the continent. The global response has been overwhelming. Unprecedented policy shifts in Germany and across Europe have made irreversible changes to Europe's security structure. Consequences of the war in Ukraine are felt well beyond its borders.

While initially the war in Ukraine seemed to have taken the spotlight off the Western Balkans and wider Southeast European region, attention was quickly turned back towards the region given the potential implications of Russia invading its neighbour. The reasons for this renewed attention are many.

First and foremost, because the risk of an extended armed conflict directly affects the region: Moldova was immediately identified – together with Georgia – as two countries where Russia would be most likely to further spread its aggression.

Second, the weight of Russia's influence in the region has long been viewed as a menace. Now, Putin's determination to prevent Euro-Atlantic integration and his readiness to cause political turmoil is more threatening than ever. Every bit of Russian influence is seen unambiguously as a potentially destabilizing factor – not only for the region, but also for the EU and NATO. Significantly, just a few days before the war set off in Ukraine, the EU Foreign Affairs Council had both Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina on its agenda. Although receding in the order of priorities, the Western Balkans have remained a major concern for the EU, US, and UK. An additional 500 EUFOR troops have been sent to Bosnia “as a precautionary measure” to ensure “a safe and secure environment” in the country.

Finally, the Russian assault on a sovereign country revived the question of Euro-Atlantic expansion, not only for Ukraine but also the aspiring countries of the Western Balkans. When Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia announced they would submit membership applications to the EU – with Ukraine requesting a “fast-track process” – the question on people's mind in the region was naturally: “What about us?” Would the

current EU candidate and potential candidate countries be able to benefit from a facilitated process now that the security environment has become so precarious?

This issue of *Political Trends and Dynamics in Southeast Europe* focuses on the immediate implications of the war in Ukraine on the region's security. We first explore how regional ties to Russia and Russian influence affect political stability in Southeast Europe. Our contributors also look at the future of regional security in the context of Europe's geopolitical shift and whether a new sense of urgency could be beneficial for regional stability in the long run. Finally, this issue explores the effect of the war on the Euro-Atlantic paths of Western Balkan countries and whether the EU and the US will change their approach in the region.

A stellar line up of authors from Ukraine, Croatia, and Romania bring thought-provoking analyses on these issues and clear recommendations to foster security and political stability in Southeast Europe. They overwhelmingly point to the need to accelerate and strengthen the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region.

Vivien Savoye, Ioannis Armakolas and Alida Vračić

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DISPATCH FROM ODESSA



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Compared to the North and East of Ukraine, the city of Odessa seems calm and safe. However, this feeling should not delude you. Sporadic attempts of air and missile strikes, possibilities of amphibious operation and constant reconnaissance by drones have both the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the local population on high alert. Moreover, the city has de facto been under the maritime blockade since mid-February, earlier than the Russian invasion had started. Curfew and road-blocks around the town make the picture of the city centre surreal.

It is difficult to explain what is more important about Odessa – its economic, strategic, or emotional significance for the Russian Federation. The biggest Ukrainian seaport is a guarantor of economic development and trade, as, according to different data, around 60% of Ukrainian exports are delivered by sea. More importantly, most of the grain cargos (up to 90%) are also shipped by sea. Considering the position of Ukraine as a guarantor of food security for many Middle Eastern, African, and Asian states, the food crisis is just to come, as many are already experiencing either shortage of supply or increased prices. There are discussions of land delivery by trains or trucks to neighbouring countries and using the facilities of Constanta seaport in Romania, but one should definitely take into account whether insurance companies are ready to confirm such routes, and also the capacity of one truck compared to one ship.

Moreover, Odessa is the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy. Driven away from Crimea in 2014, they found a new home in Odessa. Their mood is resolute and determined. They have held a grudge against the Russian Armed Forces since 2014. If the Russian Navy gained control of Odessa, it would be possible for the Russian Federation to control the whole Northern Black Sea, thus threatening all three littoral NATO states – Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

Odessa's emotional significance may not be so understandable to those not from the region. Odessa is a multinational city formally established at the end of the 18th century and has always been perceived to be part of the Russian Empire's culture and history. The sense is that a mainly Russian-speaking town should be eager to have closer relations with Moscow because of the

shared families, artists, writers, and legends and its role as a popular holiday location since Soviet times. For the Russian Federation, it is important that the city surrender, rather than fight or oppose the occupation – otherwise, it would ruin the myths created within the last 20 years about the Russian bonds of Odessa and its pro-Russian stance. What is not understood by Moscow is that the Russian language was just a language of intercultural cooperation, and shared appreciation of the classical Russian culture was just a legacy of the Empire. Still, for Odessa, freedom and tolerance were the most important values, something that Russia never associated with. The events of 2014, the brutality of military actions, as well as the further degradation of Donetsk added arguments against the pro-Kremlin sentiments among the locals.

Still, many ask – if Odessa is so important, why have the Russians not attacked it heavily yet? There are three main reasons. First, it would be barely possible to take Odessa without controlling the coastline from Crimea to Odessa, as there are no other ways to ensure military supply for forces. Without controlling the city of Mykolaiv, any landing operation will not be able to survive long. Second are the chances of the maritime operation itself. Considering the current defence arrangements and the geographical terrain of the coast, any amphibious operation without land or air control of the terrain would be insane. Last but not least, due to those emotional sentiments described above, it would be very difficult to initiate serious airstrikes against the city centre (where the commercial port and the navy base are also located). Any pictures of the destroyed historic buildings well-known from movies and holiday photos will be something personal for many Russians. Perhaps the last point is the wishful thinking of the locals, but it clearly correlates with the idea that Russia would need the city to surrender, a notion that has been cultivated in anonymous social networks channels before and during the invasion.

Still, this Russian invasion is very irrational. Decisions by its leadership are often illogical and unbeneficial for the Russian Federation. Many of their consequences seem surreal. That is why unpredictability is probably the main word of this war for Odessa. Will it be attacked, when, and how severe – these are questions that we hope remain unanswered until the end of Russia's aggression.

RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE AND EASTERN EUROPE'S WORST FEARS



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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

This article argues that the survival of young democracies in Eastern Europe following Russia's aggression on Ukraine will depend on the consolidation of NATO's Black Sea posture, the EU weaning off its energy dependence on Moscow, and rethinking EU enlargement from a geopolitical perspective while ramping up democratic resilience at home and promoting democracy from Ukraine to the Western Balkans. Romania's entry into the EU and NATO partly came to fruition because of geopolitical considerations at the time therefore benefitting from a somewhat fast-tracked accession despite falling short on certain EU benchmarks. Moldova in particular remains of special concern to Romania, given the close relations between the two countries.

With Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Eastern Europe's worst fears have returned: regional instability, conventional war and the primacy of force. Countries like Romania had joined NATO and the European Union to avert precisely such developments; hence they perceive this new reality as an existential threat. Whether their still young democracies are able to survive the shock will shape the future of the EU as a whole. This will depend on the consolidation of NATO's Black Sea posture, the EU's weaning off of its energy dependence on Russia, rethinking of enlargement in a geopolitical manner, while at the same time the EU ramps up its defence of democratic resilience at home and invests in the same around its borders, from Ukraine to the Western Balkans.

Romanian identity has always been a paradoxical composite of elite-driven Westernism, at least since the 1848 movement for national emancipation, growing on a predominantly Balkan/non-Western base. While still pre-modern in many of its socio-economic characteristics,¹ the country has embraced a firm pro-Western political orientation after 1989.² EU accession was seen not just as a political or economic option, but an identity issue, a return to the "bosom of the West" and the roots of Romanian culture.³ Integration and convergence with the EU were seen as the single most powerful driver for the continued modernisation of the country, given that domestic elites have shown chronic opportunism and corruption, a lack of independent strategic vision and implementation capacity.⁴ Strict requirements before accession and even afterwards (the CVM5 or criteria for EU funding) have compensated for domestic bad governance.

This reliance on a clear external roadmap for internal progress underscores Romania's approach to foreign policy and security; hence, what the country has dreaded first and foremost is volatility in Europe and regional contagion. Its strategic culture has consistently been dominated by the looming threat of an aggressive Russia, by never-ending conflicts and disputes among its uncomfortable neighbours,⁶ and by the prospect of getting caught in the crosshairs of conflicting great power interests. NATO and EU accession, therefore, were seen as the ultimate means to insulate itself from that instability and earn a shield of invulnerability which could never be penetrated, either from inside or outside.

