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## **THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE WESTERN BALKANS**

### **Resume**

The war in Ukraine represents a turning point in international relations that significantly affects the common foreign and security policy of the European Union. By taking place on European soil and mainly between Russia and Ukraine, it really indirectly affects several countries united in two important entities, the European Union and NATO. In this paper, we will deal with the analysis of the impact of the war in Ukraine on the countries of the Western Balkans, which are in a significant geopolitical position and have developed relations with Russia in the fields of foreign policy, security, and energy. The work aims to contribute to the understanding of the implications that are happening and that may arise in the domain of internal and foreign policy of the Western Balkan countries, and especially regional relations, as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. In the first part of the paper, attention is paid to a theoretical explanation of war and realism in international relations which could be implied to this war. Furthermore, a brief overview of the political events that led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine will be presented in order to understand the next chapter, which is dedicated to considering the response of each Western Balkan state to the beginning of the war and the events that came as a result of it.

**Keywords:** war, Ukraine, Russia, region, Western Balkan, European Union

### **INTRODUCTION**

The war in Ukraine represents a complex political, security and economic issue in international relations in modern history. Before a

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succinct explanation of its background and its impact on the Western Balkan countries, which is the topic of this paper, the author will present a theoretical approach to war and one of the theories of international relations necessary for understanding it as it unfolds. Therefore, it will be presented with Clausewitz's theory of war as well as realism as a theory of international relations that implies this war. The methodology will be comparative and based on factors in each country, such as changes in politics, security, and the economy brought on by the war.

As aforementioned, by taking place on the soil of Europe, the war in Ukraine leads to a re-examination of the theories of international politics, important democratic principles, and the common foreign and security policy of the European Union. It is certain that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shaken the European geopolitical and security architecture since it has involved the EU and NATO standing together with Ukraine. The war, which began on February 24, 2022, when Russia's military entered the country after being stationed for months on the Ukrainian border, has brought casualties, migrations, a halt in the Russian economy, and new diplomatic measures. Although being "local" and between two states, the war in Ukraine is a proxy war that involves several actors: two main countries, the Russian Federation and Ukraine; political and security alliances; and NATO and EU states. As a consequence, other countries could also be dragged into the conflict, including those that remain in the sphere of influence of many superpowers (Lachert 2022). Some of those countries are undoubtedly Western Balkan countries, with their peculiar geopolitical position and relations with Russia. This paper aims to provide a thorough and comprehensive explanation of the impact of the war in Ukraine on each Western Balkan country and to indicate the key moments in internal and regional relations.

## **THEORY ON WAR AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Although the paper isn't focused on the theoretical study of war, its causes, and classifications, it is certainly necessary to offer certain theoretical determinations that are crucial for further understanding of the current war in Ukraine. Despite all the changes that human society has experienced in cultural, scientific, technological, political and every other aspect of development, war is a social phenomenon that accompanies all of humanity. Although the actors, strategies and tactics changed frequently, the war persisted. This was well noted by the Tunisian sociologist Gaston Bouthoul that "conditions change, but the war remains" (Matić and Podunavac 1993, 955). These authors

also contend that, as the harshest form of social relations, war implies attempting to achieve political goals that could not or did not want to be achieved in other, peaceful ways (Matić and Podunavac 1993, 955). Regardless of this difficulty, it is undeniable that (Aron 2001) “wars imply the organization of violent actions by conflicting communities” (354). War could be explained as the strategic-diplomatic behavior of states referring to the possibility of armed conflict as the ultimate solution to previous operations (Aron 2001, 179). Despite the tremendously diverse theoretical-analytical, legalistic and operational oeuvre of numerous theorists who tried to define war, the understanding of the former Prussian general and highly respected theorist of war art, Carl von Clausewitz (Clausewitz 1976, 51 cited in: Aron 2001) is one of the most popular for defining that “war is an act of violence aimed at forcing the opponent to do our will, and that such an act of violence has no limits” (59).

However, a high-quality and comprehensive analysis of war is not possible without considering its connection with politics. War, in particular, can be studied from the perspectives of psychology, sociology, law, and military security science, but its primary focus is on politics. War is an inseparable part of it. To back this up, Clausewitz’s well-known pattern suggests that war is a real political tool, the continuation of political relations, their realization through other means (Clausewitz 1976, 252). The above clearly indicates that it is necessary to take into account its connection with politics because it includes states and their political goals. Thomas Waldman additionally elaborates Clausewitz’s view, stressing out that the “war as an instrument of politics is presented almost nowhere as independent from the idea of war as a continuation of political intercourse. To state that war is a continuation of politics is to make a point beyond war’s instrumentality. Continuation powerfully conveys the idea that war is itself a form of political behavior, and thus, even if subjective policy loses control of its instrument, the lines that run through war remain fundamentally political in nature” (Waldman 2010, 3).

