



# THE WESTERN BALKANS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE



This analysis reflects on Russia's aggression against Ukraine in regards to Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries in the Western Balkans

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# INTRODUCTION

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**N**umerous talks and diplomatic efforts have been launched in the past year to resolve the crisis in Ukraine, which intensified with the accumulation of Russian military forces near their shared border, but Putin has nevertheless opted for a classic military-political subjugation of Ukraine.

After recognizing the renegade regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states, he launched what is in fact the largest military offensive in Europe since World War II. Although Russia has been engaged in an unofficial conflict since Ukraine's first democratic revolution in 2004, and in an open war with the country since 2014, there had been no military escalations since the end of 2015 (except for minor breaches of the ceasefire which the OSCE has duly recorded). The conflict in Ukraine was almost "forgotten"; the Minsk agreements were mentioned on the eve of major world political events; the West tolerated the occupied and annexed territory of Ukraine by Russia as if it were a natural force majeure, and its sanctions and other responses were overly lukewarm and inconsistent.

Moreover the West, especially Angela Merkel's government, has continued to trade with the Russian regime and actively contribute to the Kremlin's economic and political goals.



# THREE CONTEXTUAL ASPECTS THAT LED TO RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

The Kremlin has been preparing and planning a Soviet-type intervention for a long time to overthrow the legitimately elected and democratic government in Ukraine, and was waiting for the most opportune timing. The circumstances that likely contributed to Moscow's assessment that now was the right time to attack (excluding any consideration of Vladimir Putin's health and psychophysical condition) can be divided into three sets.

## 1. THE OLD SOVIET NARRATIVE OF THE WEST'S WEAKNESS

In the first set we emphasize the foreign policy circumstances, primarily the atmosphere and state of politics in Western countries. As former (Yeltsin-era) Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev recently commented, Russia's political elite - especially Putin's circles - "became convinced of its own propaganda about US President Joe Biden as mentally incompetent" and about the weakness, disunity and decadence of Western countries. This old Soviet narrative about the "rotten West" - the apathy and weakness of its citizens, "sick societies" eroded by political "deviations" such as individualism, liberalism, free thought and the like - have remained dominant in Putin's Russia. This has only been further strengthened by the tepid reaction of the West to Putin's occupation of Crimea in 2014, but also by the images of the withdrawal of US and NATO missions from Afghanistan and the rapid disintegration of the pro-American government in Kabul in the summer of 2021. Plus the controversial agreement between the US and Germany in July 2021 by which Washington enabled the completion of Gazprom's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which would have bypassed Ukraine as a gas transit country had it become operational.

The fact that the West has been in political turmoil for a long time, viz. financial crisis, Brexit, refugee crisis, crisis of liberal democracy - as well as the crisis of the Covid 19 pandemic - has had its influence. In addition, over the past five years the Kremlin has tested the determination, unity and synchronicity of the European Union and NATO countries with its numerous military exercises, especially in Belarus and Serbia; the development of its own hypersonic ballistic and nuclear capabilities; its intensive military, military-technical and intelligence cooperation with Serbia; the intervention in Syria; its aggressive behavior in the Black Sea and Baltic basins; and its aggressive influence on the policies of states in the Caucasus and the Balkans. It turned out that not all Western countries equally understood the seriousness and danger of these activities and of Moscow's intentions. It turned out that the initial reactions of NATO countries to the accumulation of weapons and troops in Crimea and along the border with Ukraine since the spring of 2021 - and even the reaction to the recognition of independence and entry of Russian troops into the rebel regions of Donetsk and Luhansk - were deeply divided and catastrophically halfhearted. While European intelligence analysts believed Moscow would decide on limited intervention in Donbas and possibly in the Azov basin (something similar to what happened in 2014), European governments hoped that things would stop with expansion into the occupied and annexed territories and maintaining a frozen-status conflict in Ukraine, while they could continue doing business with Putin as they had after the annexation of Crimea. On the other hand when Russia, according to its own estimates, gained China's support for the operation to overthrow the government in Kiev, Putin saw this as the best moment to regain the old glory of the USSR and / or to start rebuilding the "Russian Empire" - something which cannot exist without Ukraine. This imperial reflex is a characteristic of all great powers that, at some point, are seen to be at the peak of their power.



## 2. THE KREMLIN'S BELIEF IN THE RENEWED POWER OF RUSSIA

Among the second set of circumstances we would point out the Kremlin's conviction regarding Russia's status as a world power under Putin. In a military, resource and energy sense this is the case - but it is not in a technological, economic, financial or demographic sense. Moscow is confident in the efficiency and decisive role of its hybrid, intelligence-security, media-disinformation and military-political capacities and operations - especially those on show in Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014. The annexation of Crimea is considered the best example of a hybrid war in recent times. Through a combination of military, diplomatic, economic and information factors, Crimea became part of Russian territory practically overnight.<sup>1</sup> The lackluster reaction to this by the West has further strengthened Moscow's belief in a global dependence on its raw materials and energy sources. Furthermore, Moscow's successes in cooperating with neoconservative, *alt-right* and ultra-right political and media elements in the West itself, along with its capacity for hybrid (primarily cyber and disinformation) activities, have been used to invade the US electoral system in 2016 and were of crucial influence in the election of Donald Trump as President. At the turn of 2021 this resulted in an attack by Trump supporters on the US constitutional system, threatening the US electoral process and the will of its citizens. The attempt to undermine confidence in democratic procedure has the potential to lead to civil strife in an extremely plural and liberal society, but one which is also highly segmented and polarized.