This illusion has been shattered to pieces with the invasion of Ukraine. The primary danger is of a conventional military nature: control of the Serpent Island now brings Russian strike capabilities only 45 km from the Romanian coast and in the immediate vicinity of the gas reserves in the Black Sea that it was planning to start exploiting in the near future,⁷ to reduce its dependence (and that of its neighbours) on Russia. Access to these deposits was granted to the country following a dispute with Ukraine which was resolved in 2009 in the Hague.⁸ Already after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 there were growing concerns that Moscow would station nuclear weapons on the island.⁹ The Black Sea – once jokingly called Romania's only friendly neighbour¹⁰ – was already a *de facto* A2/AD space¹¹ and Romania had proposed at the NATO Warsaw Summit in 2016 the creation of a flotilla to defend the now hostile sea together with Bulgaria and Turkey; but (apparently due to Russian pressure) Sofia later withdrew its initial support.¹²

Where repeated Romanian pleas for NATO to give the southeastern flank the same attention as to Poland and the Baltics were once grounded in the desire to deny Russia a *potential* strategic advantage in the Black Sea, now the country contemplates the *actual* weakness of coastal NATO members (other than Turkey) in front of a no longer unimaginable prospect of a Russian disembarkment. If Putin manages to obtain full control of the southern corridor in Ukraine (Mariupol, Odessa), it will have more than confirmed these worst-case scenarios, depicted in so many diplomatic reunions over the years. As things currently stand, the Black Sea is on a path to becoming a 'Russian lake'¹³: with the Russian Black Sea Fleet in a strong position to support ground troops taking control of south-eastern Ukraine, but also to potentially project power well beyond the immediate region, into the Mediterranean, Western Balkans and the Middle East and to threaten the "economy, energy and food security of the entire region."¹⁴

Under these circumstances, Bucharest's best hope for territorial defence remains its strategic partnership with the US, which has bases on Romanian soil, one right on the Black Sea shore, at Kogalniceanu, near the key port of Constanta, where Ukraine reroutes now part of its exports.¹⁵ Romania has announced that it is stepping up its defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, but money alone will

not solve a long-lasting problem of judicious and swift allocation. The purchase of corvettes¹⁶ from the Netherlands or France to replace outdated capabilities has been suspended for a few years now.

Beyond hard security, all of Romania's other fears have come back to haunt it after the Russian invasion of Ukraine: primarily, the use of force to reestablish spheres of influence. A middle-sized country by European standards and a small one at global scale, Romania feels best protected by a framework of norms and principles, that reinforce the rules-based international order. With rare exceptions (i.e. support for the US mission in Iraq without a UN mandate), Romania's diplomacy has consistently emphasized the need to strictly respect international law (which, for example, was a determining factor in their choice not to recognise Kosovo¹⁷). However, after their foundations were seriously shaken by annexation of Crimea, international law and the peaceful resolution of disputes have just been blown up by Russia's actions in Ukraine, including war crimes, as the international community looks on, much like in the case of Srebrenica, recollections of which still ring fresh in the memory of decision-makers.

Romania's good relations with Serbia, as kindred Orthodox countries sharing a troubled history, underscores the significance of the permission it granted NATO in 1999

to use its airspace to bomb the Milosevic regime. Conflicts in the Balkans, therefore, hold particular importance for Bucharest, which has since sought to evade the volatility of the region. A Balkan country by many tokens, Romania has made a deliberate effort in the 1990s and 2000s to dissociate itself from that classification.¹⁸ It has also been one of the most consistent supporters of EU and NATO enlargement, to avoid being the eastern border of the Euro-Atlantic alliance and to surround itself by friendly, peace-loving, interdependent countries that will have signed up to the same system of norms and values.

Now it seems to be surrounded by rogue or weak states again: Hungary has just renewed its illiberal option under Viktor Orban, as has Serbia under Vučić.¹⁹ On the other hand, Moldova and Bulgaria both have pro-European, reformist governments, but the extent to which they can really escape the significant Russian influence, as well as work out their internal challenges has yet to be tested. North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro's NATO membership significantly reduces the prospect of actual hot conflict in the Western Balkans, but the transformation of these countries and convergence with the West is incomplete as long as they are still kept at the EU's door. Turkey under Erdoğan remains unpredictable.

Romania's entry into the EU and NATO was itself based to some extent on geopolitical considerations, and thus

President of Moldova Maia Sandu welcoming refugees; Source: Presidency of Republic of Moldova



“ The gaping chasm created between Russia and the West will most likely endure for a good many years ”

it benefitted from a somewhat fast-tracked accession, although it was still falling short of some EU benchmarks.²⁰ The understanding in Bucharest of the geopolitical value of the enlargement process itself is, unsurprisingly, sharper than in many other European capitals. At a time when geopolitics has returned so violently to the region, the importance of the choice that countries like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia or the Western Balkans have made to stand with the system of norms and values represented by the West, rather than with revisionist powers like Russia is fundamental and deserving of a proper response from the EU – which itself stands to benefit from this choice. As divisions emerge more clear-cut than ever, countries that have demonstrated their Europeanness, even before achieving every measure of convergence with the EU or internalising all of its values should be given more, not less incentive for closer association. That can only mean a rethinking of enlargement to offer a clear perspective for accession (even in a distant future), as well as reward progress along the way. A political approach should complement, not replace the conditionality policy.

Until that happens, Moldova in particular remains of special concern to Romania, given the close relations between the two countries²¹ and the presence of Russian troops on the separatist territory of Transnistria, which can at any time cause major disruption in an already fragile state. Bucharest would then feel compelled to take responsibility for the ca. 650,000 Moldovans holding a Romanian passport,²² as well as for aiding Chisinau in every way possible.

Ukraine itself, whether victorious or defeated (whatever that means) will remain a huge challenge not just for

its neighbours, but for the whole of Europe. On top of the destruction, the economic crisis and enduring social and security challenges (a minor example would be the number of small arms that have been distributed to the population and which are impossible to trace), and Ukraine's current resistance, emboldened and empowered by its successes and frustrated by its losses, may well translate into radicalisation, growing nationalism and resentment.²³ Countries that go through a history of conflict feeling largely abandoned by others (the West, in this case), tend to develop a sense of post-conflict opportunism that drives them to play the victim card and request assistance while openly rejecting or avoiding compliance with any accompanying conditions. Already the Western Balkan regimes have displayed a mastery of playing the EU while milking it for funds. Ukraine may follow suit and demand its legitimate place, earned with blood, amidst the European community, while eschewing the required reforms as much as possible. For Romania, this can only spell trouble, given the importance it attaches to the treatment of its minority in Ukraine²⁴ – which may only worsen after the war, as Ukraine will have no interest in being more 'inclusive' of its Russian minority, thus extending the same kind of treatment over all the others.

While Romania may become more attractive to investors fleeing instability in its vicinity, may fix some of its labour force shortage and may shine bright among less Brussels-compliant capitals, the lack of regional 'competition' and the comparatively lower pressure from the EU do not usually work to its advantage. Romania has been very sensitive to external admonishment, and it has avoided alignment with V4 in challenging Brussels' approach to

rule of law. If Brussels and Washington don't have enough bandwidth left now for the scrutiny of Romanian corruption, being busy with the bigger trouble-makers, there is little chance for progress on rule of law, which has been stalling already for a few years.²⁵ Even more so as politicians in Bucharest have learnt to master the art of gradually chipping away at civic freedoms and justice reforms, rather than going at it with a loud bang that can be heard in Brussels and at home. Investment may also come in despite the lack of much-needed structural reform.²⁶ The social pressures of a large number of refugees, in a country without the experience of diversity and which has regarded Ukraine with suspicion or outright hostility over the years, compounded by nationalistic overtones in neighbouring countries and from its own radical political forces, may deepen xenophobia and the appeal of far-right populists.

These are all internal vulnerabilities likely to be exploited by Moscow. Whatever the outcome of the current conflict, the gaping chasm created between Russia and the West will most likely endure for a good many years. This is perhaps, in fact, the most fundamental strategic shift that will impact Romania directly. Until now, it used to see itself as a minor player that gets to witness major global rearrangements that will only affect it down the line. This is no longer the case. The EU and NATO have for so long tried to appease Russia, to avoid 'throwing' it in the arms of China in a renewed logic of opposing blocks. The invasion of Ukraine, as well as the Russian army's horrendous abuse of civilians clearly indicate Moscow's refusal to be European. That effectively redraws the map of potential future conflict, with a fault line that runs right through the Black Sea and the permanent looming prospect of even nuclear disaster immediately in Romania's vicinity. It also heralds an intensification of Russian efforts in the realm of 'below the threshold' threats, where it has been extremely effective over the past years, as opposed to its recently demonstrated military incompetence. Attempts to undermine stability, social cohesion and commitment to democracy in Europe, especially in its vicinity are able to evade the Romanian public's disaffection with Russia (dating back way before the recent aggression), as they are carried out through domestic agents.²⁷

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TARGETS OF RUSSIAN SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

This article argues that Russia's primary interest in the Western Balkans is halting the further expansion of NATO membership in the region and undermining the stability and governance of existing NATO members. Moscow is actively aided in these efforts by a network of local proxy actors, the most significant of which are the Serb nationalist regimes in Belgrade and Banja Luka, respectively. Following the events in Ukraine, policymakers in the Atlantic community cannot afford to underestimate the desperation and danger of Russia's malign activities in the Western Balkans and should undertake robust measures to buttress the defensive and counter-intelligence capacities of local NATO members and NATO-aligned governments, while accelerating initiatives to bring the latter (namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) formally into the alliance.

Russia's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans for much the last decade (certainly since the return of the nationalist right to power in Serbia in 2012 and since Moscow's original invasion of Ukraine in 2014) has had one primary purpose: preventing regional governments from joining NATO. In this effort, Russia has closely cooperated both with the Vučić regime in Belgrade,¹ but also their respective regional proxies in the region, among whom the secessionist authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) Republika Srpska (RS) entity are the most significant. Indeed, Serb nationalist movements and parties throughout the region – especially BiH, Kosovo, and Montenegro – have emerged as the primary executors of the Kremlin's objectives in the Western Balkans.

