THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CRISIS AND THE WESTERN BALKANS: ASSOCIATIONS AND KNOCK-ON EFFECTS

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THE ISSUE

More than thirty years after the end of the Cold War, the Western alliance is faced with a possibility of a “hot war” with Russia over Ukraine. A Russian military build-up culminating at over 130,000 soldiers with the start of 2022, around the borders of Ukraine from north, east and south, revived speculation that an invasion in Ukraine was imminent. Many in the West were warning against Russia’s revisionism, the possibility of a new “Iron Curtain” and divisions along the spheres of influence, ala Yalta. Since its eruption in 2014, the conflict in Ukraine has been associated with the 1990s post-Yugoslav wars, not only in terms of ethnic and territorial parallels between the two conflicts but also in terms of Ukraine’s impact on vulnerable Western Balkans.

This policy brief discusses the Ukraine crisis through the prism of the Western Balkans by looking at three particular aspects: first, it compares the two regional cases in terms of similarities and differences; second, it compares their links with the West; and third, it looks at Russia’s influence on the Western Balkans in the shadow of the Ukraine conflict. It argues that while the Western Balkan countries are not frontline states in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, they are feeling its reverberations, with a risk of becoming a proxy hybrid battlefield in the increasing antagonism between Russia and the West.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU should keep the Western Balkans firmly on the enlargement course and stick to its democratic conditionality.
- NATO should deepen its dialogue with Serbian elites and use its public diplomacy to improve its image with the Serbian people.
- The West should help address Russian-led misinformation and conspiracy theories in the Western Balkans.
- EU and the US should speak with the same voice to the Western Balkan states and avoid sending conflicting messages.
INTRODUCTION

The current crisis in Ukraine, the beginning of which goes back to the 2014 Russo-Ukraine war, and the foundations originate in the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, bear some similarities with the breakdown of Yugoslavia. As with the Yugoslav wars during the 1990s, the conflict in Ukraine is territorial with historically charged ethnic references. Russians and Ukrainians are considered Slavic “brothers” with shared civilizational past, much like the South Slavs in the Balkans, the latter sharing the same language and common cultural traits, notwithstanding the historical antagonisms within the South Slavic family. In both regional cases, the post-communist new independent states were part of similar political past, members of one-party communist federations. Despite the many differences and disagreements between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union during the Cold War years, both were federal unions of communist republics, under the central administration of Belgrade in Serbia and Moscow in Russia, respectively. The post-communist transitions in the early 1990s saw a considerable resurgence of identity politics in both of them. Ethnicity and minority questions became instruments for mobilising political support for nationalist elites, towards independence and nation-building, as well as for justifying competitive territorial claims beyond the new national borders. The breakdown of Yugoslavia took place in the form of successive violent wars during the 1990s, whereas the disintegration of the Soviet Union was much more nuanced in terms of combining smaller scale or short-lived wars and frozen conflicts in several contested zones (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia). For its part, Ukraine as a new independent state from the Soviet Union had a special significance for Russia, not just because of its sizeable population and the common historical legacies but also because of its geostrategic position between Russia and Europe; this two-way influence was reflected into Ukraine’s foreign policy internal splits between West and East, pro-Europeans and pro-Russians. The crisis in Ukraine came much later not just in comparison with the Balkan wars but also in the context of the conflicts of the post-Soviet space. The 2014 crisis in Ukraine and the Russo-Ukrainian hostilities evoked comparisons with the wars between and within the former republics of Yugoslavia, with references to Greater Serbian nationalism, the Serbo-Croat rivalry, the fragility of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) and the independence of Kosovo. Both regional conflicts became highly internationalised drawing in neighbouring external actors, the United States and the wider international community. In both cases, the US, as a hegemonic or near-hegemonic global power wavered in terms of the degree of its engagement, the EU struggled to come up with a common strategy to represent all of its member states, and Russia was concerned with its global influence after a weak post-communist start. Meanwhile, NATO, as a potential destination for the Western Balkans and Ukraine, has been central in both regional conflicts but with a different impact on each case.