Moscow has also been intensively conducting diplomatic and hybrid, subversive and soft power campaigns for the last decade in order to position itself in the countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Its political and intelligence maneuvers, especially in NATO member countries, could destabilize the alliance and undermine the basic unity of member states. It is worth mentioning the coup attempts in Montenegro in 2016 and Northern Macedonia in 2017, as well as Kremlin support for Milorad Dodik's secessionist policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the open threat made to the peace of BiH were the country to decide to join NATO. Moscow has worked diligently to support more or less pro-Russian governments, such as Orban in Hungary and Vučić in Serbia, Krivokapić and Abazović in Montenegro, Nikola Gruevski in northern Macedonia or Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria. It likewise lends support to pro-Russian megaphones such as French ultra-rightist Marine Le Pen, Czech President Miloš Zeman, Croatian President Milanović and others. Russia has invested a lot in the establishment of far-right and patriotic groups and parties, national organizations, cultural and research centers, media outlets and armies of bots and portals on social media - especially in Slavic countries. Depending on the socio-political characteristics of each country Moscow, using information, culture and religion as weapons by exploiting Russophile sentiments, corruption and the closeness of Slavic languages and cultural practices, has tried to impose a Russian political discourse and grand narrative over public and political life. This set of circumstances also encompasses the Kremlin's belief in the capabilities of its

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the hybrid operations conducted by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, i.e. a part of its territory such as Crimea, see: Kico, A .. Kapetanović, M. (2019) *Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans - Aspects of the Geopolitics and Hybrid War*, Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, page 13.





own military arsenal (especially nuclear) and in the standard of modernization, training, equipment and sufficiency of its military capacity. Confidence in the adequacy and correctness of the Gerasimov doctrine of hybrid and limited warfare, and in the success of its development strategies and doctrine of the use of naval, air-space, nuclear and ground forces, has been especially nurtured.

### 3. UNDERESTIMATION OF UKRAINE

The third set of circumstances that contributed to Putin's decision to go to war includes Moscow's assessments about Ukraine itself. More precisely, the state of mind and self-identification of Ukrainian peoples; the character of the country's democracy and its political freedoms and aspirations; the general mood in Ukrainian society and politics; and the attitude of Ukrainian citizens towards Russia and the authorities in Kiev. Plus its estimation of the security and defense capacities of Ukraine - especially in terms of media/information and cyber capacities, as well as the morale levels of Ukrainian troops and the availability of an able-bodied (military-age) population.

In terms of the invasion so far, it is evident that strategists and analysts in Moscow had made wrong and incomplete estimates, as well as having only modest insight into almost every aspect of these appraisals. It seems strategists satisfied themselves with empty stats on the number of generals and pieces of equipment when determining the superiority of the Russian military apparatus over the Ukrainian one.

This set also certainly includes what was perhaps a key factor in Putin's decision. That is the refusal of Russia's political, ecclesiastical and intellectual elite to accept Ukraine as a free and independent nation from Russia - sharing a common history and culture, but not part of the Russian nation. Analysts also point out the emotional attachment of Putin and his circle to the historical power of the former USSR, and their deep frustration at its collapse (followed by the economic and political collapse of the Russian Federation in the 1990s). They are intimately convinced about the non-existence of an independent Ukrainian nation, and they believed their propagandists that Ukraine is actually ruled by a neo-Nazi-Banderist junta, and that a significant part of Ukrainians - especially Russophones - seek liberation from them and wish this to be delivered by the Russian army.

This conviction about the need to "denazify" Ukraine has filtered right down to the level of Russian soldiers and ordinary citizens in the last six months via state propaganda, so it is not surprising that captured Russian soldiers seem convinced that they came not to fight against Ukrainians but to liberate them from "Nazis". Moreover, in 2004 - and especially after the removal of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and the famous events on the Maidan in February 2014 - Putin saw Washington as manipulating events in Ukraine, but also believed Ukraine could no longer be brought under Moscow's sphere of influence without the application of force. That is why the hybrid war against Ukraine began, the first phase of which ended with the annexation of Crimea and the creation of separatist 'people's republics' in Donetsk and Luhansk.



What makes Putin's regime especially tense about a free and independent Ukraine which refuses to follow Moscow's policies is the direction of travel on two key issues among the vast majority of Ukrainian society. The first is the acceptance that Ukraine, as a society and a political system, is developing along the lines of liberal social values, the free market and a democratic order. The second is a desire for Ukraine to join the political and economic bloc of the EU and the military bloc of NATO, thus providing a long-term geopolitical environment for that development. Both of these decisions by Ukrainian society were democratically and legitimately projected at the last election in the character of President Zelensky, for whom a convincing majority of people voted. That is why Zelensky, as well as his family and the government of Ukraine, were declared the primary target of Russian aggression. For Putin's regime, therefore, the mortal danger is not Ukraine as a state, but the democratic processes taking place within it whose influence could spill over to their fraternal Russian neighbors at any point and threaten power in the Kremlin.