The centrality of anti-NATO operations in Moscow's activities in the Western Balkans was confirmed in 2015, after the fall of the Nikola Gruevski regime in North Macedonia, when leaked documents published by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) revealed that "Russian spies and diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long effort to spread propaganda and provoke discord in [North] Macedonia as part of a region-wide endeavor to stop Balkan countries from joining NATO ... The documents – a collection of reports by [North] Macedonian counterintelligence – also describe efforts by Serbian intelligence to support anti-Western and pro-Russian nationalists in [North] Macedonia."²

On the face of it, Russia's attempts to halt NATO's expansion in the region have been fruitless. Montenegro successfully joined the Atlantic bloc in 2017, and North Macedonia joined in 2020. But the situation is considerably more complex than that.

To begin with, Montenegro's accession to NATO saw the first in a series of dramatic political crises roil the small country, as Russian and Serbian para-criminal elements attempted to orchestrate a coup in October 2016³ as a last-ditch attempt to prevent then DPS-led government from finalizing Podgorica's Atlantic aspirations. While the details of what exactly occurred in October 2016 remain mired in controversy, the formation of a heterodox Serb nationalist-clericalist and left-populist government after the 2020 parliamentary elections – which followed

nearly two years of Russian and Serbian-backed protests by supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro – has left the country deeply polarized and politically immobilized.

In North Macedonia, there are outstanding questions about the pro-Russian orientation of Nikola Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE party, especially given that Gruevski continues to be a wanted fugitive harbored by the likewise Kremlin-aligned government of Hungary.⁴ If the VMRO-DPMNE returns to power, there are concerns that the party will pressure local courts to drop convictions against their former hetman, paving the way for his return to Skopje. This would precipitate a major political crisis in North Macedonia, and likewise immobilize the country's government apparatus, as in Montenegro.

In other words, while Russia was thwarted in its attempts to prevent Podgorica and Skopje from joining NATO, Russian-aligned actors have continued to undermine political stability in both countries, which now obviously represents a far more intimate challenge to NATO too.

But it is in BiH and Kosovo, both of which still aspire to NATO membership, that Russia's malign activities are most readily observed. In BiH, Russo-Serbian-backed secessionist authorities in the RS entity have launched their most sustained attempt at breaking up the country since the conclusion of the Bosnian War over the course of 2021 and 2022. The Croat nationalist HDZ, however, has also increasingly veered into the orbit of the Kremlin,⁵ an unsurprising turn given the party's long-time co-operation⁶ with Milorad Dodik's secessionist SNSD.

As the literature concerning Russia's support for Dodik⁷ is well established,⁸ at this juncture it is important only to highlight the developments since the second-leg Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Russia's Embassy in Sarajevo has in the intervening month radically escalated its explicit attacks on Bosnian authorities, with Ambassador Igor Kalbukhov even threatening BiH⁹ with a "Ukrainian scenario" if Sarajevo continues to pursue its Atlanticist aspirations. While the odds of direction Russian intervention in BiH remain minimal, the prospects for hybrid Russia support for se-



Protests in support of Russia in Belgrade, March 4th 2022; Source: FoNet

cessionist forces in the RS entity, in conjunction with (in)direct support from neighboring Serbia, are significant. Indeed, both Russia and Serbia have spent much of the last decade clearly signaling their ability to do just that with frequent “visits” to BiH Russian and Serbian para-criminal and paramilitary elements, such as the Night Wolves,¹⁰ members of “Srbska Cast”,¹¹ and various “former” Russian¹² and Serbian security officials¹³ and militants.

Moreover, it is worth noting that despite near universal condemnation of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, both Belgrade and Banja Luka have taken a de facto pro-Kremlin position, while attempting to portray themselves as simply “neutral”. Nevertheless, Belgrade has explicitly rejected the idea of joining the EU’s sanctions regime versus Russia, while both Dodik’s SNSD and the HDZ BiH voted against BiH joining the same regimen¹⁴ on March 24, 2022, in the country’s House of Peoples, the upper chamber of the state parliament.

In Kosovo Russia continues to find both ideological and political purpose. The Kremlin has consistently invoked the idea of a “Kosovo precedent”¹⁵ to justify both an-

nexation of Crimea and continuing aggression against Ukraine, citing NATO’s purportedly “illegal” air campaign versus the Milosevic regime as having definitively shattered any pretense of a rules-based international order. Of course, the argument lacks any merit. Both because NATO’s intervention in 1999 was in keeping with existing international efforts to prevent the Milosevic regime from committing a second genocide in less than a decade – lacking UN Security Council approval only because of Moscow’s explicit support for the Belgrade regime – and because Moscow’s own narrative is internally incoherent. The Kremlin argues that NATO’s 1999 campaign was illegal *and* that it justifies its occupation of and aggression against Ukraine. A nonsensical position meant not to advance a coherent political argument but sow distrust and disillusionment with the whole concept of a rules-based international order in the first place.

Still, there are political interests in Kosovo too for Russia. Kosovo’s unsettled international status allows Russia significant influence over the regime in Belgrade – which, in turn, remains eager for Moscow’s political and military support – and because Kosovo’s three Serb-dominated northern municipalities are an ideal staging area for both

“It is in BiH and Kosovo, both of which still aspire to NATO membership, that Russia’s malign activities are most readily observed”

Serbian and Russian government destabilization operations. For Russia, would-be “breakaway”¹⁶ territories like the north of Kosovo (cf. Transnistria in Moldova; Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia; the self-declared “People’s Republics” in Ukraine; the RS entity in BiH) are the preferred staging grounds for both the projection of its political and material influence and domination.

As such, in both BiH and Kosovo, Russia maintains a significant influence apparatus, one extensively buttressed by the regime in Belgrade, which may be operationalized towards kinetic objectives, in the right circumstances – ones which may become necessary or desirable for the Kremlin especially as Moscow’s operations in Ukraine falter. Likewise, in Montenegro and North Macedonia, Russian-aligned elements within the political and governing structures of both states continue to represent a significant challenge to the stability and governance of both states.

Years spent underplaying the extent of Russia’s expansionist pretensions have resulted in devastating consequences for Europe’s security, and above all for the civilian population of Ukraine. The Atlantic community can no longer afford to dismiss or equivocate on the presence or malign intentions of the Kremlin, or its local proxies, in the Western Balkans. Credible and immediate measures to shore up the defensive and counter-intelligence capacities of both local NATO allies and

NATO-aligned governments should be taken immediately, while policymakers in the Atlantic community develop a still more comprehensive political program for the integration of the region into the Euro-Atlantic order.

Among these, there can be no greater priority than expanding the Atlantic aegis to BiH, which should be fast-tracked toward NATO membership, especially given that the country is already a part of the bloc’s Membership Action Program. Likewise, collective efforts must be undertaken to ensure the immediate recognition of Kosovo by the EU’s five non-recognizers, and subsequently initiating formal accession procedures with the government in Pristina. While the examples of Montenegro and North Macedonia show that NATO membership is not a salve for malign Russian interference, inclusion in the bloc has definitively forestalled the possibility of any kind of foreign-backed security crises in these countries. Given both Moscow and Belgrade’s persistent threats to both BiH and Kosovo, the necessity of including these polities in NATO is self-evident.

Finally, policymakers in the Atlantic community must undertake a more comprehensive threat assessment of Russia’s activities in the Western Balkans but also within the Atlantic community itself. There are, in short, far too many compromised elements, indeed compromised governments, within NATO that represent a credible political and security threat to the long-term viability

and interests of the alliance. The example of the Russian-aligned HDZ BiH, for instance, and its intimate relationship with the HDZ-led government in Zagreb (and its own malign interference in BiH¹⁷ as well as Croatia's populist vulgarian President Zoran Milanovic,¹⁸ the Orban government in Hungary, and the Janez Jansa cabinet in Slovenia¹⁹), are all examples of evident and/or emerging Russian nodes within the Atlantic community.

If NATO is to maintain a credible posture against renewed Russian aggression across Europe and Eurasia, it will have to both actively contest Moscow's malign activities in vulnerable regions like the Western Balkans and ensure that all its members are lockstep with this mission. To date, that has not been the case.

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POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

OVERVIEW

This section aims to provide a comprehensive analysis and understanding of human security, which includes structural sources of conflict such as social tensions brought about by unfinished democratization, social or economic in-

equalities or ecological challenges, for instance. The briefings cover fourteen countries in Southeast Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

Russian aggression on Ukraine, which started on February 24th, is a history-altering moment, the effects of which are expected to be felt in years to come.

As the region bordering Ukraine, Southeast Europe has experienced some of the most immediate consequences of the war, such as the influx of a large number of refugees, with Moldova and Romania bearing the brunt of the initial arrivals. The conflict has also raised significant concerns over the security of these two countries. The possibility of Russia attacking Moldova has been frequently discussed, while Romanian leadership has raised the issue of the necessity to reinforce NATO's eastern flank. The security of the Western Balkans, where the effects of Russian interference and the activities of pro-Russian politicians became obvious, has also been in the spotlight.

Europe has reacted to the conflict more forcefully than expected, especially at the beginning, imposing harsh sanctions on Russia and delivering support to Ukraine. Some commentators have suggested that Vladimir Putin has done more to make the EU a geopolitical actor than any European leader in recent decades. However, in order to truly justify this description, the EU will have to deal with some longstanding issues, including energy sources diversification and defense spending, as well as maintaining stability and security in Southeastern Europe.

This is the context in which, in early April, Cypriot Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulides commented that a solution to the Cyprus problem is needed now, adding that it is time to solve issues that the international community considers of minor importance. Whether the new geopolitical reality can contribute to the resolution of longstanding disputes, including Cyprus and Kosovo, as well as completing the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, remains to be seen.

