

POLITICAL AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has created a sense of urgency across Europe and thus pushed forward significant changes and readjustments of foreign, security, and defense policies. These major shifts have been referred to as *Zeitenwende* by the German chancellor Olaf Scholz, the turning point not only for Germany but for the whole European security architecture. Western Balkans is increasingly stated as an area of strategic importance for the European (Euro-Atlantic) security community, whereby it is the geopolitical interest of the both the EU and NATO to have the Western Balkans integrated. This is one of the regions where the interests of the West and Russian Federation collide – this factor adds to the already complex security dynamics resulting from domestic, bilateral, and regional issues that affect regional security and stability. Hence, one characteristic of the regional political and security dynamics is the long-term presence of external actors. This paper explores the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Western Balkans' political and security dynamics from the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory.

Keywords: *Zeitenwende, (Western) Balkans, regional security (sub)complex, Russian Federation, Ukraine*

Introduction

The latest phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that began in February 2022 is often cited as a turning point for European (Euro-Atlantic) security and its security architecture (von Daniels et al, 2022; Exadaktylos & Massetti, 2023, Michta, 2023). This turning point was referred to as *Zeitenwende* by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in the government's statement to the Bundestag on 27th February 2022 (Die Bundesregierung, 2022, p.7, Bieber, 2023), announcing significant shifts in German foreign, security, and defense policy. The return of

war to Europe produced effects at different levels and in different areas that required a turn in global, regional, and national policies. Hence, it created a momentum for strategic rethinking and readjustment. At the global level, there are discussions about global security governance, challenges for the rules-based international order, new strategic alliances and actors, and the likelihood of the beginning of the new (more multipolar) phase of international relations. At the level of broader regional security complexes (especially highly institutionalized ones), the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on allied relations, the possibility of adopting a unified position, commitment to the application of sanctions against Russia, and the rebound social, political and economic impact of sanctions across regions are considered. The best example of such an exceptionally institutionalized and functionally connected region is Europe, with two central pillars of its security architecture – NATO and EU, which are now re-examining their role, capabilities, and possibilities of action in global and European security relations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine gave new momentum to the achievement of the EU's goal of strategic autonomy, while NATO has made a shift back from crisis response operations towards collective defense and strengthening its collective capabilities (NATO, 2022). At the national level, many (European) states are further readjusting their security and defense policies, increasing their defense capabilities and strengthening their defensive posture, either individually or collectively. The most notable examples of these strategic readjustments are Swedish and Finnish membership in NATO. These two former European neutrals took this critical step toward membership as a direct consequence of the Russian aggressive policies in Eastern Europe.

On the external borders of the EU, there is a security subcomplex of the Western Balkans (hereinafter WB). It is the only region that, since 2003 and the summit of the European Council in Thessaloniki is reputed to have a clear perspective of EU membership (European Commission, 2003). This “clear perspective” has been repeated for more than two decades in EU programs, reform agendas, and strategic documents related to this region, and so far, only Croatia has managed to realize it. Other WB countries (hereinafter WB6) are at different stages of institutionalization of their relations with the EU, with many obstacles that go beyond the insufficient reforms as prerequisites for opening and closing of negotiation chapters, including the unfinished state-building processes, lack of internal consolidation, questionable sustainability of some states without the presence of external actors, unresolved internal and bilateral disputes, as well as democratic backsliding (Kapidžić, 2020), to name just a few.

The very fact that the EU and the countries of the region have so far failed to achieve the proclaimed goal of their integration into the Union opened the way for the influence of a few other external actors, such as Turkey, China, and especially the Russian Federation. This is of concern to the EU, which has further enhanced its post-February 2022 WB6 agenda to prevent the Russian Federation's perceived aim to destabilize the region and further delay its integration with the EU and NATO (Stronski, 2022; Stanicek & Caprile, 2023).

Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, is one of the most widely used conceptual frameworks for regional security analysis. This theoretical-conceptual framework is based on the assertion that most security activities take place precisely at the regional level (Amable, 2022). The framework for analyzing regional security dynamics, according to Buzan and Wæver, consists of four levels: domestic (internal order, internal vulnerabilities), state-to-state (interaction between regional actors), interaction of the region with neighboring regions, the role of global powers in the region (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 51). This type of logic, somewhat modified, was also applied to the analysis of security dynamics in WB. According to Buzan and Wæver, "Subcomplexes have essentially the same definition as RSCs¹, the difference being that a subcomplex is firmly embedded within a larger RSC. Subcomplexes represent distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are nevertheless caught up in a wider pattern that defines the RSC as a whole." (Ibid).

Therefore, this paper examines if and how the Russian war in Ukraine affected countries in the WB, focusing on political and security dimensions. For this purpose, the paper follows Buzan & Wæver's argument of the Balkans being a subcomplex (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 378) of the wider European security complex, here applied to what is referred to as WB. As this subcomplex is not yet fully integrated into the wider complex, the paper argues that this fact is critical in other actors' attempts to achieve their interests in the region which significantly diverge from those of the EU and wider Euro-Atlantic security community. Therefore, the paper is based on the hypothesis that there is a greater possibility of the expansion of Russian influence in those countries of the Western Balkans that are characterized by a lower degree of internal consolidation and that do not follow a clear and agreed concept of foreign and security policy. The paper relies on qualitative methodology, that is, on the content analysis of primary and secondary sources, from official documents in the field of foreign and security policy, official reports and decisions, through agreements and statements of political leaders, to academic sources dealing with the Western Balkans.