From the Kremlin's point of view, it has become too risky to wait for a burgeoning democracy and the liberal enthusiasm of young Ukrainians to evolve into NATO and EU membership. The current aggression against Ukraine is, therefore, a clear indicator of the very rational goals of Putin's regime: Putin does not plan to give up on taking Kiev, removing the democratically elected state leadership and establishing a puppet pro-Russian government; nor does he plan to abandon the historic project of returning "centuries-old Russian" territories to within the auspices of the Kremlin and Ukraine, even at the cost of destroying the history and memory of an entire people. Putin also does not plan to give up tightening the vise of his own dictatorship on Russian citizens and society, and to brutally block any flow of democratic influence into Russia. Finally, he does not plan to give up the occupation of Ukrainian territory and the destruction of its infrastructure in order to permanently prevent Ukraine from becoming a member of the EU and NATO.

## **4. THE IRRATIONAL ATTITUDE OF THE WEST AND PUTIN'S RATIONALIZATION**

The goal, therefore, is a loyal vassal in a formally independent but now Russian Ukraine, which will serve as a sociological trench around the "empire" as it slides into tyranny. Russia needs a satellite Ukraine, something like Belarus, in order for the Kremlin to show its subjects and the world that the "empire" is not a fairytale but something that exists as a reality. Putin's seeming unpredictability to the Western mode of thinking - that he will never do something that does not benefit him - has hit the West hard. What seems irrational and illegitimate to the West, in the political climate and language of the Kremlin may seem quite rational and legitimate. Although data from Western intelligence services, especially the US, warned that an attack was real and possible, even inevitable, Western political elites again demonstrated their lack of alertness (while being focused on maintaining business with the Kremlin) and their confidence that they share a reality with Putin. But they don't.



The fact that Putin's rationale for conquering Ukraine does not coincide with the decision-making rationale of Western countries does not mean that Putin is acting irrationally. The researchers may also find irrational the attitude of the West that Putin's rationalization of Ukraine's significance for Russia in terms of the economic, military-strategic, identity and historical importance will not prevail in favor of the war option, which he ultimately opted for. Putin, based on what for him are rational motives - the most rational of which is the inadmissible influence of Ukrainian democracy and its geostrategic choices - made a risky move to restore the power of the former Soviet Union, something which is likely to prove catastrophic for Russia in the long run.

The question remains as to why Western governments have yet to recall the events of more than 20 years ago, when official Belgrade's military-police intervention in its southern province in 1998-99 (which was in fact a general attack on the Albanian population and the political and militant movement of the Kosovo Liberation Army) was initiated and pursued by a dictatorial regime - despite the most serious warnings from the most powerful Western countries and NATO that it would expose a small country to sanctions and military intervention. The West saw this as irrational, while for the regime in Belgrade it was a rational response to the urgency and nature of the problem as seen by the aggressor.

The only timely and strategically justified reaction has come from the Pentagon, which last year initiated several key military exercises by NATO member states' land, air and naval forces, with NATO partners, focusing on potential war scenarios in the Black Sea basin, Ukraine, the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean.



# REFLECTIONS ON THE WESTERN BALKANS AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bearing all of the above in mind, here we can only hint at an answer to whether Russia's general aggression against Ukraine - as a security and defense crisis - might spill over into BiH and the Western Balkans and if so, how. In the attempt we will draw several parallels between Russia's actions in Ukraine and its neighborhood, and the actions of its most loyal ally Serbia in the Western Balkans, and particularly in BiH.

## 1. CONTINUOUS DESTABILIZATION: RUSSIA'S STRATEGY AND PARTNERS IN THE BALKANS

As the first parallel between the crisis in the Balkans and the crisis in Ukraine, we mention Russia's strategic interest in **not permitting any of these regions to achieve long-term stability in the form of democratization and the liberalization of the society and economy.** For example by strengthening human and political rights institutions and the rule of law, reducing corruption and political clientelism, or the accession of these regions to the Western economic, political and defense alliances. Moscow's real interest lies in the constant maintenance of tensions, exploiting existing and fueling new territorial, border and ethnic disputes, and maintaining frozen conflicts by which Moscow can retain its influence. As with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, the Balkans is an important geostrategic space at which the interests of Russia and the West intersect. Like Ukraine and the Caucasus, the countries of the Western Balkans are not part of the Western security architecture or its economic or political community. Even almost thirty years after the end of the war the region has found no political formula or wisdom with which to face the past and build reconciliation and trust. It is still in constant turmoil, handicapped by inter-ethnic tensions, weak institutions and a flawed democracy.