In the meantime, the economic effects of the conflict are expected to be significant. In what might have been only a preview of things to come, citizens of Albania took to the streets in March to protest recent price hikes. Protesters continued their calls for lower taxes and an adequate economic relief package in response to the global crisis, with students, civil society representatives, and regular citizens joining forces. These could be the images that will be seen more frequently.

REFUGEES WELCOME

Immediate neighbors of Ukraine in the region of Southeast Europe have received large numbers of refugees since the start of the war. As of April 4th, according to the UN-HCR data, Moldova has seen an influx of 396,448 Ukrainians, which is more than 10% of its population; at the same time, 648,410 entered Romania. Bulgaria is also a significant destination for refugees, receiving 144,311 of them.

It was apparent from the outset that Moldova would struggle the most with the accommodation of refugees. In early March, their number exceeded the country's reception capacities by a factor of five. Following the outbreak of the war, President Maia Sandu contacted the representatives of the international community, including the old and new elected President of France Emmanuel Macron and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, requesting immediate assistance. The country has so far been promised 20 million Euros in support from the EU, as well as the inclusion in the US financial package to support the Ukrainian refugee crisis in Europe as a whole. On April 5th, European donors, including Germany, France, and Romania, pledged 695 million euros in aid to Moldova at an international donor conference in Berlin.

The financial situation of Romania and Bulgaria is not expected to be under such pressure due to the refugee crisis, but the costs are mounting and the sources of financing for refugee accommodation are being actively discussed. In Romania, the government authorized assistance to the citizens hosting Ukrainian refugees on March 11th. On the same day, Prime Minister of Bulgaria Kiril Petkov proposed a mutual European fund in support of refugees from Ukraine at the informal European Council meeting in Versailles.

Other countries in the region are also making accommodations for the people fleeing the war. More than 1,000 minors from Ukraine will form the first batch of refugee students to be welcomed at Greek schools. Meanwhile, the Albanian government announced that it would accept Ukrainian refugees without the need for a residence permit. Cyprus has begun issuing cards to the refugees, providing them free residence, food, education, and health care for 12 months. Almost 15,000 Ukrainians are currently being hosted on the island.

SECURITY: CAN THE CONFLICT SPREAD TO THE REGION? —

While the prospect of the war spilling over the Ukrainian borders seemed more likely in the first weeks of the Russian aggression, areas in which the Southeast European security architecture could break down are still being monitored. Moldova is once again the most affected country in the region.

On March 1st, Belarussian President and Moscow's ally Alexander Lukashenko appeared to broadcast a planned Russian invasion of Moldova, a post-Soviet country, during an address to his security council, which raised alarm across Europe. Russia stations about 1,500 to 2,000 soldiers in the breakaway Moldovan region of Transnistria.

However, the authorities of Transnistria have since refused to endorse Russia's attack on Ukraine, despite being reliant on Moscow. The region also has deep ties to Ukraine, with roughly a third of the population identifying as ethnic Ukrainians and some 100,000 holding Ukrainian citizenship. Some analysts believe that will likely try to maintain its neutral position, at least until Russia signals its potential intent to annex it formally.

At the same time, many expressed concerns over the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has been facing a serious political crisis since the summer of 2021. The country's Republika Srpska entity, whose most influential politician Milorad Dodik is known for having close ties to Moscow, has since taken legislative steps many fear can lead to full secession.

PM Plenković inspecting the drone that fell in Zagreb
Source: Government of the Republic of Croatia



On the day the war broke out, European Union announced it would nearly double the size of its peacekeeping force, EUFOR Althea, in Bosnia by sending in 500 reserves as a precautionary measure to stave off any instability. "The deterioration of the security situation internationally has the potential to spread instability to Bosnia and Herzegovina," the European Union's EUFOR force said in a statement on February 24th. The deployment of additional EUFOR forces was completed by the first week of March. No serious threat of conflict has taken place since.

Another fragile area of the region – Kosovo – has also been relatively peaceful since the beginning of the war, but that has not made the security concerns go away. The Serb-populated North has seen periodic tensions in recent years, most notably over the license plates of Serbian vehicles entering Kosovo, which broke out in September 2021.

The EULEX Formed Police Unit in Kosovo announced in mid-March that it would strengthen its capacities with a Reserve Formed Police Unit consisting of 92 members drawn from the European Gendarmerie Force EURO-GENDFOR. The statement justifying the decision emphasized the concern over Russian influence in the Western Balkans, but added that, for the time being, there are no significant security concerns.

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the temperature in Kosovo has risen once, but without serious consequences. Hundreds of Kosovo Serbs gathered on March 25th in the northern town of Mitrovica, demanding the right to vote in Kosovo for Serbia's elections on April 3rd. Kosovo wanted Serbia to officially ask it for permission to organize the voting. However, Serbia does not recognize it as an independent state and refused to do so.

In the meantime, the war has prompted a significant re-evaluation of European security architecture, primarily the role of NATO. Its Southeastern flank came into focus due to its proximity to Russia, and all member states in the region, including Turkey, reaffirmed their commitment to the Alliance in the wake of Russian aggression.

US Vice President Kamala Harris visited Romania on March 11th, assuring it of the commitment of the United States to Article Five of the NATO Treaty, saying that

every inch of NATO territory will be defended. Romanian President Klaus Iohannis announced that his country would host a meeting of the NATO members in the region, under the already established Bucharest 9 format, two weeks ahead of the Alliance's summit in July.

On March 28th, Prime Ministers of North Macedonia Dimitar Kovačevski and of Montenegro Zdravko Krivokapić met with their counterparts from Bulgaria Kiril Petkov and Romania Nicolae Ciucă, discussing the security impact of the war in Ukraine as the NATO member countries from the region. Kovačevski, whose country marked its second anniversary as a NATO member only a day earlier, emphasized the importance of vigilance in opposing misinformation from Russia.

Meanwhile, a somewhat bizarre incident involving a Ukrainian military drone highlighted the uncertainty created by the war. The drone, a Soviet-era TU-141 reconnaissance aircraft, crossed Romania and Hungary before entering Croatia on March 10th and crashing into a field in Zagreb near a student dormitory. According to the Hungarian authorities, the drone was “tracked and monitored” from the moment it entered the country. Croatia strongly criticized NATO for its slow reaction and called on the Hungarian authorities to investigate the incident. Both Russia and Ukraine have denied launching the drone.

ACCELERATION OF EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATIONS: A REALISTIC SCENARIO? —————

On Monday, February 28th, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy submitted an official request to allow his country to gain ‘immediate’ membership under a special fast-track procedure as it defended itself from a Russian invasion. The request was soon followed by those of Georgia and Moldova. President Sandu co-signed the application with the Prime Minister and Parliament Speaker on March 4th, while Romanian president Klaus Iohannis soon pledged the support of his country to Moldova's accession to the European Union.

Unlike the Western Balkan countries which have been given a clear perspective to join the EU in 2003, the three

former Soviet republics have received no such pledge. It soon became obvious that there is no consensus within the European Union over the issue.

PM Janša with other EU leaders during the visit to President Zelenskyy in Kyiv; Source: Government of the Republic of Slovenia



While leaders of eight Eastern European EU Member States, including Slovenia and Bulgaria, wrote an open letter urging other members to start the process of accession talks with Ukraine, a spokesperson of the Austrian Foreign Ministry stated in March a “fast-track” or “immediate” accession process “is not foreseen in the EU treaties” and urged for finding alternative solutions for deepening ties with Ukraine, indicating a wider reluctance to the quick entry of the three new applicants.

Some of the older applicants among the six Western Balkan countries have also started to argue their case for a faster Euro-Atlantic integration process in the context of the new global environment.

On March 9th, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti presented the objectives of the Interinstitutional Working Group for Kosovo's integration into NATO. Foreign Minister Donika Gervalla said that, considering Moscow's efforts to undermine all Euro-Atlantic processes, Kosovo should join NATO as soon as possible. The country is still not recognized by four NATO members.

Meanwhile, a member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency Željko Komšić sent an official request to the European Union leaders, asking them to consider

granting the country the candidate status. Komšić said in a note he sent to Brussels that this would be “another confirmation of the indivisibility and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina.” Bosnia and Herzegovina officially applied for EU membership in 2016.

The country whose lack of progress has affected the integrity of the enlargement process the most, North Macedonia, is still blocked by Bulgaria, despite efforts of rapprochement made by both sides since the change of their governments in late 2021. Bulgaria-North Macedonia Joint Commission on Historical and Educational Affairs has made progress in some important areas, said the Bulgarian Prime Minister, Kiril Petkov, on March 28th, without going into details. The Commission met again on March 31st and April 1st, discussing the medieval period.

Nevertheless, following the publication of the results of the population census conducted in North Macedonia in 2021, which showed only about 3,000 citizens identifying as Bulgarians, President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev stated that the veto policy should continue until “the interests of Bulgaria” are fully protected. He claimed that more than 120,000 citizens in North Macedonia do not dare openly declare that they are Bulgarians. The veto policy is affecting Albania as well, which remains coupled with North Macedonia.

In March, the European Union adopted the Strategic Compass, a new document laying out its global strategy. The need to develop a “tailored partnership” with the Western Balkans was emphasized, as well as the assessment that security and stability throughout the Western Balkans is still not a given. “Tangible progress on the rule of law and reforms based on European values, rules and standards needs to continue and the European perspective is a strategic choice, essential for all partners aspiring to EU membership”, reads the document, spelling out that strict conditions for EU accession are still in force.