THE TWO REGIONAL WARS COMPARED

The 2014 wars in Ukraine reawakened memories of the 1990s Yugoslav violent wars to the people of the Western Balkan states, each side from their own point of view, as victims or perpetrators, defenders or aggressors, voicing different reactions to the Russo-Ukraine wars. From the Serbo-Croat conflict in Krajina to the ethnic wars in BiH and the subsequent independence of Kosovo, the different sides to these conflicts adopted different interpretations and connections with the Ukrainian crisis. The Serbs nationalists aligned with the Russians, as a payback to Russia’s solidarity with the Serbs during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and especially its support over Kosovo. The Bosniaks, seeing themselves as the victims of both Croatian and Serbian aggression, identified with Ukrainians who were attacked by the Russians or the pro-Russian Ukrainian insurgents. The declarations of separatism by the self-proclaimed Peoples’ Donetsk and Luhansk Republics were reminiscent of the Republic of Srpska claims for independence. Like Ukraine, BiH never had a background of unity as an independent country, being from the start a politically and institutionally weak central state. Both of them are divided along ethnic lines from within and struggle to assert their territorial integrity. As with Yugoslavia, the crisis in Ukraine combined features of both intra-state and inter-state conflicts. The Russo-Ukrainian war evoked similarities with the Serbo-Croatian hostilities in Krajina, with Serbia being compared to Russia and Croatia to Ukraine. An often-evoked comparison relates to the role of Serbia and Russia, as key players in how the regional conflicts evolved. Having been the most populous republics in their former communist federations, they had the most sizeable populations of co-nationals “to protect” in the context of the post-cold war new borders. Both Russia and Serbia perceived themselves as larger than their borders. Their respective political leaderships used similar nationalistic rhetoric and mobilizational tactics towards neighbouring successor states. In Yugoslavia, President Slobodan Milosevic was claiming to be protecting the rights of the Serbs in Kosovo, Croatia and BiH, while similar claims were presented some years later by Russian President Vladimir Putin, regarding the state of the Russian minorities in many post-Soviet independent states; in the case of Ukraine, in particular, Putin was arguing for the welfare of 8 million ethnic Russians living mostly in the south and the east of the country. While
nationalist leaders during the 1990s did not enjoy the variety of media that were available to Putin later, there was still a similar manipulation of the message and control of information, in order to mobilise resources and wage their respective wars. There were even similar allegations, calling the opponent “fascist”, and it has been said that Putin’s misuse of World War II references was a deliberate duplication of Milosevic’s successful anti-fascist campaign against the Croatian party HDZ and its leader Franjo Tudjman during the Yugoslav wars.4

With these similarities in mind, we should, however, keep a sense of proportion in our comparison in that Russia is not Serbia in terms of size and global power status; Russia, a massive land with a population of 144 million, is a former superpower and one of the current most influential powers with nuclear capabilities and a vote in the UN Security Council. Even the comparison of Ukraine with BiH or Croatia should be qualified due to the much bigger size of Ukraine, a country of 44 million people and much stronger military capabilities, compared with the post-Yugoslav states, each having less than one-tenth of Ukraine’s population. Moreover, the longevity and the scale of destruction of the two regional wars are noticeably different too. The Ukraine conflict, a lower intensity war, reaching its peak in 2014 (followed by some shelling and clashes in Eastern Ukraine during subsequent years), had a death toll of 14,000 people and 1.4 million displaced people (according to the UN Rights Office), compared with the much more violent Yugoslav wars which lasted for 10 years and cost 130,000 dead, 2.4 million refugees and an additional 2 million displaced persons (according to the Humanitarian Law Centre).

LINKS WITH THE WEST

Ukraine, like the Western Balkan states, has opted for a western-style political and economic transition, having established close relations with the EU, signed association agreements and declared its ambition to become a member of the European Union. From an EU perspective, Ukraine is included in the regional context of the Eastern Partnership4 and has since 2014 signed together with Moldova and Georgia (the so-called ‘Association Trio’) Association Agreements (AAs), Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) and visa-free travel. The Western Balkan states are all part of the Stabilisation and Association Process which started in 2001 and is tied to eventual EU membership, albeit containing different degrees of progress between the Western Balkan states.4 Since 2010 the European Commission merged the Western Balkans enlargement with the Eastern Neighbourhood portfolios, to be both monitored by the same Directorate General and, on some occasions, bringing the two groups together in terms of policy initiatives (energy community; coal regions in the Western Balkans and Ukraine; post-COVID-19 emergency and loan grants). While both regions have adopted the same orientation of europeanization and approximation of their laws with EU standards, and are currently negotiating similar chapters and commitments, the membership perspective is offered only to the Western Balkans, whereas the Associated Trio are still calling the EU to acknowledge their membership perspective.3 Be that as it may, the two groups of countries face similar macro-economic challenges and political problems including human rights violations, problematic implementation of the rule of law, and widespread corruption, as these criteria are assessed by the relevant organisations (EU, World Bank, EBRD, Energy Community, Council of Europe) and international rating agencies.4 Seen from this perspective, the Balkan accession experience—including EU member states Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia—can provide important lessons for Ukraine and the other Eastern Neighbourhood countries, on what works and what does not work with post-communist transitions and east European countries’ convergence with EU standards.