Taking advantage of linguistic, cultural and religious ties, Russia has strongly positioned its media-information, cultural-religious and intelligence presence and influence in the Western Balkans (as well as in Ukraine and other Slavic countries such as Croatia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Russian and pro-Russian media such as Sputnik, RT, Geopolitics, Pravda, in4S and others have been active in Serbia, Montenegro and BiH since 2012 and have so far successfully imposed anti-democratic and anti-Western narratives on the majority of the population, while turning some domestic political actors into their spokespersons and puppets. After years of thus creating a favorable cultural and information climate, Moscow has shown its determination in the Balkans to pursue subversive activities that undermine the democratic progress of these countries and their accession to NATO and the EU, or to undermine democratic and electoral processes or the implementation of election results.<sup>2</sup> The coup attempts in Montenegro on election day 2016 and in Northern Macedonia the following year are glaring examples of this. Since the Ukrainian revolutions in 2004 and the Maidan in 2014, Putin's regime has been in fear of democratically and freely

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2 On the importance and significance of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to bodies such as the EU and NATO, especially from a security aspect, see more detail in: Kico, A. (2021). "Security and Economic Aspects of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Accession to Euro-Atlantic Integration" in, Proceedings Security and Society, Banja Luka: CKM Mostar, Union College in Mostar, European Defendology Center for Scientific, Political, Economic, Social, Security, Sociological and Criminological Research, Banja Luka, p. 119.





elected authorities and the so-called color revolutions, which it accuses the West of instigating. This fear is limited not only to Russia's immediate neighborhood but also to the Balkans, because the departure of autocratic pro-Russian authorities would significantly reduce its influence in this area, which would lead to the stabilization of the region.

The current regime of Aleksandar Vučić operates along the same lines of curbing democracy and human rights, of course within the limits of possibility. Moscow and the regime in Belgrade made a joint assessment after the victory of Joe Biden that the United States would commence with the so-called export of democracy, and that a joint effort is needed to defend against that influence. Meetings were held on several occasions in 2021 between the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Platonovich Patrushev, and the Serbian Minister of the Interior, Aleksandar Vulin, which resulted in a strategic partnership agreement. According to some sources<sup>3</sup>, Russia and Serbia have formed a top-secret 'Working Group to Combat Colored Revolutions' which has the task of preventing mass demonstrations, the constant monitoring of opposition activists, NGOs and independent journalists (those from Serbia and those from Russia, Eastern and Southeastern Europe), and the exchange of information with each other. The first results of this agreement were visible in recent revelations about the Serbian intelligence community spying on Russian opposition activists in Belgrade and sending the collected data to the Kremlin.

Clearly the Kremlin could not wait too long or allow too much democratization and modernization to take place in Ukraine, and so it decided to replace its hybrid actions towards curbing democratic processes, with military ones. As happened recently in Kazakhstan, the Kremlin has shown that it is ready to act militarily to protect its interests if democratic processes slip out of the hands of pro-Kremlin autocrats. The question is whether Russia and its ally (the regime in Belgrade) will be able to forestall democratic processes in the foreseeable future by using street violence, (para) military force or coup tactics - especially in any context which could lead to the removal of pro-Kremlin governments, such as those in Montenegro, Belgrade or the RS entity.

## 2. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH OF SERBIA IN THE RUSSIFICATION OF THE SERBIAN NARRATIVE

Another parallel between Eastern Europe and the Caucasus on the one hand, and the Balkans on the other, is the manipulation of **interethnic disputes and frozen conflicts as a means of conducting foreign policy by both Moscow and Belgrade**. Russia's approach to the post-Soviet arena shows a pattern of abuse of minority populations in Russia, or the exploitation of interethnic disputes in which Moscow has mediated or participated mainly by creating secession or renegade regions within former Soviet states - such as Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Ka-

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/vulin-i-patrusev-srbija-i-rusija-zajedno-protiv-obojenih-revolucija/> (pristup 2. marta 2022).



rabakh, and most recently Donetsk and Luhansk. With Russia's growing power and influence, the Kremlin is increasingly deciding to recognize these secessionist creations as "independent states", effectively blocking political decision-making and foreign policy initiatives in countries to which these areas belong under international law.

Like Russia, Serbia misused "Serbian national issues" during the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and faked the threat to Serbs in order to legitimize an open attack on the republics of Croatia and BiH and create outlawed and ethnically cleansed and unrecognized territories. But with one important difference: the entity of Republika Srpska (RS) was created by Serbia, but Western democracies have recognized and legalized its existence as an inseparable part of BiH - along with all the war symbols, narratives, RS army and police and other competencies with which the RS is today hampering key reforms and the processes towards Euro-Atlantic integration -thus naively allowing a *de facto* freeze of the conflict. Today Moscow, Belgrade and Banja Luka are using the RS entity construct in BiH for their own ends and, via support for secessionist policies, are rehabilitating Serbia's 1990 war policy while blocking BiH's entry into NATO and threatening BiH's survival as a functional, comprehensive and sovereign state.

In Montenegro joint efforts by Belgrade and Moscow successfully spread propaganda about the endangerment of Serbs and the Church of Serbia which, along with intelligence and material support for Litany processes prior to the 2020 elections, helped overthrow the pro-Western incumbent and install a pro-Russian and pro-Belgrade puppet government in Podgorica. Belgrade and Moscow are also working together to isolate Kosovo from international organizations, the EU and NATO. Belgrade is using the same demands as the Kremlin in relation to Donbas, calling for the widest possible territorial autonomy of the Serb community in Kosovo in order to influence the key decisions of the authorities in Priština, especially on Euro-Atlantic integration, via the competencies granted to such ethno-territorial communities.