NOT EVERYBODY IS AGAINST RUSSIA

One of the pre-conditions for EU membership, foreign policy alignment, has proven to be the main challenge in the case of Serbia. In the wake of the Russian aggression,

the country has attempted to maintain the policy of balancing, justifying it with Russian support of its position on Kosovo and dependence on Russian gas, as well as significantly pro-Russian public opinion. A pro-Russian rally held in Serbia on March 4th, supposedly in support of the Russian people affected by sanctions, drew significant international attention and was met with numerous condemnations. Experts pointed out the fact that the mainstream media, as well as the ruling parties, have been perpetrating pro-Russian narratives in Serbia for years.

After considerable pressure from the Western countries, Serbia voted in favor of the UN Resolution which condemned Russian aggression on March 2nd. It also voted for a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire and condemning Russia for the humanitarian situation in Ukraine on March 24th. Previously, on February 25th, the National Security Council of Serbia adopted the conclusions supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine but refraining from imposing sanctions on Russia.

On April 3rd, the incumbent President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić was re-elected with a dominant majority, while the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by Vučić, won the most votes, but lost its majority in both the National Assembly of Serbia and the capital of Belgrade. Several right-wing pro-Russian parties returned to the parliament, profiting from the presence of the topic in the public. The calls for the President to start aligning with the policy of sanctions intensified in the days following the election.

On April 7th Serbia also joined other UN members from the region by voting in favour of the resolution calling for Russia to be suspended from the Human Rights Council. This was the third time the country had aligned with the EU and US position in the United Nations, indicating that more alignment might be expected. Nevertheless, Vučić had what he described as a “good” phone call with Vladimir Putin a day earlier, on April 6th, which was interpreted as an attempt to continue the policy of balancing for as long as possible. Russia decided to withdraw from the Human Rights Council following the vote.

While Serbia is the most visible case, there are other countries in the region struggling to take a clear anti-Russian position. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Presidency Mem-

ber Milorad Dodik continues to demand that the country should be neutral in the conflict. On March 3rd, the media reported that Dodik had written to UN Secretary-General António Guterres and that the letter was submitted by Vasily Nebenzya, Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations. In the letter, Dodik claimed that Bosnia and Herzegovina was neutral in the conflict and that the actions of BiH Representative Sven Alkalaj had not been authorized. Bosnia officially supported the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression.

According to the High Representative of the European Union, Bosnia and Herzegovina has aligned itself with EU Declarations condemning the aggression and imposing sanctions. As of March 28th, however, Dodik maintains that there is no decision in Bosnia and Herzegovina on the adoption of restrictive measures towards Russia, since, as he says, the Presidency is the only institution that can decide on that and not the Council of Ministers.

A similar problem was faced by Montenegro, where the Commission for the Political System, Interior, and Foreign Policy has formally adopted the EU's sanctions against Russia, but the Government struggled to implement them, with some ministers reportedly being against the sanctions. The Commission is led by Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, who received the mandate to form the new government, is the permanent working body of the current Government, which has lost the confidence vote in February. After several delays, on April 8th Abazović announced that the Government had officially adopted sanctions against Russia.

Some EU Member States from the region have also been hesitant when it comes to taking a pro-Ukrainian position. In Bulgaria, where, according to some polls, more than 50% of the population had a positive opinion of Vladimir Putin before February, cracks became visible on day one, with the Defense Minister and former caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev refusing to use the word "war" to describe the events in Ukraine. Several days later, Prime Minister Kiril Petkov demanded Yanev's resignation, which was finalized by a vote in the Parliament on March 1st. Former Bulgarian Ambassador to NATO Dragomir Zakov was elected as the new Defense Minister.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), formerly one of the two main parties in the country and now a member of the ruling coalition, has also opposed some of the more decisive actions against Moscow. The party's pro-Russian position has been well known for years. On April 1st, the leader of the party and Deputy Prime Minister Korneliya Ninova said Bulgaria would not supply weapons to Ukraine. BSP voted in favor of the European Parliament resolution condemning the war on March 1st, but opposed some of the specific proposals put forward by other MEPs, including the suspension of licensing of Russian broadcasters.

One of the few MEPs to abstain from voting for the EP resolution on March 1st was Giorgos Georgiou from left-wing Akel, the second-largest party in Cyprus. Georgiou argued that the resolution would further embolden NATO – which in his view is "not an agent for peace". Cyprus also attracted attention during the negotiations over one of the early packages of sanctions against Russia at the beginning of March. The authorities were initially against banning major Russian banks from the SWIFT international payment network, but ultimately supported the decision.

"The Cypriot economy is disproportionately affected compared to other countries due to the structure of the Cypriot economy and its reliance on Russian tourists," Cypriot Finance Minister Constantinos Petrides told the media at the time. More than a quarter of FDI received by Cyprus in 2020 came from Russia as well. The deep ties the country has had with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union have put it in a fragile position since the start of the war.

All EU Member States, together with Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, nonetheless ended up on the list of unfriendly countries approved by the government of Russia on March 7th. The list did not include Serbia and BiH.

Some countries in Southeast Europe have remained more active in support of Ukraine than others, "justifying" their position on the Russian list. The former prime Minister of Slovenia Janez Janša traveled to Kyiv together with his counterparts from Poland and Czech Republic on March 16th, meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Janša described the visit as a way to send a message

that Ukraine is a European country that deserves to be accepted into the EU. Slovenia held parliamentary elections on April 24th and opposition leader Tanja Fajon commented on that occasion that “we should not forget what side Orbán, Le Pen, Kaczynski, Alternative for Germany, and Janša were previously on”, alluding to illiberal values represented by these politicians.

On Sunday, April 24, Janša lost, by a wide margin, the legislative elections held in Slovenia. In his place, a relative newcomer to politics, 57-year-old Robert Golob and his Movement Freedom, won a victory on a scale not seen since independence in 1991, taking 41 of the 90 seats in Parliament. Janša’s party has won 27, his coalition partners the Christian Democrats eight, the Social Democrats seven and the Left five seats. The remaining two seats are reserved for minorities.

At the same time Emmanuel Macron won a second term as president of France, triumphing on Sunday, May 24, over Marine Le Pen, his far-right challenger. Macron, a centrist, gained 58.6 percent of the vote to Le Pen’s 41.4 percent. His victory was much narrower than in 2017, when the margin was 66.1 percent to 33.9 percent for Le Pen.

Another official from the region, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, expressed his willingness to travel to Ukraine. He intends to lead a humanitarian mission to the besieged city of Mariupol, where thousands of ethnic Greeks live. Greece was quick to send military equipment, including ammunition, “Kalashnikov-type assault rifles” and missile launchers, to Ukraine in the first days of the war.

Emmanuel Macron won a second term as president of France
Source: Emmanuel Macron/Facebook



A specific role in the region has, expectedly, been taken up by Turkey. From March 10th onwards, it has been the primary mediator between the two sides. The first meeting between Ukrainian and Russian Foreign Ministers,

Meeting of Russian and Ukrainian negotiators in Turkey
Source: Presidency of the Republic of Turkey



Dmitro Kuleba and Sergei Lavrov, took place on March 10th in Antalya, with the presence of Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.

Turkey has not joined Western sanctions and has not closed its airspace to Russia, unlike all other NATO members. Yet, Turkey also has close ties with Ukraine, and Ankara has helped to equip the Ukrainian army.

In the last week of March, another round of negotiations was held, this time in Istanbul. Çavuşoğlu said that the meeting achieved “the most meaningful progress since the start of negotiations”, adding that he was pleased to see increasing “rapprochement” between the two sides at “every stage”. Ukraine wants Turkey, Germany and the members of the UN Security Council to act as guarantors in any potential peace deal, the Foreign Minister said.

Following the Istanbul negotiations, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also reiterated his offer to host Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Vladimir Putin for talks to secure peace between Ukraine and Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Belgrade, Serbia, was also considered a possible meeting place between the two sides, though this is still looking far-fetched.

ENERGY SOURCES DIVERSIFICATION

One of the main instruments of Russian influence in the region, its supply of natural gas, was long discussed as a possible problem in the case of significant deterioration of the relations between Russia and the West. This scenario has now materialized, and the diversification of energy sources became an even more pressing issue.

In mid-March, the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Kiril Petkov inspected the construction of the Greece-Bulgaria gas interconnection, in the region of Stara Zagora. The interconnector is crucial for Bulgaria because its completion would break the monopoly of Russian gas on the Bulgarian market for the first time. The IGB links to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), bringing Azerbaijani gas from Greece to Italy. For over a decade, businesses and politicians have made optimistic statements about the IGB interconnector, but the construction is still unfinished.

A couple of weeks later, the former Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša met with his Croatian counterpart Andrej Plenković in Zagreb, the main issue of the meeting being the expansion of the capacity of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal on the island of Krk in Croatia. Plenković said that the capacity of the LNG terminal on Krk had already been increased from 2.6 billion cubic meters of gas to 2.9 billion. The current capacity could be expanded to a maximum of 3.5 billion cubic meters of gas per year. In order to increase gas transport between countries, however, the capacity of the gas pipeline connecting the country must also be increased.