From the defence side, NATO has been central in both regional conflicts, albeit in different ways. Back in the 1990s, its role was pivotal in ending the war in BiH dispatching a 60,000-strong peacekeeping mission, to enforce the Dayton Peace Agreement. During the 1999 Kosovo war, NATO carried out an aerial bombing campaign against the Serbian targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia leading to the defeat of the Yugoslav army and precipitating the fall of Milosevic. The air intervention against Serbs was opposed by Russia at the time but NATO proceeded what might have been perceived then as humbling for Russia. The 1999 NATO military campaign in Kosovo was the turning point in Russia’s disapproval of NATO and the West’s liberal interventionist international order. Since then, with the exception of the Baltic states, who became members of the organisation in 2004, further NATO membership of the post-Soviet states became a red line for Russia. In its anti-NATO rhetoric, Russia found a convenient ally in Serbia and the Serbs of BiH who never forgot the NATO bombing campaign against them and have kept their respective countries outside the organisation.

Ironically for Russia, the 2014 crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea was a catalyst for the further enlargement of NATO in the Western Balkans. Having already accepted Croatia and Albania in 2009, Montenegro became the 29th member of NATO in 2017, an accession which Russia tried hard to undermine. At the time, pro-Russian opposition parties in Montenegro argued that there should be a referendum on the issue together with the 2016 parliamentary elections while the Montenegrin government responded that the parliamentary elections were a de facto plebiscite on the issue, pointing to the centrality of this accession in Montenegrin politics. The
The connection between Russia and the Western Balkans was increasingly hostile, culminating in an attempt to stage a coup on the day of the elections and in rumours that this would have included the assassination of the Montenegrin Prime Minister. What made it even more irritating for Russia was that Montenegro, a country which had, up to then, enjoyed close relations with it, joined EU sanctions against it and supported the UN General Assembly resolution on Crimea. The Montenegrin coup allegations were indicative of a climate of suspicion and discord between two former friends.\textsuperscript{9}

North Macedonia became the 30\textsuperscript{th} member of NATO in 2020, following the resolution of its name dispute with Greece. In fact, it could be argued that the geopolitical threat of Russia after Crimea was a strong incentive for both Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (as it was formally recognised by the UN until then), both of them with newly elected left and centre-left governments, respectively, to settle the name dispute. Moscow was a vocal opponent of the name deal as this would automatically lead to another NATO expansion. During the 2018 referendum in North Macedonia, on whether to accept the new name of the country, it was alleged that hundreds of new websites urging voters to boycott the referendum were guided by Russia while in Greece two Russian diplomats were expelled, suspected of trying to undermine the name change negotiations.

For its part BiH, like Ukraine, has been lobbying to become a NATO member state, divided between those who want to move closer to the transatlantic partnership and those, guided by the Republic of Srpska’s (RS) President Milorad Dodik, who press for alignment with Russia in security matters. In one instance last year, the Russian Embassy in Sarajevo stated that Bosnia becoming a NATO member would constitute a “hostile act” that “Russia would have to react to”. As such, the Western Balkan region remains the last significant part of Europe that has not yet fully integrated into the EU and NATO structures which makes it Europe’s soft underbelly and offers opportunities for Russia to exert influence and play patronage politics.\textsuperscript{10}

## Russia’s influence in its near abroad

In the fight over Ukraine, the Western Balkans are not frontline states like the Baltics or the East European states Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, all sharing border with Ukraine. The Western Balkans are states further afield and, in that sense, they don’t feel a direct military threat in the eventuality of a conflict between Russia and Ukraine. All of the Western Balkan states, however, have experienced Russia’s presence in some form or another. While the Western Balkans are not Russia’s foreign policy priority, yet they are a much-preferred low-cost backup strategy that pays dividends in terms of Russia’s positioning in Europe. Leaving Ukraine to adhere to the western fold would be a major blow to Russia’s military standing in Europe and its access to the Mediterranean as a naval power. On the contrary, bearing some losses in the Western Balkans is not particularly harmful, in terms of its prestige, as this region is on path to the European Union anyway. In the Western Balkans, Russia has to rely on local players who will spread its anti-western message for her.