Russia, like Serbia, exerts its influence on compatriot ethno-religious communities through the concept of "soft power". Since 2012 cultural centers have been established in the Western Balkans, such as the Russian House in Belgrade or the Russian Cultural Center in Banja Luka, but also the so-called Serbian houses in Podgorica. "Russian villages" and Serbian-Russian Orthodox religious centers and media are being built, while openly pro-Russian parties are entering parliaments. Over time Russia's "soft power" has grown unhindered, becoming more networked and more violent, but also hidden behind local proxies. These proxies manifest in groups such as local branches of the motorcycle gang "Night Wolves"; Serbian-Russian fraternal societies in RS; patronage fraternities related to Montenegrin monasteries which are monopolized by the Church of Serbia; right-wing groups such as "Zavetnik" or "Serbian Honor"; and numerous Serbian veterans' organizations and Serbian-Russian religious-militant camps for the radicalization and pre-war training of children and youth from Serbia, RS and Montenegro. By far the most important role in shifting opinion in the direction of Russia's interests (i.e. in the Russification of narratives and identities for patriotic populations in Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and part of BiH) is played by the Church of Serbia - which is the most similar and the closest to the Moscow Patriarchate in terms of



political activity, ideological coordinates and aims. It is not impossible that, in the absence of democratic and historically unadulterated narratives, Serbia's political and religious elite will succeed in cementing irrational narratives about Montenegrins and Bosniaks or Bosnians as "non-existent" or "fictional" peoples among the majority of Western Balkan citizens who declare themselves Serbs, and about BiH and Montenegro as being "fake" and "artificial" states. Similar, in other words, to Russian propaganda about Ukrainians. The question is whether Serbian nationalist political elites in the Balkans, like Putin's oligarchy, would sink into an irrationalism that completely blurs their sense of reality (as in the 1990s) and dares them to join Putin's war campaign by organizing the escalation of interethnic violence and secessionism in the region.

### 3. SERBIA AS A KEY RUSSIAN PLATFORM: "SERBIAN WORLD" AS A CARBON COPY OF "RUSSIAN WORLD"

The third parallel between the war in Ukraine and the crisis in the Balkans lies in the threat of **military escalation and arms accumulation** by Russia in Ukraine and Serbia in the Balkans, and in the **intensive military-technical and military-security cooperation between Belgrade and Moscow**.

Within that context we point to the urgent and large scale arming and modernization of the Serbian army and police over the past five years, mainly from Russian and Chinese military industries, on which Serbia has spent more than four billion dollars. Serbia's new arsenal includes donations of six Russian and four Belarusian MiG 29 fighter planes whose modernization was paid for along with four other domestic aircraft. Russia has also donated 30 T-72B1MS main battle tanks and 30 BRDM-2MS armored battle vehicles; one "Pancir S1" air defense battery; eight Mi-35M attack helicopters purchased or ordered from Russia plus 11 Mi-35P from Cyprus; eight Mi-17V-5 transport helicopters purchased or ordered so far; nine Airbus H-145M helicopters, four for the police and five for the Serbian Army; 50 Mistral 3 light anti-aircraft guns; the Russian "Cornet" anti-tank weapon; and two batteries of Chinese CH-92A combat drones. In addition to these imports, Serbia's military arsenal has been significantly increased by new or modernized domestic industry products, such as the multi-purpose armored vehicles BOV-16 Miloš, OBVT Lazar 3, BVP Lazanski, OT M-21 and MRAP M-20; DUBP Miloš land drones; modernized versions of BOV KIV, M83 and M86 combat vehicles and BVP M-80AB1 tracked vehicles; modernized versions of the M-84AS1 / M-84AS2 tank; the new Pasars 16 anti-aircraft system; 12 Pegasus combat drones made in Serbia and China; new generations of self-propelled howitzers (M09 105 mm, Nora B-52 155 mm and 2S1 Nail 122 mm) and top howitzer (Sora 122 mm and MGS 25 Alexander 155 mm); new generations of the modular multi-barrel missile systems Oganj M18, Morava, Alas, Šumadija and Tamnava (with modernized missiles Grad 122 mm, Tamnava 267 mm, Jerina-1 400 mm and Jerina-2 262 mm and others); new generations of domestic guided surface-to-surface missiles (Alas, Košava 1 and 2),





anti-tank missiles (Nova, Spider), surface-to-air missiles (RLN-IC 170) and air-to-ground missiles (Ralas, VRVZ-24 and VRVZ-200, E-24-A1, Košava 3 TM and 3 RM, the laser guided LVB-250F bomb, semi-active laser guided M-16D missiles, S-8LGR guided missiles; and new generations of combat drones (Raven 145 and Raven 2 kamikaze drone, Sparrow reconnaissance drone, Hornet helicopter drone). Despite fears in the Balkans that the strengthening of the Serbian military could lead to new tensions in the region, Serbia is also planning new acquisitions of military systems, including two more batteries and a more modern Pancir S1M system; a further 10 military versions of the Airbus H-145M helicopter; an unknown number of new Chinese CH-95A combat drones; a Krasuha 2/4 mobile system for radio-electronic warfare; the Chinese anti-aircraft system FK3; three H-215 Superpump special police helicopters; two C-295 transport aircraft; two Kamov 32 helicopters for firefighting purposes; more Cornet anti-tank guns, and more Mistral anti-aircraft guns. To this should be added the efforts of the RS regime to arm and militarize the RS police (through the establishment of the Gendarmerie military police formation, the procurement of military uniforms, helmets and armor, the procurement of Russian helicopters, military infantry weapons, military snipers, grenade launchers, armored vehicles, and combat vehicles with large caliber military grade automatic weapons), or to revive the military industry in RS through domestic investments (viz. overhauling the TRB Bratunac plant, announcing the opening of a military industry plant in Banja Luka), or by selling companies to Serbia (e.g. the "Zrak" Teslic company), or through cooperation with the Serbia's military complex (e.g. the Kosmos Banja Luka company and the Orao Bijeljina Aviation Institute). Finally, it should not be forgotten that the training of RS special police and gendarmerie and helicopter pilots takes place in both Serbia and Russia, while Russian military and security instructors are often engaged in both Serbia and the RS. No one can guarantee that members of the Wagner Group did not take part in these trainings and visits.