Western Balkans a security subcomplex

To start talking about security dynamics in the (Western) Balkans that make it a security subcomplex, one first must point out to disagreements about the term itself, more precisely its geographical, political, and geopolitical background and the countries it consists of. Articles and books dealing with the WB frequently mention at least in a footnote that this term is disputed: "Without entering in endless debates of who is Western Balkans I will use the term

¹ Whereby, regional security complexes (RSCs) "are defined by durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of sub-global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 45).

Western Balkans referring to what has been defined as "ex-Yugoslavia minus Slovenia plus Albania" (Jano, 2008, p. 55). One of the most widely used encyclopedic sources, Encyclopaedia Britannica, also pointing out these discrepancies, cites Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia as Balkan countries, sometimes joined by Greece and Turkey. The same source includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia in the WB (Britannica, n.d.). However, the WB is not a geographical or historical, but a political designation coined by the EU to designate the countries covered by the Stabilization and Association Process since 1999 (European Commission, n.d.). Some authors refer to the term as a concept and a social construct, corroborating this with the fact that when the states of the WB become members of the EU, they cease to be part of this politically defined region and become 'European' states (Lika, 2022, p. 63). This was the case with Croatia when it became a member a little more than a decade ago. After Croatia's accession to the EU, the WB includes the remaining six countries (WB6) surrounded by the territory of the European Union, which makes it so strategically important for the EU.

It is no exaggeration to say that some countries are reluctant towards their labeling as a 'Balkan' country, such as Croatia. For example, in its strategic documents, there are no references to the Balkans, and instead, its central European, Danube, Adriatic, and Mediterranean identity is emphasized (National Security Strategy, 2017). There is no even identification with the term "Southeast Europe" which is sometimes used interchangeably with Balkans, although they are not synonymous. This all has to do with the very security dynamics in the region during the 1990s as was one of the two main sources of the term "balkanization" and pejorative connotations related to the term which date back far in history. Why is it important to point out to these disagreements regarding the definition of the (Western) Balkans? One of the reasons is because reluctance towards the term or the refusal of a country to be defined as a member of the region, i.e. unwillingly agreeing to such designation, can reflect the presence/absence and strength of the "we feeling" as one of the key characteristics of security community – and the question is whether countries in the region (conceived in the broadest sense) make one such community (Grizold & Skočajić Juvan, 2017; Stojanović Gajić & Ejodus, 2018; Jakešević, 2019), even a nascent one (Adler & Barnett, 1998). To leave all these terminological dilemmas aside, for practical reasons the analysis includes current WB6² and Croatia, which has not counted as a Western Balkan country since 2013 when it joined the EU – still the youngest member state. Given that Croatia's border with the Western Balkans is also the external border of the EU, i.e. the border of the Schengen area, Croatia finds its place in the analysis, with the reservations previously mentioned in the interpretation of the term, and because WB today includes the remaining six states.

² Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Despite positive progress recorded in the past 20 years, the state of regional relations is not such that one could speak of a security community, while countries of the region share a few common characteristics, similarities, problems, and challenges, which further strengthen the argument of the WB as a separate security subcomplex at the external border of the EU. All the WB6 countries are small states by qualitative and quantitative criteria. They experienced violent conflicts in the recent past (Džankić, Keil, and Kmezić, 2019) or civil unrest,³ delayed democratic transition towards political pluralism (Laštro and Bieber, 2023) and market economy (Uvalić, 2012). The latest Freedom House 2023 report, states Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as countries that have recorded the greatest decline in freedoms in the last ten years (both are "partly free"). The rest of the countries in the region, except Croatia (free), are also only "partly free" (Freedom House, 2023). When it comes to the state of democracy, the Democracy Index for 2023 showed that most of the countries in the region are classified as *flawed democracies* (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is labeled as a *hybrid regime* (there is no data for Kosovo) (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023, p. 50). Montenegro scored the biggest progress among the Eastern European group of states in two consecutive years "upgrading" its status from a hybrid regime to a flawed democracy in 2021 (Ibid, p. 53).

These indicators are among the reasons why the states in the region are vulnerable to destabilization attempts that existed even before the open Russian aggression against Ukraine. The Russian Federation is trying to increase its influence in the Balkans and thus suppress the influence of NATO and the EU, which in the last three decades have reached a high level of institutionalization of relations with the states of the region. However, the fact that these relations are not fully institutionalized makes these countries more vulnerable to destabilization attempts than EU and NATO member states. In this regard, we can talk about the collision of interests between the EU, NATO, the USA, i.e. the West in general and the Russian Federation in the (Western) Balkans.