The issue of energy can prove to be especially tricky for Serbia. According to the decision of the Council of the EU, starting from May 15th, EU member states will not perform transactions with 12 Russian companies in which the state has majority ownership, among which are Russian energy giants such as Gazpromneft. This company has the majority ownership (56%) in the company Naftna industrija Srbije (NIS). On April 7th, President Aleksandar Vučić announced that Serbia had been exempted from this measure and that NIS will be able to continue to import oil. Vučić indicated that this decision had been conditioned by Serbia's vote on the resolution calling for Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: WHAT CONSEQUENCES FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?



Dejan Jović

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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

The war in Ukraine creates new arguments for the Western Balkans to join the European Union sooner rather than later. Europeans now see Ukraine – not the Western Balkans – as the border between East and West. However, the West needs to ignore those in the Western Balkans who even before the war in Ukraine argued that the new war in the Balkans is likely, even inevitable. Both domestic and international actors should make sure that the war in Ukraine remains the first one since the beginning of 20th century which will not involve countries of the Western Balkans.

Questions are on the minds of many in the Western Balkans. Will the war that Russia is waging in Ukraine spread to other parts of Europe, including to their own region? What effects will the war in Ukraine have on the long-term status of the countries of the Western Balkans? Can they benefit from new geopolitical circumstances and can they use them to speed up and finally complete their accession to the European Union? Or, on the contrary, will the war in Ukraine increase nationalism in Europe, leading to the EU shrinking instead of expanding?

The war is particularly sensitive for citizens of post-Yugoslav states. Scenes from the Ukrainian war have the potential to re-traumatise survivors of the 1990s wars, of which there are many. The wounds made by that war, which tore apart not only Yugoslavia as a country but also its successor states, and often cities, villages and families, are still not completely healed, and the war is extremely present in public discourse. Memories of war are easily awakened and (mis)used for particular political purposes. It is used by all sides to construct the image of us as innocent victims and *them* as occupiers, aggressors or perpetrators of crime, thus wars are continuously revived. Those who see themselves as *victors* in previous wars keep reminding others (including the new generation of post-war youth) of their achievements and heroism, whereas those who feel that their side lost, often call for another conflict in order to change the status quo, which they see as unfair and unacceptable. This includes *victims* who have not been recognised as victims – or compensated, morally, legally or politically. Some of them see another war as the only opportunity to change their position.

In the post war Western Balkans, the 1990s wars are mainly interpreted on ethno-political grounds. The main (political) purpose was to conceptualise and then consolidate new *national identities* through the construction of images of *us being good and thus victims* and *them being evil and so far unpunished for that*. Keeping the war alive in political rhetoric is thus not only about paying tribute to the fallen or uttering anti-war pledges for the future, it is also used as a political instrument by which interests of political actors can be achieved, as well as a prelude for possible new conflict in the future. The policy of *remembering* in this latter context is easily misused for purposes not of peacebuilding, but of warmongering.

The latest round of intensified warnings about the possibility of war in the Balkans started before the beginning of the war in Ukraine. In July 2021, the outgoing High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, enacted the amendments of the Penal Code by which the denial of genocide committed in previous wars became punishable by law. In response to this, representatives of the Serb entity, Republika Srpska (RS), withdrew from Bosnian-Herzegovinian state-level institutions. Milorad Dodik yet again issued one of his now already frequent announcements about a referendum for the independence of Republika Srpska. To many, this was reminiscent of what happened in 1992 – and thus it provoked fears of a new war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Fear is not a good ally to stability and peace. Those who fear war either leave the country or begin preparation for defence. What looks like *self-defence* can be perceived by others – potential predators and attackers – as preparation for war. The *other side* then arms itself and prepares for its own defence. In these circumstances, even smaller incidents could spark a major problem. The construction of fears, unwise political steps taken without much consideration for their potentially damaging consequences, and a long-term industry of exploitation of previous wars for political purposes all serve to divide ethnic groups and countries as a whole.

Similar warnings that a war is almost *unavoidable* or *imminent* were also heard in September last year in the case of internal divisions in Montenegro over the inauguration of the new Orthodox Metropolitan bishop, Joanikije II. They were also heard when Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti said in November 2021 that Serbia threatens to start a Third Balkan War. War was a word that external commentators, including high-level politicians and signatories to various petitions, addressed to the leadership of the European Union, also used lightly, almost as if they did not care about possible negative effects of the panic they spread by this. Their intention was probably not to promote fear and therefore introduce instability, but this was an unintended consequence of their actions. And this was all before the beginning of the Ukrainian war in February 2022.

When this war started, therefore, there was already much talk about a war in the Balkans. The immediate question in people's minds was: is this the beginning of a wider

There are two more important consequences of the Ukrainian crisis – and both might affect the long-term status of the Western Balkans

European, or even global war that will eventually affect us? Will local constructors of war rhetoric use the Ukrainian conflict to prove that they were right about the war in the Balkans? This question was not only on the mind of the people in the Balkans – it was also asked by others in Europe and beyond. However, the images of the war in Ukraine were particularly traumatic for victims of the 1990s wars. In Croatia the Ukrainian war was quickly compared to their own *Homeland war*, whereas Mariupol became the *new Vukovar*. The introduction of sanctions on Russia reminded many in Serbia of how devastating sanctions might be – since they brought Serbian economic and social life to its knees in the 1990s. The Russian attempt to explain the “special military operation” by using discrimination against Russian minorities for its justification, their concept of the *Russian world*, as well as ideas of de-nazification (and to a degree also de-Communisation, based on criticism of Lenin’s nationality policies), were also compared to similar ideas produced by Serbia (and to smaller degree Croatia) during the war of the 1990s.

Thus, the war in Ukraine only added to already existing renewed fears of war that produced tensions in the political arena.

However, much of these were – as stated – images and warnings produced for particular political purposes. The reality was, fortunately, rather different. Neither

Inzko’s legal intervention, nor Dodik’s withdrawal from institutions produced a war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Neither did the episode of Joanikije’s inauguration in Cetinje, or the intervention of Kosovar police in the Serb-majority north of Kosovo in October 2021. The Western Balkans, despite its often irresponsible political and social actors who are quick in using the motive of previous war(s) in their rhetoric, remains stable and peaceful. This is an amazing positive result of agreements such as Dayton and of the Western presence on the ground in the last two and a half decades. The Balkans remain fertile ground for various revisionists who talk of the need to change the borders, of great plans for *unification* on ethnic grounds sometime in the future, and who are highly motivated and motivate others for yet another round of challenging the volatile status quo. But the good news for peace and stability in the Balkans is that war and peace do not depend on the will and motives of *conspiracy theorists*, not even when they hold power. Just like any other crime, war can happen only if there are weapons and opportunities, not only motives and desires for it.

Weapons in the Balkan countries in NATO are under the control of NATO. Bosnia and Herzegovina is however, under direct control by a consortium of Western power, and the USA dominates in a legal, security and political sense. The West also guarantees and enables territorial integrity of this country. Thus, the opportunity for

another war would arise only with the collapse of Western hegemony. How likely is this to happen?

The first month and a half of the war in Ukraine shows that the West is still powerful and united – perhaps more so than it seemed before February of this year. Putin's initial explanation of the reason for waging his “operation” included a strong verbal attack on the West, which he called the *Empire of Lies*. He condemned the enlargement of NATO as a deliberate and hostile process aimed at weakening Russia. He involved the West directly into the conflict, to which the West responded with almost unprecedented economic sanctions. Despite occasional Hungarian *exceptionalism* and a Turkish semi-independent role, the West seems to have used this war to consolidate its ranks and enhance unity. Those who hoped for the quick dissolution of the European Union and NATO – have been disappointed, at least for now. Just as *Brexit* did not lead to the beginning of the end of the EU, the Russian war against Ukraine did not destroy the credibility and capability of the West, which is of key importance for keeping stability in the Western Balkans as well. Thus, the expectations that the collapse of Western power would provide grounds for anarchy and chaos and thus facilitate another war in the Balkans have not been met.

There are two more important consequences of the Ukrainian crisis – and both might affect the long-term status of the Western Balkans. First, the West might be more inspired by geostrategic and geopolitical thinking, which could be useful for countries of the Western Balkans. So far, the EU in particular has followed the old lines of the 1990s – the era of *liberalism/idealism in international relations* – insisting on *democratic values* above anything else. It called for a deep transformation of society and politics in candidate countries before they even begin negotiations on their membership in the Union. With the exception of Bulgaria and Romania, which were rewarded with NATO and EU membership for their strategic role in the war in Kosovo in 1999, less attention was devoted to geopolitical ideas, such as – what might happen if these countries remain outside of the Union for good? Will they then become more democratic and European, or – on the contrary – more authoritarian and more vulnerable to influences of *external actors* who are not friends of European integra-

tion processes and are in particular skeptical of NATO enlargement (such as Russia and China)? The refugee crises of 2015 introduced some elements of political realism in the Western approach to the Balkans, but the powerful countries of the EU – France in particular – remained dismissive of quick enlargement. This was a big mistake. Had countries of the Western Balkans already been included in the European Union, they would have already been more democratic and more Western. By keeping them outside, in the cold, the EU is making them more frustrated, feeling humiliated and unwanted – and these are good grounds for anti-Western sentiment in public opinion.