In this context we should remind ourselves that Serbia, according to analysis by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, is recognized as a recruiting center for mercenary formations on many battlefields around the world acting on the side of Russian interests. Serbia's growing self-confidence in the region, its new military arsenal, and its neutrality as based on military and military-technical cooperation with Russia and China cannot be denied or ignored. It could be said that the threshold of risk tolerance for Serbia and the "Serbian world" has been significantly raised. This gives official Belgrade more room for risk, the threat of military force, and blackmail in international relations. Serbia has shown this recently - on the border with Kosovo - by demonstrating force on the line of contact between the Serbian army and NATO troops, at the same time as Moscow was accumulating troops on the border with Ukraine and preparing for attack.

Thus Serbia has positioned itself as a key platform for Russian interests in the strategically important area of the Black Sea basin hinterland, driving a wedge between NATO's eastern and southern defensive wings. It should be noted that Serbia, in its foreign policy relations with the region, is increasingly introducing and adapting Russian doctrine in its post-Soviet environment. As with Russia and the post-Soviet states, Serbia has also not, within its modest capabilities, renounced its influence over the post-Yugoslav states - and for both countries military power is the foundation of that influence.



In fact Russia has - through cooperation in the field of defense and security, energy and economy, joint intelligence and hybrid operations in the Balkans, the integration of the "Serbian world" and the "Open Balkans" initiatives into the "Russian world" (essentially a sphere of influence based on ethnic and religious affiliation) - set Serbia and the RS entity up as its main allies in the heart of Europe, and the main anti-democratic and anti-NATO agents in the region. In this way Russia is able, through Serbia, RS and pro-Serbian forces in Montenegro and Kosovo, to control or at least significantly influence all processes in the Western Balkans. We should not, therefore, dismiss the possibility that if the regime in Belgrade or Banja Luka, in the event of a major crisis or armed conflict on the periphery of the EU, were to ask Russia for military assistance it would receive it were it in Russia's strategic interest. The American analyst Janos Bugajski believes that in the event of an armed conflict in the Balkans, Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić could ask for military help from Russia<sup>4</sup>. This assistance would be reflected in the supply of weapons and military equipment, the training of paramilitary units and the posting of members of the 'Wagner Group'<sup>5</sup> to Serbia, RS, Kosovo or Montenegro. Some analysts go so far as to warn about the potential engagement of private armies, with Democratic Congressman Bill Keating, chairman of a congressional subcommittee which held a hearing on US engagement in the Balkans, advising of this possibility in October 2021. Congressman Keating stated that "there is a potential military threat to Bosnia and Herzegovina, including the engagement of notorious foreign private armies, which creates the need to strengthen NATO's presence in the region". He added, "if there is any threat from groups like the Wagner Group or Little Green People<sup>6</sup>, I believe we will be vigilant and ready to act quickly."<sup>7</sup> The statement by Branimir Nešić<sup>8</sup>, the Balkans regional head of the 'Russian Humanitarian Mission' NGO, that "in the case of a natural disaster there is a possibility of direct assistance from the Russian Federation" should be seen in this light.

A demonstration of Moscow's ability and readiness to organize the arrival of military transport in BiH - in cooperation with BiH Presidency member Milorad Dodik and HDZ BiH leader Dragan Čović - was given less than two years ago. Using the pandemic as part of its deception, the Russian military - falsely declaring it as a civilian flight - landed a plane at Banja Luka airport on April 9,

4 [https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/231594/sokantne\\_najave\\_iz\\_washingtona\\_od\\_tri\\_opcije\\_najizgledniji\\_je\\_rat\\_kojim\\_bi\\_se\\_ukinuli\\_dayton\\_kantoni\\_entiteti\\_video.html](https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/vijest/231594/sokantne_najave_iz_washingtona_od_tri_opcije_najizgledniji_je_rat_kojim_bi_se_ukinuli_dayton_kantoni_entiteti_video.html)- [https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/tagovi/27362/janusz\\_bugajski.html#str-1](https://www.slobodna-bosna.ba/tagovi/27362/janusz_bugajski.html#str-1) (pristup 5. marta 2022).

5 The Russian paramilitary Wagner Group is a unit of the Russian Ministry of Defense and / or GRU, used covertly by the Russian government in conflicts or where it wants to hide its presence, since its forces train at Russian Ministry of Defense capacities and infrastructure.

6 "Little Green Men" refers to masked soldiers of the Russian Federation in unmarked green military uniforms, wearing modern Russian military weapons, who appeared during the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, and during the annexation of Crimea.