The connection between Russia and the Western Balkans is an asymmetric relationship between a big influential power and weak “client states” and in some ways is reminiscent of 19\textsuperscript{th}-century balance of power politics. As the most vulnerable part of Europe in terms of security risks, the Western Balkans is an appropriate space for Putin’s geopolitical ambitions and a proxy for indirect competition with the West. While Russia cannot block their accession into the European Union and NATO, in the same way, that it can do with the post-Soviet Republics, Russia can undermine these prospects, through a mixture of instruments, including building closer security relations, creating energy dependencies, using disinformation on websites, cyber-attacks on infrastructures, political infiltration, religious affiliations and recently vaccine diplomacy.

It is in Serbia and RS where the presence of Russia is mostly felt and where Russia is reaping some benefits. By appearing as the patron of the Serbs in the region, Russia is creating important outposts for its European strategy. For Serbia, in particular, Russia is one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, enough to veto Kosovo’s ambitions to join the UN as an independent state. This in itself makes Russia Serbia’s precious ally in its fight against the international recognition of Kosovo’s independence, a key issue of national interest for Serbia and gives Russia a special place in the hearts and minds of many Serbian elites and people. This explains why Serbia chose not to criticise Russia’s claim on Crimea, although there were some contentious linkages with the case of Kosovo. Serbia was the only country in Europe where the 2014 Ukrainian situation sparked actual street protests in which pro-Russia demonstrators gathered in Belgrade, chanting and holding placards reading, “Crimea is Russia, and Kosovo is Serbia”,\textsuperscript{11} including seeing some nationalist Serbian volunteer fighters who assisted Russians in their battles in Eastern Ukraine.\textsuperscript{12} But because it had been offered the start of accession talks with the EU in 2014, the official state tried to keep down the tone and preserve as much as possible low-key stance. Serbia’s delicate balance between membership in the European Union and partnership with Russia is tested when relations between Moscow and the West intensify over the crisis in Ukraine, also because the latter has not recognized the independence of Kosovo on the grounds that it went against international law.
From a religious diplomacy perspective, the two regions have witnessed some parallels between Ukraine and Montenegro, including occasional interferences from Russia. Both Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches deny the existence of separate Ukrainian and Montenegro religious orthodox identities and have firmly reacted to acts of religious autonomization. When Montenegro Parliament passed the law on Freedom of Religion in December 2019, the Serbian Orthodox Church reacted fiercely while President Vucic asked Russia’s help for the protection of the unity of the Orthodox Church in the Balkans, seeing this as an attempt by the Church of Montenegro to seek autocephaly as had occurred in Ukraine. The intervention of Russia in this instance is another example of the instrumentalization of religious diplomacy and the use of cultural and historical links for political gains in Russia.13

Within the context of the wider solidarity and brotherhood with the Serbs of the region, Russia built close relations with RS investing in the entity’s oil refineries, training its police force and developing intensive cooperation in counter-terrorism and internal security education. This ties also with the recent pledges by RS to withdraw from the central army in BiH and create its own separate army. Such moves are also accompanied by statements such as the one when Dodik warned that he would call his “friends” for help if the West tries to intervene, referring to Serbia and Russia.14 There are fears that the Republic of Srpska risks becoming like Donbas in Eastern Ukraine backed by Russian separatists.15 What serves Russia’s interests in BiH is to avoid the country’s membership in NATO and to increase RS’s dependency on Russia in military, economic and energy fields.