Although the region itself is not the focus of major global powers, its geopolitical and geostrategic importance is evidenced by the interest, engagement, and presence of external actors in the region. We argue that the interest of the EU and the West is to further stabilize it since it is located directly on/next to the EU external border. Additionally, important transport routes that go further towards Greece and Turkey pass through it; it is an active migrant route; it is located on the Adriatic Sea which provides access to the Mediterranean, which is strategically important. Ultimately, the membership of these countries in NATO (which has been partially achieved) and in the EU is counted as a geostrategic interest of both entities (Szczerba, 2022; Panero, 2023).

Membership of WB6 countries in the EU encounters much greater obstacles than membership in NATO, and in this respect, the degree of institutionalization of relations is much lower, compared to their relations with

³ Albania in 1997

NATO⁴. However, since the EU is consistent in its statements about the WB6 as a region of strategic importance for the EU, this makes it strategically interesting for the Russian Federation as well. Therefore, the basis of Russian interest is to slow down and ultimately prevent the strengthening of the position of the EU, NATO, and the West in general (Loshaj, 2024). In doing so, it uses various institutional and non-institutional actors in the region (as proxies) - from official authorities, certain political parties and political groups, religious circles, media, and economic actors. Influence is exerted in overt and covert ways, including hybrid actions (European Parliament, 2023, p. 5). For example, some recent research states that “the general disappointment with the West across the region is a key variable to successful narrative building that serves Russian interests. Local disinformation proxies build narratives while exploiting the idea of pre-existing identity ties, shared history, and unconditional Russian political support over time. They blur the line between opinion and fact, and thus cause distrust in previously respected sources of factual information and create space for simplified anti/pro-West polarization. These narratives have been filtered through traditional and social media, as well as local political, cultural, and economic actors” (Metodieva, 2019, p. 1).

Similarly, the latest Public report of the Croatian Security Intelligence Agency points out that “in the context of the war in Ukraine and economic difficulties, in the area of the Western Balkans space has opened up for the influence of non-Western actors who seek to use the instability and undeveloped state and social institutions in the Western Balkan countries to strengthen their "soft power", expand their own interests and projects, and in some places to the additional slowdown of the Euro-Atlantic perspective of the Western Balkan countries (SOA, 2023, p. 31).

Characteristics of the regional security dynamics in the Western Balkans are the result of several factors that are intertwined⁵: first, like any other region, it is characterized by domestic, bilateral, and multilateral issues and relations that affect the state of regional security; second, the presence of external actors in different phases and forms/roles; third, differing foreign policy objectives and security concepts; and fourth, wider geopolitical circumstances.

The analysis of each of the mentioned factors in the following chapter(s) aims to examine the thesis that the (Western) Balkans represents a separate subcomplex within the wider European security complex, whose characteristics make it conducive to influences that delay the realization of their proclaimed foreign policy goals.

⁴ Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia are NATO members.

⁵ In this part, paper refers to the region as a whole, with references to specific country-related situations which are indicative for the arguments that are used.

Security dynamics in the Western Balkans

In terms of the first factor, two mutually reinforcing dynamics are the domestic and bilateral/multilateral ones. What does that mean? It means that internal dynamics very often affect the state of bilateral and multilateral relations in the region, but also *vice versa*. Namely, following the wars of the 1990s, newly formed states in the region went through phases of ups and downs in political relations, which affected the internal stability of these states and internal and regional security. The development of good-neighborly relations from the end of the 1990s has remained at the center of EU (and some other external actors') policies towards this part of Europe, as a pivotal goal. The connection between domestic and bilateral/multilateral dynamics in the region is a consequence of, among other things, the legacy of disintegration of the former state, the accompanying wars and peace agreements, state-building processes, and their internal consolidation, as well as the ethnic complexity of each of them. The processes of state building in this region had to take ethnic complexity into account, and thus different instruments of ethnic diversity management were incorporated into their political systems, thus enabling the realization of civil and political rights of members of different ethnic and national communities and national minorities to varying degrees. Since each of these countries is characterized by a specific situation, their political systems, and institutional designs are also different. Some of them have become well consolidated in the past 30 years, while in some cases there is still no consensus regarding the internal political system and separatist tendencies further complicate regional security dynamics. As a result, it can be argued that the processes of state-building in this region are still not complete - this primarily refers to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, as states of limited sovereignty⁶ and international protectorates. The absence of external (Western) actors in these two states would probably lead to a deteriorating political situation with possible negative security dynamics. This fact is exploited by Russia in both countries. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the role of the Office of the High Representative⁷ is still instrumental in situations when internal political stability is at stake, due to the lack of capacity or will of the political representatives of three constituent peoples to reach a consensus on important political issues.

Dealing with the past and reconciliation related to the conflicts of the 1990s remain unfinished processes affecting internal and regional relations. This is best evidenced by the disagreement over the qualifications of the massacre of more than 8,000 civilians in Srebrenica in 1995, which caused social and political divisions within Bosnia and Herzegovina, its disagreements with Serbia with wider regional consequences. The announced vote of the UN General Assembly (UNGA)⁸ on the draft resolution that would declare July 11

⁶ In the case of Kosovo, limited international recognition has to be added.

⁷ Currently position held by Christian Schmidt since 2021.