The Ukrainian war will inevitably make Europeans think more geopolitically. They might come to the conclusion that if it wants to be a great power, the EU needs to act as a great power. It should expand when and where it can – and it (still) can in the Western Balkans. In fact, now is a better moment than before the crisis in Ukraine: both because Russian influence is weaker than it was before (due to catastrophic failure of its reputation, which makes those who are seen as its allies marginalised and ostracised) and because there is a growing understanding in the Western Balkans that the West is not weak and that it is capable of punishing authoritarian regimes, especially if they act offensively against other countries. If separatists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or other revisionists who hoped for another war to change defeat in the previous war to a victory in the new one could hope for external support before, they are now worried and disappointed. However, the West needs to act quickly, fairly and with a cool head, in order not to neglect the political interests of all of those who need to be involved in decision-making on the ground because their cooperation is needed for long-term stability. It should not support the warmongers' on either side in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

The second consequence of the Ukrainian war is a shift in the image of the borders of Europe. For most Europeans, the border between *us* and *them* is now in Ukraine, not in the Western Balkans. Ukraine recently applied for membership to the European Union and its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, called for a “special procedure” by which Ukraine would join immediately. This is unlikely to happen, more due to the hesitation of politicians than

of public opinion in member states, which is at present empathetic towards Ukraine. However, if we now see Ukraine as a potential part of the West, how could we not see the Western Balkans as being Western too?

The war in Ukraine can thus potentially strengthen arguments for the accession of the whole Western Balkans into the European Union – and, hopefully, soon. Its territory is completely surrounded by EU member states. We are not talking about physical expansion to the east,

In addition, the Western Balkans has now been peaceful for a relatively long time, despite challenges, due to already intense Western policies of peacebuilding and to political, security, and economic investments of the West into that region. Finally, the inclusion of the Western Balkans 25 years since the second to last war in Europe would be fair to the Balkans and good news to Ukraine too. It would show that post-war recovery is possible and that Europe cares about long-term prosperity, as well as the status of countries affected by war. But Europe needs



Visit of High Representative Borrell to EUFOR Camp Butmir, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Source: EUFOR Althea

nor of a move that could further provoke Russia since it is about consolidation of the territory of EU, not about the further expansion of NATO. In terms of population size, the whole Western Balkans contains about half the population of Ukraine. The countries of the Western Balkans are indeed rather specific, and in many ways imperfect. But Bosnia and Herzegovina is not less integrated than Cyprus, and Serbia is rather similar in terms of its internal politics to Hungary.

to end the previous war – and all its consequences, including the exclusion of the Western Balkans from the Union before it concentrates on the consequences of the current one in Ukraine. If it does not (symbolically) end the old war, it might not be credible in addressing the consequences of the new war. After all, the EU itself is a peace project. If it was imagined and established for anti-war purposes, it needs to show that it is also capable of acting as an anti-war actor.

Despite much rhetoric about war and the deliberate construction of fears that it might happen again in the Western Balkans – either due to domestic factors of a spillover of the war in Ukraine – the region has reason to hope that the new geopolitical situation that emerges could lead to the advancement of the process of accession to the European Union and to consolidating and strengthening what has already been achieved in terms of peace and security. The war in Ukraine is the first war in Europe in decades in which the Western Balkans is not involved. It is in its strategic interest that this remains the case. The region has suffered enormously from the Balkan Wars, First and Second World Wars as well as from the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. It is of paramount importance to stay away from this conflict. This does not mean being morally and politically numb regarding atrocities and war crimes committed in Ukraine. For this, there is enough sensibility in all countries that lived through the war of the 1990s. But the best service to peace is given by those who act responsibly and in the interest of peace. Domestic leaders, as well as those from international community involved in Balkans, should therefore make sure that the Balkans remain peaceful, unaffected (to the highest degree possible) by the war in Ukraine and incorporated into the European Union soon.

ZEITENWENDE AND WHAT IS NEW?



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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

Germany will become the biggest financial contributor to NATO in Europe. This change, called “Zeitenwende” could only happen with the international support and partners wanting, even expecting, Germany to step up. This article argues and outlines five significant consequences of this pivotal moment. Among them, a review of relations with Russia, as well as the strategic interests of Germany and Europe in a changed global and European security order, are needed beyond discussing defense investments. According to Helene Kortländer and Eva Ellereit, the EU and Germany must become more effective in their leadership in order to prevent crises and create political impact and change.

Germany will still have to prove in the long run that their intention to become an actor and dependable partner in security politics is serious

On February 27, 2022, in a special session of the German Bundestag called in to address parliament about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave a remarkable speech. It was remarkable for a number of reasons. He announced that from now on, Germany would meet and exceed the NATO 2% spending goal, a mark that has traditionally not been met by Germany and seen very critically especially by social democrats, and would additionally create a special 100 billion euro fund to secure crucial defense spending in the coming years. This was welcomed with applause and excited members of parliament cheering in light of the announced changes – enthusiasm that is rarely felt in parliamentary debates, especially when announcing a significant rise for the defense budget in the traditionally rather non-hawkish German Bundestag. Chancellor Scholz furthermore underlined that Germany would defend every square meter of the territory of the Alliance – for many a surprising statement by a German head of government, but specifically a social democrat leading a center-left coalition.

While Scholz announced this, more than 100,000 people gathered in front of the nearby Brandenburg Gate to protest against Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine. The peace movement in Germany marching the streets found itself denouncing war while cheering for a signif-

icant rise of military spending as well as the export of weapons to war zones at the same time. In short: Things have changed. Out of historical responsibility, German governments used to shy away from raising military spending. Now, with the same argument, the raise is justified. This change could only happen with international support and partners wanting, even expecting Germany to step up. It took a war in Europe, it seems.

The rapid shift in politics and public opinion can partly be explained by the degree of disillusionment that took place in Germany, where a majority of political actors and experts did not expect this level of escalation by Russia in Ukraine. But it is a well-known fact that Germany with its military spending has been lagging behind not only the 2-percent-goal but even behind its own expectations on what the German Defense Forces should be. And even though the transformation is an enormous one in Germany – and perceived as such – exporting weapons and raising the budget, even if deliberately decided upon, was practically inevitable considering the Russian aggression and disrespect for any international agreement or institution.

If October 27th will actually mark a historic shift with lasting policy changes in Germany depends on a number of factors. While the intention to meet the 2-percent-goal

from now on and to equip the German Army better are claims that are within the sole authority of this government, the special fund of 100 billion Euros (spent additionally over the course of the next 10 years) will need further political confirmation, and that will not come easily. Especially when the first shock about the Russian invasion subsides or fighting in Ukraine comes to an end, the cross-party and public support may diminish.

While EU and NATO partners acknowledge the political transformation, Germany will still have to prove in the long run that their intention to become an actor and dependable partner in security politics is serious. So far Germany has yet to step out of its reputation as the ever-hesitant cunctator. Meanwhile, the Eastern European Partners are especially skeptical if Germany is really doing all it can to stop Putin.

While we cannot say for sure what will last, there are some significant announcements and plans that will change German and possibly European foreign and security policy in the long run:

Firstly, the budget for defense spending will go up and there will be larger societal backing for higher defense budgets, which will make it easier for the current government to push through some reforms they already had on the agenda even without the war in Ukraine. Strategic spending and a higher priority and attention from parliament will have to follow, to ensure that the money will be used sustainably. This will lift Germany to becoming the biggest financial contributor to NATO in Europe and may change the power dynamics of the alliance. While there have traditionally been many critics of the German austerity in defense, it was also a welcome shield to hide behind and justify smaller defense budgets in other places. With the “Zeitenwende”, military spending could go up in other countries as well.

Secondly, Germany and in particular the social democrats, will have to fundamentally review their policy towards Russia. The energy dependencies are already being reviewed and challenged and this will create a new and challenging ground for relations with Russia, effecting not just the bilateral level but the way Russia is treated as a regional competitor in other areas. If Germany (and

assumably many other European countries) fade out of Russian coal, oil and gas, the Russian business model is at stake – but also the German one as a trade nation staying out of military issues and focusing on “soft power”. With the shift in politics towards Russia, the German economy, along with its geostrategic interests, will be reshaped in key areas.

Thirdly, the European partnerships have strengthened, and national hesitations are more likely to be dismissed in favor of broader European security interests. These will be far-reaching and go beyond traditional defense, towards the resilience of European energy supply and the stability of the economy. Germany will have to play a leading role in securing European unity in these matters once the first shock after the Russian invasion in Ukraine wears off and other interests are afloat again.

And last but not least, the transatlantic bond and the idea of the “political West” has returned for good. NATO as a security provider for “the West” as well as the assessment of geopolitical dynamics in other areas of the world will become more important in Germany’s public debate as well as its political dialogue. EU and NATO will coordinate more intensely than they have in the past and with time, they will have to define more clearly who takes the lead and who plays which role in a multitude of global challenges and conflicts with different competitors and rivals.

Now what does this mean for the Western Balkans? Currently, the events in Ukraine have diverted attention towards the eastern flank of Europe, and the Western Balkans once again seem to be pushed down the political agenda. Still, the war in Ukraine throws a spotlight on Europe’s and Germany’s vulnerabilities and illusions – first and foremost the notion that stability can be achieved at the cost of democracy.

It shows that conflict and crisis may arise from an assumedly stable status-quo within the blink of an eye and calls to attention the destructive role Russia is ready to play to secure its interests.

German politics towards the Western Balkans have been quite clear and determined. Had it been up to Germany, accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania had



NATO extraordinary summit on the 22 March 2022; Source: German Federal Government/Denzel

already started in 2021. In the past weeks German politicians have repeatedly underlined that the escalation in Ukraine should be a warning for the Western Balkans.