By taking place on the soil of Europe, the war in Ukraine leads to a re-examination of the theories of international politics, important democratic principles, and the common foreign and security policy of the European Union. Which mechanisms failed, which one were misinterpreted, or were moves made on the spur of the moment? At this stage, it would be helpful to briefly mention theories of international relations that could offer further explanation of their cause. The explanation of war events in international politics reaches into political philosophy and the question of the state of nature. The different views of

the state of nature as seen by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, at the same time, shaped the philosophical principles of the two most famous views on world politics: the realistic and liberal approaches to international politics.

Although both theories offer their own explanations, it is very challenging to explicitly opt for only one of them because the combination of their elements and the changes that are taking place make a synthetic explanation impossible. The combination, but also the intertwining of many elements of both theories, is noticeable. Realists see the central problem of international politics in war and the use of force, with states as the main actors, while liberals point to a slightly broader picture of international relations through the understanding of states within the global society in which they operate (Naj 2006, 20). Realism, as a more pessimistic theory, has a narrower view of observing international relations, focused on individual states and their cooperation with other states, as opposed to liberalism, the so-called more optimistic theory that provides a broader insight through the observation of the international system and global society in which states participate and are part of that context (Naj 2006, 20).

In addition to the aforementioned theories, we believe that another aspect of observing international politics deserves attention. The aspect within realism, the so-called “defensive neorealism,” that has its roots in the work of Kenneth Waltz. The introduction of Waltz’s Theory of International Politics in the late 1970s marked the beginning of defensive realism, often known as “structural realism.” According to Waltz, “great powers aren’t inherently aggressive because they are infused with a will to power; instead, he starts by assuming that states merely aim to survive. Above all else, they seek security. Nevertheless, he maintains that the structure of the international system forces great powers to pay careful attention to the balance of power. In particular, anarchy forces security-seeking states to compete with each other for power because power is the best means of survival” (Mearsheimer 2001, 10). This theory contends that governments are encouraged to adopt moderate and cautious policies in order to achieve national security by the design of the international system.

Defensive realists generally hold that states are not intrinsically aggressive, aim to maximize security, maintain the current balance of power, and try to minimize relative losses brought on by changes in their relative positions and standing (Grieco 1990 cited in Steven E. Lobell 2017). Conflict is occasionally necessary, according to defensive realists, such as in the case of aggressor states, when their security

is in danger, when they feel insecure, or when their differences are insurmountable (Lobel 2017). The above sentence can be taken as a key starting point to explain the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The expansion of NATO and its literal encirclement of Russia have been viewed as threats to Russia for decades. NATO on the border led to caution and the perception of security threats, which led Russia to act in a way already known.

## WAR IN UKRAINE IN A NUTSHELL

In order to understand the impact of the war in Ukraine on the countries of the Western Balkans, it is necessary to briefly present the war in Ukraine itself, or more precisely, the context in which it arose. The war, which was initiated by Russia on February 24, 2022, has unified the Ukrainian people, the Transatlantic Alliance, European defenses, and isolated Russia from the global economic system (Douglas 2022). Its origins can be traced back to 2004, when the so-called “Orange Revolution” erupted. The wave of street protests that fueled the rise of a pro-Western government in Kiev will likely be considered the very first modern episode in the drama that will eventually lead to the current Ukraine War (Alonso-Trabanco 2022). The West warmly embraced this turning point as a significant ideological victory for liberal democracy and, more importantly, as a geopolitical tipping moment in NATO and the EU. According to a Russian viewpoint, the USA and the EU supported the Orange Revolution with the intention of aggressively encircling Russia. The pinnacle of the encirclement would be Ukraine’s membership in the EU and NATO. That scenario would put Russia in a defensive position.<sup>1</sup> However, it is hardly imaginable that Russia would have stayed silent. Besides the mobilization of its political proxies in Ukraine so that pro-Russian leadership could take over, Russia also annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and “overt support for pro-Russian separatist militias in the Donbass with the purpose of compromising Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sowing a degree of chaos so that Ukraine could not be absorbed by Western structures in the near future, as well as to remind Kiev that Russian interests could not be overlooked” (Alonso-Trabanco 2022).