⁸ The vote is scheduled to take place in May 2024. The document was drafted with the contributions of Germany, USA, Rwanda and France.

"The International Day of Reflection and Remembrance of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide" (UN, 2024) sparked protests in Republic of Srpska and set in motion a huge diplomatic initiative by Serbia in April 2024, the goal of which is to distract member states from positive voting on the draft and to try to move the issue from UNGA to UN Security Council, where they would count once again on Russian veto⁹. Although the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia "has established beyond a reasonable doubt that the killing of 7,000 to 8,000 Bosnian Muslim prisoners was genocide" (ICTY, n.d.) which is consistent with the 2006 ruling of the International Court of Justice that genocide was committed in Srebrenica (ICJ, n.d.), the authorities in Serbia and Republic of Srpska dispute that it was genocide (not that the crime actually took place) and some believe that "Dodik is using the draft UN resolution as a pretext to carry out his separatist agenda" (Cantone & Ivanović, 2024). Thus, even without the influence of wider geopolitical circumstances, regional instabilities serve as the generator of security challenges that the European/international security architecture must continuously address.

The second factor, i.e. presence of external actors, has been a characteristic of the region ever since the beginning of the 1990s. It has manifested itself in different forms over time in accordance with the course of internal and regional stabilization, which, considering that they are still engaged in the region, is not a finished work (Jakešević, 2018). Therefore, the first decade of activity by external actors (European Community, United Nations) was marked by attempts to prevent violent conflicts, and when these attempts failed, peace-making, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and peace-enforcement operations followed (UN, NATO, EU, OSCE). As part of the efforts to build peace within and between the countries of the region, in the second half of the 1990s, at the instigation of external actors, the process of normalization and establishment of diplomatic relations began, and "good neighborly relations" have been continuously cited as an imperative in their policies towards the region. All the actors are still present in the region as part of various peace support operations (Kosovo-UN, NATO, EU; Bosnia and Herzegovina - EU), while OSCE missions also operate in all WB6 countries of the region. With the stabilization of the region, another type of presence of external actors has become a characteristic of this region – that is, the presence of the EU and NATO through their enlargement policies. Their success is so far mixed, especially in terms of EU membership, as a combination of domestic, regional, and EU factors have played a role in the delayed accession process.

This is also in close relation with the third factor that explains regional security dynamics, i.e. the fact that WB countries display differing foreign policy orientations and security concepts, if not nominally than at least practically. To illustrate this, and to preserve the consistency of the paper, we can observe their position towards the membership of the EU and NATO, without the intention

⁹ In 2015 Russian Federation vetoed UN Srebrenica Genocide Resolution, which was subsequently used on many occasions as a testimony of special Serbian-Russian relations (Miroslavljević, 2023).

to narrow down the realm of foreign policy generally. Nominally, all the states in the region state the EU membership as their primary foreign policy goal. Most of the states in the region opted for membership in NATO as the most reliable guarantee of their national security, except Serbia which opted for military neutrality as a security concept, while consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina on this issue is not clear, as will be explained later.

While for some of the WB6 nominal EU orientation is reflected in their practical efforts (North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania), in the case of others, there is a discrepancy between the two (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro). In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this discrepancy stems from the general failure of its two entities (Republic of Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) to reach a consensus on many points, including the relations between the state and the entities, while in the case of Serbia, it can be viewed as a calculated (although questionably rational) foreign policy choice, whose aim is to balance between West and Russia. With its ambivalent foreign policy orientation, Vučić's regime is trying to achieve gains in the domestic and foreign policy arena (Bieber, 2023a). In reality, it is torn between loyalty to "brotherly" Russia and the expressed goal of EU membership. Although its negotiation process has been ongoing since 2014, politically it continues to balance loyalty to these two entities (European Commission, 2023a, p. 3), adding to the ambiguity of its foreign policy. Another domestic/foreign policy issue is related to the status of Kosovo, which generates not only delays in Serbia's accession to the EU but also presents a source of instability and insecurity in the whole region. In the case of Montenegro, a series of political crises revolving around pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian forces has transformed to some extent into pro-European vs. pro-Russian positions. However, this situation creates space for destabilizing actions of various external actors, which thus generates concerns for the wider European community and its security.

The EU enlargement policy has so far resulted in the membership of Croatia in 2013, while other countries, except Kosovo, are either candidates or are in different stages of the negotiation process. The last to receive candidate status was Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022. Albania's international standing somewhat improved with its NATO membership, but the country continues to struggle with widespread corruption, organized crime, slow reforms, rule of law, and other criteria that would qualify it for EU membership. Albania was granted EU candidate status in 2014 and despite political consensus among EU member states on opening the negotiations reached in 2020, they became effective only in July 2022 (European Council, n.d.). North Macedonia has been a candidate for EU membership since 2005, which waited until mid-2022 to start membership negotiations due to regional disputes. A long-standing dispute with Greece over the country's name, which was ultimately changed following the 2018 Prespa agreement (Saveski, 2020, p. 1194) presented a major obstacle in fulfilling its major foreign policy goal. What followed was Bulgaria's blockade of the opening EU-North Macedonia negotiations in 2020, reviving disputes concerning Macedonian identity