The moment of unity that takes place in the EU right now is also a window of opportunity to bring about a new push towards enlargement – for geostrategic reasons, as well as a signal of strength showing EU is capable and willing to renew, to grow and to set its own values against competing forces. And while the EU is not a military power it may deepen and renew its impact as an economic and normative power. This is where the Western Balkans should be a focus and where the EU is able to demonstrate commitment quickly.

While that does not relate to Germany only – it is rather a question of whether the European Union will manage to come together on foreign policy consensus – and Germany can certainly throw its weight behind this process. Russia's War in Ukraine is also a chance for national governments in the EU to let go of some reservations in the face of a changed world order – like Bulgaria's veto against the Accession of North Macedonia – to make a significant push towards closing the ranks in Europe.

For many in the Western Balkan countries, it is also the moment of truth in regard to Russia. The room for neutrality or any sort of ambiguity in this regard has shrunk massively and the respective levels of alignment with EU positions (and how seriously they are implemented) are noted in Brussels. On the other hand, EU expectations that the Western Balkan countries gain stronger independence from Russia economically and in the energy sector, will have to go hand in hand with substantial EU

support for that process – especially if it is seen as a prerequisite for EU accession.

Ukraine's bid for a "fast track" to EU membership may turn out to be an asset as well as a liability to the accession process for the Western Balkans. Because while the EU might review its absorption ability in the process, alternatives to full membership will be considered as the introduction of partial or junior membership. While this could be a step forward as a preliminary stage to full membership, it should not become the permanent status of the Western Balkans.

The EU – and Germany should be at the forefront of this – has to become more effective in preventing crises and decide to take a lead in the Balkans once and for all, not just in a financial sense, but by creating real political impact and change. This will require unity among the member states and a clear list priorities. Anyone who thought EU members may pay less attention to democratic consolidation and favor stability and security over the reform agenda for the Acquis should, in light of the return of war to Europe, reconsider. Because the one thing the Russian invasion has shown, is that cutting back free speech, limiting minority rights, oppressing the political opposition and creating an economic environment beneficial to oligarchs, is a solid recipe for escalation and can threaten the European way of life like nothing else as it undermines the rules-based order Europe has thrived upon. This is essentially what is at stake. Moreover, the Western Balkans – like the member states themselves – will have to commit to this order unequivocally, otherwise no military budget in the world could prevent an upcoming future escalation.

EU OFFER TO ALL EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES: MAKING NEW WARS IN THE BALKANS UNTHINKABLE



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● KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is fundamentally changing the political landscape of Europe. A new iron curtain is drawn, going through, and dividing the continent. The European Union must not lose sight of the Western Balkans, Moldova and Georgia. It should develop and offer a model of integration that is open to all European democracies – one that will strengthen and bring together all democracies in this new Europe that finds itself at war with aggressive dictatorships in Russia and Belarus. In this article, I argue that this offer should be a concrete, tangible and beneficial integration with the EU in the form of membership in the EU single market. To achieve this interim step towards full EU membership, governments would need to reform their economy and institutions, adopt EU laws and standards, and strengthen the rule of law and democracy.

While the war in Ukraine commands all the attention, the European Union must not lose sight of the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Georgia

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought Europe to a turning point. That's not a catchphrase but rather, reality. As a major nuclear power, Russia is using its military to wage war against an entire country without any justification and with brutal force used against civilians. Europe is also facing its biggest refugee crisis since World War II, which could easily become its greatest humanitarian crisis. All of this is fundamentally changing the political landscape of Europe. A new iron curtain has been drawn, dividing the continent.

While the war in Ukraine commands all the attention, the European Union must not lose sight of the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Georgia. It was the right move for the EU to accept receiving membership applications from Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which is a first of many steps towards accession. This should push the EU to develop and offer a model of integration that is open to all European democracies, one that will strengthen and bring together all democracies in this new Europe that is finding itself in conflict with aggressive dictatorships in Russia and Belarus.

This model has to be unlike everything we have seen since 2014 in the Western Balkans. Apart from empty rhetoric and phrases that nobody believes anymore, the EU has avoided making a clear decision on the Western Balkans

for years. The decision must be to offer all six countries a credible and realistic prospect of EU-integration that would make war unthinkable.

Today, media in the Western Balkans is intensively discussing possible new conflicts in the region. Politicians in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have openly speculated in recent months about whether there will be a new outbreak of violence. In a situation where Vladimir Putin sees the EU as an enemy and has every interest in further provocation and tension, this region finds itself situated under extremely dangerous circumstances. This is why European governments should not repeat the mistakes made in Ukraine, where too many policymakers relied on wishful thinking that all would work out in the end. The result of this wishful thinking is a catastrophe.

In the Balkans the EU still holds the cards, but it has to play them quickly. To do that, the EU needs to move away from empty phrases like 'European perspective', which implies a distant future. The EU needs to underscore that the Western Balkans (and all other European democracies) *will* become full members of the Union. At the same time, the EU needs to recognize that an implausible accession process, like the one it has had with Serbia since 2014, Montenegro since 2012, or Turkey since 2005, is ultimately of no use to anyone. Most importantly,

EU member states need to be honest about their inability to agree on offering any of the six Western Balkans states full EU membership in the next five to seven years.

This is why the EU has to state specifically, what can realistically happen in the coming months and years. Only then can citizens clearly voice their expectations and thereby push politicians towards making a choice: will they accept a specific EU offer that would be popular with the population? Or do they, like some Serbian poli-

only for those countries where governments reform their economy and institutions, adopt EU laws and standards, and strengthen the rule of law and democracy. Countries would need to reform in a way that Estonia and Slovakia have in order to become part of the EU (single market).

This approach would be nothing new. It would also not be a quickly designed policy goal but something that was tried and worked many times before. Having the prospect



German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in Pristina with the President of Kosovo Vjosa Osmani; Source: German Federal Foreign Office

ticians today, continue to play with the narrative that they cannot decide between the EU and Russia, while the media cheer on nationalism and write about potential wars? The EU must no longer stand by and watch from afar but engage coherently with rock solid promises.

This offer should be membership in the EU single market.¹ It would be a concrete, tangible, and beneficial integration with the EU. Of course, this would happen

of joining the EU single market would make conceivable that in the near future, the borders between the countries in the Balkans will look like the borders between Austria and Germany or between Germany and Poland: invisible borders, over which one no longer fights, and no one is willing to shed blood over because they no longer serve to separate people. Foreign investors would also get a clear signal that these countries could become part of the EU Single Market in five years.

Membership in the EU single market would make those countries that reform and join it more attractive to other EU members, helping them to achieve their ultimate goal of full EU membership, following the examples of Austria, Finland, and Sweden, which first joined the EU single market and only afterwards became full members of the EU.

Ahead of her visit to the Balkans in March 2022, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that “in recent years we have disappointed and neglected» some in the Western Balkans,² adding that “today’s peace may not be perfect but it is precious.” Baerbock promised that Germany will not leave the region to Russia and called for the EU to «engage in a creative and future-oriented manner.”

Baerbock is right but there is not much time left. Countries like Germany and France must proactively approach all six Balkan states as soon as possible and convey a clear vision: membership in a South-Eastern European Economic Area (SE-EEA) within the EU in the next few years for everyone who fulfills the conditions. The EU would have to start negotiations with all six Western Balkans countries soon, and eventually with Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. This should be offered, at the latest, during the French EU Presidency’s conference on the Western Balkans planned for June 2022.

When asked to respond to calls for a fast-track EU membership for Ukraine, Michael Roth, head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the German Bundestag and mem-

ber of the Social Democrats (SPD) was honest and clear when saying that it would not work.³ Roth rightfully insisted that nevertheless, the EU must give Ukraine a signal that it has a chance to be part of the EU. But this signal, Roth explained, has to be an honest one. As Germany’s Minister of State for Europe from 2013 to 2021, Roth knows the Western Balkans and EU policy towards the region well. He called for the EU to learn from the serious mistakes made in the Western Balkans, “where the EU is in a sorry state.” He concluded that in the medium-term for Ukraine, he “could imagine proposals already on the table, a European Economic Area.”

What brought peace in the Western Europe at first was close economic integration. When people in the Western Balkans see that progress is being made, that borders are becoming more permeable and that they are becoming part of a larger, democratic Europe, then they will no longer be susceptible to populist politicians who are discussing new borders again today.

The offer of single market membership could be made by the EU to all European democracies that are in danger of becoming prey to dictatorships. It would also deter those who could rely on violence to fulfill their political goals, a tactic we see unfolding right now in the heart of Europe, which we failed to prevent.

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After more than two decades of engagement in southeastern Europe, the FES appreciates that the challenges and problems still facing this region can best be resolved through a shared regional framework. Our commitment to advancing our core interests in democratic consolidation, social and economic justice and peace through regional cooperation, has since 2015 been strengthened by establishing an infrastructure to coordinate the FES' regional work out of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Regional Dialogue Southeast Europe (Dialogue SOE).

Dialogue SOE provides analysis of shared challenges in the region and develops suitable regional programs and activities in close cooperation with the twelve FES country offices across Southeast Europe. Furthermore, we integrate our regional work into joint initiatives with our colleagues in Berlin and Brussels. We aim to inform and be informed by the efforts of both local and international organizations in order to further our work in southeastern Europe as effectively as possible.

Our regional initiatives are advanced through three broad working lines:

- Social Democratic Politics and Values
- Social and Economic Justice
- Progressive Peace Policy

Our website provides information about individual projects within each of these working lines, past events, and future initiatives:

<http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org>

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