As an act of “vigilance”, Russia placed its troops on the Ukrainian border in 2021. After the EU and NATO remained immune

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<sup>1</sup> More on Russia-Ukrainian war in the paper written by Gajić Aleksandar and Nikola Rajić “Geopolitical Framework of Russian Military Intervention in Ukraine”, *The Policy of National Security*. <https://doi.org/10.22182/pnb.2212022.6>.

to Russia's demands, which included: "guarantee that no more states from the post-Soviet space ever join NATO or host military activities undertaken by the transatlantic alliance; the withdrawal of offensive weapons from neighboring European countries; the removal of NATO military infrastructure placed in Eastern Europe since 1997; and a series of restrictions related to both nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles." Russia initiated the aggression as the only remaining solution (Alonso-Trabanco 2022).

The Ukraine War is a conflict that combines conventional and cutting-edge tactics. In terms of its traditional components, it includes the conventional encirclement of enemy forces in urban positions in an effort to stifle the flow of supplies, obstruct the arrival of reinforcements, demoralize the defenders, and increase psychological pressure (Alonso-Trabanco 2022). The peculiarity of the full span of conflict is the extreme measures of economic and financial warfare. The Russian ultimatum to stop the flow of natural gas to European consumer markets unless payments are denominated in rubles shows that weaponized vectors of coercion and disruption are used on such a massive scale. Similarly, the West has retaliated with economic sanctions and the confiscation of monetary assets to weaken Russia (Alonso-Trabanco 2022).

As the war unfolds, it is questionable how it will further influence European countries. The region which is particularly vulnerable is the Western Balkans. In Europe, the word "Balkan" conjures up images of ethnic conflicts and rivalries between regional great powers. Traditionally, the Balkans represent a potential geopolitical award in the run for European supremacy due to their geopolitical position (Bžežinski 2001, 117). It has always been of high importance to two or three powers, such as the EU and Russia. As each country in the Western Balkan region has unique political and diplomatic ties with Russia, it will be examined how this war affects them in the next chapter.

## WAR AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Western Balkans is particularly sensitive to possible serious repercussions linked to the conflict in Ukraine due to its geopolitical, diplomatic, security, and economic ties with Russia. The Russian presence in the Western Balkan region isn't negligible because it affects some vital sectors such as energy and the economy, and countries in this region are differently exposed to it.

It is undeniable that the Western Balkans is one of the regions where Russia has intervened most in opposition to the European Union

and the United States in recent years, and one of the indicators is the establishment of a “Russian-Serbian humanitarian center” in Nis in 2012, (a training center that the EU called for the closure of) to reframe the geopolitical pattern of this region (Vale 2022). Another indicator of the Russian presence here is Russian gas. Countries in the Balkan region are still heavily dependent on Russian gas, making them highly vulnerable (Stojkovski 2020). As an example of this statement, we could indicate that Serbia supplies almost 90% of its needs through Russia, while North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are completely dependent on Russian gas (Vale 2022).

Aside from Russian influence, what makes the situation even more challenging is the EU’s enlargement agenda and EU influence, which are also in the spotlight in the Western Balkans. Aware of the vulnerability of the region and Russian influence, Western diplomats were quick to react. In August, German Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Sarajevo, Prishtina, and Belgrade, while Borrell visited Albania to start a tour in the region and delivered messages of hope for the quick EU integration of the Western Balkans countries in light of recent events in Europe (Lumezi 2022).

Western Balkan countries are facing challenges at national and regional level as a consequence of this war. The decision to apply sanctions against Russia has not been unanimously agreed upon at the regional level, which is one of the points that has caused strife among Western Balkan countries. The fact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine, more notably the eastern areas of Donbass and Luhansk, opens up many sensitive issues for this region is another issue that is worrisome and might potentially have a detrimental impact on regional dynamics. The right to self-determination and the right to sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state, which are crucial problems in the Western Balkans, are especially brought up.

Analogies do not necessarily have to be drawn, but we have already seen that it has been done. Donbass and Kosovo<sup>2\*</sup> are compared by Putin himself, so the opening of those sensitive issues in countries that have an influence on the Western Balkans, such as Russia, could have a negative impact on the region.<sup>3</sup> This situation does not necessarily have catastrophic consequences for the Balkans, but it is certainly not a unifying factor either. Additionally, EU integration is a particularly significant issue in the Western Balkans. The granting of candidate

2 \*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

3 More on the Russian presence in the Balkan is written in the paper “The Balkans and the Russian Federation-Geopolitical and Security Aspects.” by Vinko Pandurević. *The Policy of National Security*. <https://doi.org/10.22182/pnb.1722019.1>.

status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia without strict conditions has undermined its credibility in the region.

In such an unpleasant position, Western Balkan countries do have concerns about the evolution of the war in Ukraine and its impact on them and the region as well. Therefore, in the next chapter, it will be presented how Western Balkan countries reacted to the Russian invasion and how it has influenced their internal, regional, and energy policies.