(Brunnbauer, 2022; Bechev, 2022), but also demanding Bulgarian minority in the country be included in the constitution. While North Macedonia's political leadership had to cope with another regional dispute, some research shows that it did not have a significant impact on public support for the EU membership, although there have already been a "decade-long declining trends of support for EU membership" (Damjanovski, 2022, p. 10), caused by the absence of a more concrete manifestation of countries' EU perspectives. Bulgarian veto was lifted in June 2022, as the green light for the EU-North Macedonia negotiations. Yet, their relations are still strained, while Bulgaria continues to "wave" the veto card in situations where it believes that North Macedonia is not fulfilling its accepted obligations. For example, at the beginning of 2023, the Bulgarian parliament adopted a declaration condemning the "anti-Bulgarian" campaign, which could once again lead to the blocking of EU negotiations, and what would "serve the interests of third-party countries" (Marusic, 2023). A potential situation of a new veto would serve the expansion of Russian influence on the population and political actors in the country.

Montenegro became a NATO member in 2017, following a period of political instability. Namely, in the last decade, Montenegro experienced several serious political crises, from the attempted *coup d'état* in 2016 to the political crisis that characterized the period from 2020. In a country where the majority of Montenegrin people do not even make up half of the total population, the political and constitutional crisis was generated partly around the split between pro-Serbian and pro-Montenegrin political actors. Montenegrin society is becoming increasingly polarized. The new president Jakov Milatović was inaugurated in May 2023, defeating the long-time president Milo Đukanović. President Milatović is one of the founders of the political party Movement Europe Now, which describes itself as pro-European, and which won the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections in June 2023¹⁰. After months of negotiations, the new government was formed by a coalition of pro-European and pro-Serbian parties at the end of October 2023 (Reuters, 2023). To secure a majority in the parliament for a new government, certain concessions were given to pro-Serbian and pro-Russian parties, such as the Democratic Front/For the Future of Montenegro, which in exchange for support received the post of speaker of the parliament. Political crises slowed down Montenegro's EU negotiations, as the Government's stated main foreign policy priority. The question is whether this goal can be achieved in view of the pro-European/pro-Russian split among political actors. The trend shows that in the last two years (but also beyond) political forces inclined to Russian politics strengthened (Dickinson & Harding, 2024), which then had a negative impact on the European perspectives of this country.

Finally, the status of Kosovo in the international community is the result of the wider Serbia's position regarding their unresolved relationship. This presents an obstacle for the achievement of full international subjectivity of Kosovo, which Serbia considers part of its territory. Kosovo is thus still not a member

¹⁰ It won 24/81 seats in parliament.

of the UN and other international organizations, while a recent recommendation of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly from April to invite Kosovo to become a member of CoE (CoE, 2024) is likely to be the first step in achieving its stated foreign policy goal, despite strong opposition from Serbia. Kosovo applied formally for EU membership in 2022, while in 2014 it signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (European Commission, 2023e).

Granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the beginning of negotiations with North Macedonia are part of the "new dynamics" in EU-WB6 relations following the Russian aggression on Ukraine, through which the influence of this conflict on the situation in the region can be observed (European Commission, 2023). This new dynamic is trying to find new ways to speed up the accession process for WB6, which is exposed to the economic, energy, and political influences of the Russian Federation. Candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina was seen as a "geopolitical decision" despite the lack of significant progress in institutional and democratic development, which followed after Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status earlier that year. Such a decision is largely seen as a direct consequence of the renewed geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West, which should serve to contain the Russian influence in the region and to make the membership perspective more credible and convincing.

All countries of the region are members of either NATO's Partnership for Peace program (Serbia as a militarily neutral state and Bosnia and Herzegovina), which forms the basis for significant military cooperation, or are members of NATO (Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia¹¹). The only exception is Kosovo, which refers to PfP/NATO membership as its strategic foreign policy goal and source of security guarantees (Matias, 2022: 6).

From the strategic point of view, the territories of non-allied countries are surrounded by NATO members. NATO membership is another example of Bosnia and Herzegovina failing to exercise a clear line of foreign policy. Although the foreign policy is one of the prerogatives of the state and not of the entities, the Republic of Srpska has on many occasions differed from the official state policy. Namely, while Bosniak and Croat political representatives in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina support Bosnia's NATO membership, the authorities in the Republic of Srpska are against it (Milovan, 2023) and support the idea of military neutrality (given their experiences with NATO in the 1990s. This entity's representative body of the National Assembly adopted a (symbolic) resolution on military neutrality in 2017 (Narodna skupština Republike Srpske, 2017), stating that its future status will be coordinated with Serbia (Kovačević, 2017).

The fourth factor, the influence of the wider geopolitical circumstances on security dynamics in Western Balkans, is discussed in the following section.

¹¹ Albania and Croatia joined NATO in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020.