7 <https://ba.voanews.com/a/kongresmen-keating-treba-razmotriti-svaku-opciju-protiv-onih-koji-prijete-daytonskom-mirov-nom-sporazumu-/6287582.html> (March 7, 2022).

8 The 'Russian Humanitarian Mission' Representative Office for the Balkans is based in Belgrade. Its director is Yevgeny Primakov, the grandson of former Russian Prime Minister Y. Primakov, and a member of the Russian Duma. He was Putin's commissioner in the 2018 presidential election. He was banned from entering Ukraine.



2020 carrying an entire military medical formation. A similar attempt was made on May 1, when a Russian military medical convoy was supposed to enter BiH at the Rača border crossing on its way to Mostar.

What does this complex security and political situation in BiH mean now, in the context of the war in Ukraine? Moscow had two springboards for aggression in Ukraine: Donbas and Crimea; it has five such potential launchpads from which to provoke interethnic and interstate conflicts in the Balkans: Serbia, RS, western Herzegovina, northern Kosovo and northern Montenegro. Furthermore, it could be concluded that Vučić's regime, and himself personally - perhaps more than Moscow itself - has been shocked by the failure of the Russian military operation as originally conceived, and by the Russian losses, the resistance of Ukraine, and the unique and harsh Western sanctions (especially considering their impact on the Western economy). If Moscow had been more successful in seizing Kiev and overthrowing the democratically elected government, it is possible that the regimes in Belgrade and Banja Luka - with the Kremlin's encouragement and paramilitary assistance - would already be organizing street riots and parliamentary or plebiscite decisions (in RS on its secession from BiH, and in Montenegro on leaving NATO) which could then turn into rebel coups and the usurpation of state institutions. Would it be naive to exclude such a scenario in the coming year? In the context of prolonged political crisis, the security situation in BiH has become so complicated following the attack on Ukraine that NATO and EUFOR commands have decided to significantly increase the military presence in and around BiH and introduce airspace surveillance missions over the entire Western Balkans, except Serbia.



# **CONCLUDING REMARKS: THREE DESTABILIZATION FACTORS FOR THE BALKANS**



# 1. THREATS OF SECESSION AND THE DISSOLUTION OF BiH

In concluding our comparison between the current war in Ukraine and the crisis in BiH some important parallels can be drawn. The fact is that, regardless of the outcome of Russia's aggression on Ukraine, **the Balkans - and especially BiH, Serbia and Montenegro - remain key Russian levers for destabilizing the region, NATO and the EU, similar to Crimea and Ukraine.** In the case of Ukraine this situation could last a decade or more, while in the case of the Balkans it will remain so until these societies democratize and manage to suppress or at least reduce the influence of Russia - along with the prevalence of anti-liberal ideologies, ethno-exclusivist narratives, nationalist and religious radicalism and various forms of intolerance. Similar to the case of Ukraine, there are three focal points or problems whose gradual addressing would help prevent Russia's destructive influence in the Balkans, especially in BiH: 1. Democratization and institution building; 2. Regional consensus on the immutability of borders, inviolability of territorial integrity and state sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs between the states of the region; 3. Achieving social, economic and technological progress and integration into the EU and NATO as soon as possible.

The issue of the inviolability of borders, especially its mutual recognition by Serbia and Kosovo, remains a major security and development issue for the entire region. Occasional announcements of new agreements on territorial exchange, change and the political correction of the borders of post-Yugoslav states are reminiscent of Russia's violent "correction" of its borders with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova - i.e. such a "correction of history" does not exclude new conflicts and turbulence. In that sense, Milorad Dodik has never hidden the open or silent support received from Russia and Serbia for RS secessionist aspirations, the blockade of state institutions, the denial of BiH statehood and territorial integrity, the denial of a Bosniak and Bosnian nation or people in BiH, attacks on the BiH constitutional order through the formation of the RS army, and the usurpation of the sovereignty and competencies of the BiH state by the RS entity. These dynamics were underlined in the undiplomatic statements by the Russian Ambassador to BiH, Igor Kalabukhov, who views the "return of authority" as a so-called return to the original Dayton agreement, presenting it as a democratic process and seeing nothing contradictory to the terms of Dayton in Dodik's idea of an "independent Srpska within BiH". Constant threats of secession and the so-called peaceful dissolution of BiH are directly conditioned by the support/pressure coming from official Moscow, as stated in a recent report by the US Senate Military Committee. It is already known that the instructions of Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to Milorad Dodik, a few days after the beginning of the attack on Ukraine, went in the direction of declaring RS independence - to be followed by its recognition by Russia and its unrecognized puppet regimes.

The precursor to the attack on Ukraine was the recognition of the independence of renegade Ukrainian regions, and changes in the borders of a sovereign and independent state - while the aggression itself was an act of explicit denial of Ukraine's borders, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and an act of denial of Ukrainians as a nation.