Last but not least, the field of energy has always been a space for Russian influence in Europe, and in moments of crisis, there is always some concern over gas supplies coming from Russia, especially in the current times with prices rising fast. Russia’s oligopolistic position in some countries of the Balkans adds to its leverage, not only because it is seen as stimulating corruption and state capture, but also because of “energy colonisation”. Russia’s suspended South Stream proposal as well as the TurkStream pipeline which opened in 2021, stem from Moscow’s desire to circumvent Ukrainian pipelines, erode any potential Ukrainian leverage over Russia and isolate Ukraine from Europe thereby rendering it dependent on Russia for energy. In the Balkan region, the fact that the TurkStream remains the primary supplier of Russian gas to Serbia and Bulgaria underlines Moscow’s ability to affect local developments and create frictions among political elites.16 Through changes in pipelines and gas distribution Russia is also creating rifts within BiH and pulling RS further apart.17

Through multiple foreign policy means, Russia is exerting its influence in the Western Balkan region but this should not give the impression that the Western Balkan states are passive clients of such interferences. As it happens, local actors have some ownership of their foreign policy choices, with the EU being the most comprehensive course for them. Moreover, Russian influence is internalized differently in the various Western Balkan states. While all Western Balkan states are tied firmly to the European anchor through EU prospective membership, some states choose to play the Russian card to strengthen their own position vis-à-vis the West, as well as vis-à-vis each other. In the asymmetrical relationship between Russia and its Western Balkan clients, there is some symmetry in the sense that Putin instrumentalizes his Western Balkan connections to affect European unity, and the Western Balkan leaders are also instrumentalizing Russia’s influence to achieve their own foreign policy goals. Experience shows that relations between the Western Balkan states and Russia are similarly opportunistic and calculated, lacking a long-term clear strategy and sustainability.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Russo-Ukraine rivalry and the escalation of tensions are forcing the West to take some hard-core military choices vis-à-vis Russia and for western political elites to take sides. At the moment all NATO frontline member states are strengthening their military security amid the Ukraine crisis fears and some European states, like neutral Sweden, are even considering their membership of the organisation. In the Balkans, not just the frontline states Romania and Bulgaria are being directly threatened and strengthened by the deployment of additional troops on their territory and ships in the Black Sea.18 The impact of the Russo-Ukraine conflict is affecting some backstage NATO countries, including Albania, North Macedonia and Greece being asked to contribute with their own bases and resources, if these are needed. In other NATO cases, like in Croatia and Bulgaria, political elites are divided over the degree of military involvement. The lack of regional unity is exacerbated by Serbia’s and RS’ military cooperation and antagonistic military purchases from Russia. But given that all sides wish to resolve things diplomatically, it is mostly in the fields of energy, misinformation and ethnic tensions where the impact of this crisis will be mostly felt in the Western Balkans.

For this reason, the West should keep an eye on the potential knock-on effect from the Ukraine crisis on the Western Balkans. The EU should stick to its commitment regarding the democratic transformation of the
region, as well as keep the credibility of the carrot of membership for the Western Balkans. Now more than ever North Macedonia and Albania should start their accession talks with the European Union, a long overdue process. For its part, NATO should deepen its political dialogue and cooperation with Serbia and rectify its negative image with the Serbian public. The West needs to coordinate its activities in addressing the problems in BiH and the normalisation of Serbia and Kosovo which are in regression during the last years. It should also help address Russia’s misinformation tactics in the region and respond to campaigns and conspiracy theories, which manipulate public opinion in the Balkans, as well as support local independent media and investigative journalism. In all these areas, the EU and the US, following a period of transatlantic cacophony under the Trump years, need to speak convincingly to the region with one voice. After all, they have the same interests and goals in most of these regional questions.

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ABOUT THE BRIEF:

These Policy Briefs are a part of the bigger project funded by the Balkan Trust for Democracy (GMF) and USAID aimed at providing laser-sharp insights into the political and social trends in the region, strengthening dialogue and presenting concrete policy recommendations regarding pressing international and security issues in the Western Balkans.

The purpose of this specific Policy Brief is to provide an overview and insight into the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, and its impact on the Balkans, risks in the region and lessons learned from the Western Balkan past conflicts. What parallels can be drawn between the crisis in Ukraine and issues that are spiraling in the Western Balkans? How similar or different is the Russian strategy towards these two spheres of influence? How real is the potential of a spillover effect and what EU, NATO, and the US need to do to prevent escalation? What are policy recommendations for the Western leaders?

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