Political and security implications of the war in Ukraine in the Western Balkans

The development of events in Russian-Ukrainian (Western) relations after 2014 and Russian aggression on Ukraine since February 2022 influenced global, European, and also politics in and towards the WB. Regional states had different approaches towards war in Ukraine and to the Russian Federation that depended on their status in relation to the EU and NATO, and thus an argument can be made that clarity in foreign policy orientation, as discussed in the previous section, played an important factor in determining their position towards Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Croatia, as a country that achieved its primary foreign policy goals, often viewed through the prism of EU and NATO membership, maintains a coordinated policy with the EU and NATO in relation to the war in Ukraine. Immediately after the Russian aggression started, “on February 25, 2022, the Croatian Parliament adopted the Declaration on Ukraine (“Narodne novine”, number 25/22), which condemns Russian aggression against Ukraine (...). Within the framework of the European Union and the European Council, the Republic of Croatia supported international restrictive measures towards the Russian Federation and political, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, material, and other aid to Ukraine” (Hrvatski sabor, 2022). In October 2022, Zagreb hosted the first summit of the Crimean Platform (Hrvatski sabor, 2022a), and in October 2023 it hosted the International Donor’s Conference on humanitarian demining in Ukraine (Vlada.gov.hr, 2023), thus providing diplomatic support for Ukraine and complying with the EU’s foreign and security policy.

However, there were some disagreements regarding providing military support to Ukraine, between the ruling center-right HDZ government¹² and the opposition parliamentary political parties, spanning from far-left (Workers Front) through center-left (Center, SDP) to right-wing (Croatian sovereignists, Homeland Front), which mainly concerned the training of Ukrainian soldiers in Croatia and the involvement of the Croatian Army in that activity. Also, there was a clear difference between the narratives and positions of the President of the Republic and the Government, as co-creators and actors of foreign policy, which influenced the outcome of the Government’s proposal on participation in the EUMAM mission. Namely, the president’s position was that the proposed training of Ukrainian soldiers in Croatia was not in accordance with Article 7 of the Constitution, which regulates the rules of entry and operation of soldiers of allied countries on the territory of Croatia. Apart from the formal complaints regarding the procedure, President Zoran Milanović claimed that Ukraine was

¹² Croatian Democratic Union’s (HDZ) Government was the proponent of a wide array of military aid to Ukraine, including the training of Ukrainian soldiers in Croatia. In recent general elections held on 17 April 2024 HDZ led coalition won the relative majority of 61 seats in Croatian Parliament (151 seats), while 76 seats are required to obtain a mandate from the President of the Republic to form a government.

not an allied country, since it is not a member of NATO and the EU (Predsjednik.hr, 2022). Since the President refused to give consent to the Government's proposal, for it to be adopted, a two-thirds majority in the parliament was required. However, in December 2022 Croatian Parliament rejected the government's proposal.¹³ The decision, however, did not put a ban on military assistance to Ukraine in general. It is estimated that by January 2024, 181 million euros worth of military aid was sent to Ukraine (Ministry of Defence, 2024). Political divisions in Croatia have become partly shaped by the narrative according to which some are labeled as Russophiles or even Putinophiles (opposition parties and the president) as opposed to those who are pro-Ukrainian (HDZ, government), which is exploited in the domestic political arena (Gong, 2024).

The second group of countries, those that are members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia), had clear political views on the need to support and provide help to Ukraine, including military aid, which was in line with their stated foreign policy goal - membership in the EU, which they aspire to and in this sense they pragmatically decided to harmonize their foreign and security policy with the EU's foreign and security policy. This pragmatic decision is also legally grounded since Stabilization and association agreements include provisions on aligning the candidates' foreign and security policies with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (Stasiukevych & Malovec, 2022, p. 8). However, there were also different approaches in these countries.

Unreserved support was provided by Albania, whose parliament unanimously supported a resolution on support for Ukraine in March 2022 (Exit news, 2022), it supports Ukrainian Euro-Atlantic integration and provides military, humanitarian, and political support (President of Ukraine, 2023). It clearly distanced itself from Russia, aligned with NATO partners, joined the EU sanctions against Russia as early as 28 February 2022, and closed its airspace for Russian planes (Sinoruka, 2022). In February 2024, Tirana hosted the Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit, where the leaders of WB6, Croatia, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania met with President Zelenski, and signed a declaration condemning Russian aggression and expressing solidarity with Ukraine (Kryeministria.al, 2024). The summit was also used for discussions about the possibilities of the defense industries of the participating countries to contribute to the defense efforts of Ukraine.

Following the opening of the negotiations in July 2022, the 2023 report on Albanian progress states that "Albania has maintained its record of full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy (...) aligning with the EU position when co-sponsoring and voting on UN resolutions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its humanitarian impact, and also when voting on the

¹³ Political parties that voted against the proposal: Croatian sovereigntists, Homeland Movement, both right-wing populist political parties; Croatian Peasant Party and some other smaller parties; Members of Social Democratic Party, Most and Green-Left coalition did not vote, while Croatian Social Democrats (except one representative) voted for the proposal (Hrvatski sabor, 2022).

suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council” (European Commission, 2023d, p.3). In March 2024, Albania opened a renovated Kuçovë air base and made it available for the servicing of NATO planes, as a consequence of increased tensions in the region generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine - or, as Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama put it, because of “ambitions of the Russian Federation” in the Western Balkans (Kington, 2024).