## 2. PREVENTING EU AND NATO PRESENCE IN THE BALKANS

Another objective in the attack on Ukraine is without doubt the bringing to power of a government that would steer Ukraine towards first a NATO-neutral and then an anti-NATO position. Moscow has similar goals across this region: moving BiH and Kosovo off the path to NATO membership, and ensuring Montenegro's membership remains *de facto* frozen and without tangible effects on the ground. Last year's statement by Ambassador Kalabukhov that "Russia will be forced to take hostile steps in the event of a practical rapprochement between BiH and NATO", saying this was their last "warning" and BiH officials should "think carefully" about integration into NATO, sounds particularly ominous now following Russia's bombing of Ukrainian cities and killing of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers. Previously Russia had mostly disagreed with BiH's integration into NATO. But today this statement and the bombs falling on Ukraine speak another language - they suggest that Russia does not want to leave control of this part of the Balkans to the West, and perhaps at the cost of opening further new conflicts in Europe, especially in BiH and Montenegro. Regardless of how the war in Ukraine ends and whether Putin's position will be weaker or stronger in its wake, or some new "security forces" will take power, we can already hypothesise that in the long term Belgrade, Dodik and the pro-Serbian factors in Montenegro will not give up on their aspirations to change the borders of the Balkans i.e. the 'statehood' and independence of the RS entity, and the creation of an independent autonomous region of north Montenegro and Kosovo, with its possible later annexation to Serbia. Depending on how the situation in Ukraine develops (especially in the south in terms of the Russian army's advance towards Odessa and Transnistria) there is a possibility that Moscow will, before taking Kyiv, conquer Odessa and the Danube Delta by threatening to deploy tactical nuclear weapons, and use military coercion in Moldova and Georgia to subjugate those countries. And perhaps even threaten hybrid incursions into NATO and EU territory, primarily Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary. In such a scenario there is a possibility that Moscow would ensure the complete submission of Bulgaria and Hungary in order to facilitate military access to the Western Balkans. Then Moscow would have no obstacle to exploiting the territory, church and pro-Russian sentiment of Serbia's society and state apparatus in order to launch further military aggression against Montenegro, BiH, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Croatia.

## 3. TRANSFER OF THE CONFLICT FROM UKRAINE TO THE BALKANS?

In another more limited scenario, it is possible to imagine Moscow, due to unfavorable developments in Ukraine, deciding to establish a direct (para) military presence in Serbia, Montenegro and RS by transferring troops on civilian flights from Russia and Belarus directly to these countries (given that they are the only countries in the region and across Europe which have not suspended flights coming or going from Russia, or aircraft connected to Russia). No one would oppose the



presence of Russian troops in the states mentioned, or in the RS entity - on the contrary. Unlike Ukraine, the majority of the population has great sympathy for Russia and has been pretty indoctrinated into seeing Russia's military presence as a chance to successfully correct their own borders and history throughout the region. In this context it's worth noting the 2021 military exercise "Slavic Shield" in which Serbia, Belarus and Russia participated, which was held at the airport in Batajnica near Belgrade at the end of last year. The availability of airports, runways and heliports in Serbia, but also RS and Montenegro, for such scenarios is practically a given. Western strategists and policy makers need to understand the strategic but also the local context i.e. the carefully prepared Russophile climate in Serbia, Montenegro and RS within which Russia could at least attempt to carry out this type of very rapid intrusion. Intimidation and threats of military force and armed attacks are necessary to secure the subordination of the former Soviet states to Moscow (except Armenia) - while in terms of the Kremlin's interests, the simple fact of the Russian army's sudden appearance (without entering into conflict mode) would be enough to subjugate Serbia, Montenegro and the RS. The question is whether Russia might have an interest - during this phase of the war in Ukraine or in the near future - in transferring instability and conflict to the Western Balkans.

Within this region Moscow already has "cooked societies"<sup>9</sup> and political and security apparatuses available to exploit, plus the opportunity to inflame interethnic tensions and encourage secessionism in order to ignite local conflicts involving three, perhaps four NATO members (Croatia, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia, and perhaps Albania). Russia could try to shift the focus of the crisis in Ukraine from its own neighborhood, as it did after the occupation of Crimea and parts of Ukraine when it got involved in the war in Syria. Ultimately this would open up a new conflict - a new front to the rear of NATO - which could rattle the readiness and will of NATO members in the region (including Hungary and Bulgaria) to participate in decision-making within NATO bodies, or even to continue with active military engagement in NATO operations. This fits with the strategic goals of the Kremlin, which believes it necessary to destabilize the West in order to keep it away from its own borders.

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<sup>9</sup> "Cooked societies" in Serbia and the RS entity are the result of a hybrid war that primarily takes place in the communication and information domain, which implies *taking control of the target's thought and decision-making processes*. When you take control of a target's strategy, then you take control of the decision-making process. The opponent is put in a situation of making decisions that benefit you and harm themselves. At the point when the development of information and communication systems reaches such a level that the application, management, use and manipulation of information and media affects the goal, then the conditions are created for these non-kinetic lethal means to overtake the kinetic. Russian hybrid actions in Serbia, the RS entity, and in part in Montenegro, has put most citizens as well as political leaders in a position to make decisions in favor of Russia rather than Serbia, the RS entity or Montenegro. For more on this see: Kico, A., Japalak, A. (2021). "Non-paper diplomacy, one of the most sophisticated methods of hybrid action against the Western Balkans, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina", In: *Proceedings Science, Society and Uncertainty*, Banja Luka: CCM Mostar, Union College in Mostar, European Defendology Center for Science, Political, Economic, Social, Security, Sociological and Criminological Research, Banja Luka, p. 104.



# **RAT U UKRAJINI I ZAPADNI BALKAN**