In North Macedonia, while a small parliamentary Left party expressed support for Russian goals in Ukraine, most of the other relevant political parties and actors condemned Russian aggression soon after it began (BalkanInsight, 2022). North Macedonia supports Ukraine's membership in the EU and NATO, on which the two countries signed a joint statement in February 2024 (President of Ukraine, 2024). Despite recorded attempts of Russian influence, North Macedonia is committed to its EU path, which was recognized in the latest European Commission report which states that “on common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the country’s alignment rate with relevant High Representative statements on behalf of the EU and relevant Council Decisions has remained at 100%. This included all EU restrictive measures targeting following Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. This is a strong signal of the country’s strategic commitment to its EU path. North Macedonia also aligned with all EU statements submitted to international organizations, including co-sponsoring the resolution adopted at the UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session on Ukraine on 23 February 2023. The country continues to implement the EU restrictive measures” (European Commission, 2023: 117). It provides military aid to Ukraine and is the only (Western) Balkans country that provides military training for Ukrainian soldiers (Balkan Insight, 2023). Their soldiers also participate in NATO Multinational Forces in Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria, as part of NATO’s strengthened defense posture. According to former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Russian attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the state are not new. Namely, in a 2023 interview, he referred to such attempts: "While I was prime minister, in those four years, we had the expulsion of 13 Russian diplomats. (...) They bribed our officers, entered institutions, and took documents (...)If we do not unite and take bolder steps, I fear for the future of the Balkans, but also for the future of Europe Union" (Lupiga, 2023).

In the case of Montenegro, similar conclusions were presented by the European Commission in the 2023 report (European Commission, 2023a: 132). However, it also noted that in terms of restrictive measures “implementation and enforcement remained mixed, in part due to limited administrative capacity and the need to update Montenegro’s legal framework” (Ibid). Montenegro is among the states that provide military aid to Ukraine (weapons, ammunition, equipment), which, according to some data, at the beginning of 2023 reached 11% of the country’s defense budget (Vijesti online, 2023). It is believed that the political crisis in 2016 was triggered by Russia, in an attempt to prevent the country from joining NATO. “In 2016, only one day before a highly contentious parliamentary election asking voters to choose between closer ties with NATO or with Russia, the government announced that it thwarted a

Russian-instigated *coup* attempt. (...) In her decision, Montenegrin chief judge Suzana Mugosa explained that the Russian agents tried to “change the electoral will” and “prevent Montenegro from joining NATO.” “(Dickson & Harding, 2024).

Additionally, all NATO members in the region actively participate in NATO Forward Presence in Central/Eastern Europe: in Bulgaria (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia); in Hungary (Croatia); in Latvia (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia), in Poland (Croatia), in Romania (North Macedonia), thus providing support to join efforts in collective defense amidst deteriorated security situation in Eastern Europe (NATO, 2023).

The third group of countries includes Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, as countries that are not members of either EU or NATO. Here we can also observe how their positions towards Russia’s invasion of Ukraine were influenced by the clarity of their foreign policy orientation.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the tripartite presidency was unable to come up with a common position from the beginning of the crisis. While the then Bosniak and Croat representatives¹⁴ in the presidency condemned the Russian invasion, Serb representative Dodik insisted on ‘neutrality’ (DW, 2022). To date, there is no official and unique state-level position, and while the Croat-Bosniak entity Federation of BiH supports Ukraine in its efforts to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Republic of Srpska and President Dodik openly support Russian arguments for the invasion and use their connections with Putin to strengthen their claims for the independence of this entity (Večernji list, 2024). Additionally, in October 2023 the prime minister of the Republic of Srpska met with the deputy prime minister of Russia to discuss a further increase in oil and gas supply to this entity (TASS, 2023), contrary to the EU’s current restrictive measures towards Russia. Dodik, under US and UK sanctions himself, met with Russian president Putin in February 2024 for the fourth time since February 2022, and previously received the Order of Alexander Nevski (N1 BiH, 2024) in June 2023 for his contribution to strengthening relations between Russia and BiH, especially Republic of Srpska. This is reflected in the most recent 2023 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina in which the EC has stated that while some progress has been achieved in terms of (BiH) aligning with EU’s common foreign and security policy, “Republic of Srpska entity authorities and parties advocated for a neutral stance on Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, contesting the country’s alignment with EU statements and obstructing the full implementation of restrictive measures against Russia” (European Commission, 2023b, p. 5). The lack of consensus on foreign policy orientation opens the way for destabilizing influences stemming both from within the region and from the wider environment. Russian influence is clearly demonstrated in relations that it fosters with one entity within the country, which further destabilizes Bosnia and Herzegovina and complicates regional relations. With this support, the Republic of Srpska becomes more vocal in denying the prerogatives of federal structures (state authorities in

¹⁴ Šefik Džaferović and Željko Komšić.

Sarajevo) and strengthens the separatist claims. This tunes very well with the Russian interest in disturbing the Euro-Atlantic perspective of Western Balkans countries.

In the case of Kosovo, strategic partnership with the US and Western orientation remain the cornerstones of its international positioning. Accordingly, Kosovo condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine by passing a parliamentary resolution in March 2022, while the representatives of Serbs left the session without voting (Prishtina Insight, 2022). As an aspiring country, it joined the EU sanctions against Russia, although Ukraine is not among the countries that recognized its independence, for reasons related to its own territorial integrity.

Serbia's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine reflects its ambivalent foreign policy, visible in its effort to balance between keeping friendly relations with Russia and its EU perspective on track at the same time. Officially, it condemned Russian aggression on several occasions, starting from the UN General Assembly resolutions to the recent declaration following the Tirana summit. However, Tirana's declaration does not mention sanctions against Russia or Russian malign influence, which President Vučić stated as a sort of his diplomatic success (Euronews. Serbia, 2024) and this serves as another argument in support of its ambiguous positions. In its official communications, Serbia follows the position of support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, however, a closer look at the important political actors' statements, as well as pro-regime media outlets, reveals that their sympathies are on the Russian side. Serbia resists harmonizing its foreign policy with that of the EU regarding this issue: "It maintained high-level relations with the Russian Federation, raising questions about Serbia's strategic direction" (European Commission, 2023a, p. 3). To date, it has not introduced any restrictive measures toward Russia as it refused to participate in the EU sanctions (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023)¹⁵. This significantly affects its credibility and the credibility of its declarative support for Ukraine, as well as its perspective on EU membership.

Despite differences in their response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, WB states supported all the resolutions of the UN General Assembly on the Russian-Ukrainian war which means that they are nominally against the violent change of the borders and violation of the sovereignty of Ukraine. All but Serbia, are taking part in EU sanctions imposed on Russia, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Srpska obstructs their full implementation. Russia's list of enemy/unfriendly countries includes almost all the countries of the region, except Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Euractiv, 2022), which can be seen as a countermeasure for the agreement of the former to join the EU sanctions, i.e. of the latter not to agree to them or to obstruct them.

¹⁵ 13th package of sanctions was adopted by the European Council on 24 February 2024 (European Commission, 2024)

Conclusion

Having in mind the fact that Croatia was the last country to join the EU more than ten years ago and that it has been more than twenty years since the EU's promise of the membership perspective for the WB, one has to assume that at the moment when the full-scale war returned to Europe, these facts open some important questions regarding the impact of this crisis on the future of the region and the influence and interests of non-Western powers in this part of Europe. The (slow) dynamics of the inclusion of the WB to the wider European and Euro-Atlantic security community has been influenced both by the factors stemming from the region itself and those stemming from the Euro-Atlantic structures, and it is one of the reasons that make the region fertile ground for Russian campaigns to create anti-Western sentiments.

As the aim of this paper was to examine if and how the Russian war in Ukraine affected countries in the Western Balkans, focusing on political and security dimensions, the analysis showed that different positions in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine indicate that Russian political influence is more prominent in certain countries than in others. In this respect, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro stand out. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this influence is the most critical, since it strengthens separatist aspirations in the Republic of Srpska, which can have a negative impact on the security of not only this country, but the WB, and on the security of the EU, given that the region is surrounded by EU territory. Even in the case of Serbia and Montenegro, the security implications of Russian political influence cannot be ruled out. In the case of Serbia, this mainly refers to the status of Kosovo, with Serbia relying on diplomatic and political support from Russia in contesting Kosovo's statehood, while at the same time returning loyalty to Russia by not imposing sanctions. This deepens the crisis in relations between Serbia and Kosovo with occasional escalations but also delays Serbia's EU accession process. Periods of political crisis in Montenegro indicate a deepening division into pro-European and pro-Serbian forces, as a result of Russian political influence, which prevents the nominally pro-European government from making faster progress towards EU membership.

The upcoming June 2024 European elections will be held in an atmosphere marked by the war in Ukraine with no end in sight, and it is very important to see how the next European Commission will approach the further enlargement policy to the WB. It will have the opportunity for the new interest/pragmatic-based approach towards the WB accession process. Otherwise, other external actors, primarily Russia (but also China, Arab countries, or Turkey), will likely tend to exploit the existing void in the institutionalization of EU-WB relations even more vigorously than thus far. The recent 6 billion euros worth of the EU growth plan for the Western Balkans seems as one of the recent efforts of the EU to further stabilize the region, politically and economically, and to bring it closer to what both sides (EU and WB countries) declare as ultimate goals. Namely, the EU repeatedly states WB is strategically important for the security of Europe as a whole, but whose own security/political dynamics present a

challenge for the EU. However, member states seem to remain divided over enlargement despite the general claim that it would be geopolitically wise to have WB countries as members. This caution can be seen as support for the argument that the WB is a security subcomplex of the wider European security complex, precisely because of its separate security dynamics, which since the early 1990s have been significantly different than in the integrated part of Europe, as was shown in the analysis of the influence of domestic/bilateral/multilateral issues and differing foreign policy objectives and security concepts as factors that affect the state of regional security. And while it can be argued that the WB represents a security subcomplex, the analysis indicates that among the actors in the region, some crucial features of the security community are missing, such as unified threat perception, common interests, or the sense of belonging to the region.

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