## Serbia

Among all the Western Balkan countries, Serbia appears to be in the most difficult position for a multitude of reasons that could be classified as historical, political, security, and energy. It is important to briefly mention that Serbia and Russia share deep historical ties, which are usually attributed to common Slavic roots, similar language, and orthodoxy. During that time, the historical bond has been maintained until today. For that reason, Serbia is quite often perceived as a Russian “satellite” in the Western Balkans. However, dynamics regarding Kosovo\*, energy-related issues, security implications, and public opinion have all had a significant impact on Serbia-Russian ties, which are highly complex (Novaković 2022).

Close relations with Russia make the EU consider Serbia, although a candidate country, as one that does not follow EU interests. Doubt arose in 2014 with the Russian annexation of the Crimea Peninsula when Serbia refused to apply restrictive measures towards Russia and align with the EU. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has also contributed to Serbia’s being perceived in that way. The lack of an acceptable “compromise solution” for Kosovo\* and the likelihood of EU membership, particularly given the opposition to enlargement by a number of member states, are the reasons why the government has balanced its position toward Moscow (Novaković 2022).

As one of five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Russia has enough to veto Kosovo’s\* ambitions to join the UN as an independent state. This in itself makes Russia Serbia’s precious ally in its fight against the international recognition of Kosovo’s\* independence, a key issue of national interest for Serbia (Anastasakis 2022). That means that Resolution 1244, along with Serbian territory, is at stake. Even the potential expulsion of Russia from the UN according to Article 6 would be concerning. In that scenario, Serbia wouldn’t have international law to call on and other members of NATO and the EU that haven’t recognized Kosovo\* would do that. Nevertheless, the abovementioned statement is

only a prediction, a possible scenario, but still not confirmed.

When Russia started its invasion of Ukraine, the official Belgrade took 48 hours to state its position. The National Security Council of Serbia has met twice since the war in Ukraine and made an official statement that Serbia adheres to international law principles and supports Ukraine's territorial integrity, but it will not impose sanctions on Russia. Even Serbian President Vučić stated that, out of 13 articles on Ukraine's aggression, Serbia voted for four because the others referred to sanctions (Dunai 2022). President Vučić reiterated again at the United Nations General Assembly in March that Serbia supports Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, but that sanctions are not an option since Serbia must preserve its own vital national interest. Although, Serbia did vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council it is the only country in the Western Balkans to have chosen not to support European sanctions on Russia.

Aside from sanctions, Serbia has not prohibited Russian planes from flying over its territory. Due to the European ban on the flight of Russian planes, the only current air connections between Europe and Russia are via Belgrade and Istanbul. Two European companies that offer flights to Russia are Air Serbia and Turkish Airlines.

### **Media, energy and economic aspects**

As public opinion and media coverage play a significant role in this crisis, we find it of great importance to briefly mention it because it could ease understanding of certain political decisions. Public opinion polls conducted by the BiEPAG Group (Balkan Policy Advisory Group in Europe) in December 2021 show that 2/3 of Serbian citizens have a positive opinion of Putin (BiEPAG2021). Even President Vučić stated that 80% of Serbia's media were "always, no matter what occurs, on the Russian side" while 20% "have no objective attitude, and they are a priori against the Russians" on the evening when Putin recognized the two separatist territories (Stojanović 2022). The previously mentioned results have been misused several times by the media from Kosovo\* and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which can undermine and significantly harm regional relations. As an example of this statement, certain media have tried to exaggerate Serbian-Russian friendship by only transmitting pro-Russian announcements like the march of support for Russia, while other acts that harmonize Serbia with the West and the EU (such as the march of support for Ukraine) are ignored or partially broadcast. This crisis is gradually having implications for the relations between the

countries of the Western Balkans, showing that the wars of the 1990s are still alive in everyone's memories and that the policy of reconciliation and regional cooperation is on shaky ground. While demonizing Russia, the countries of the region can easily apply this to Serbia because of its historical relations with Russia, which could potentially cause strained relations between Serbia and the countries of the region. This particularly refers to Bosniaks and Kosovars. They seem to rely on unreliable and unverified (often fake) sources and present them as facts. It is noticeable in the media of the countries in the region that Serbia stands out as a country that can use the Russian invasion and world attention on Ukraine to "annex" the territories in the region inhabited by Serbs (Xharra and Isufi 2022). They believe that the rhetoric of the 1990s was revived with the region's perception that Serbia plans to implement the idea of a "Great Serbia." By doing so, Serbia would resolve issues with Kosovo\* and be united with the Republika Srpska. However, these statements are based on remembrance of the 1990s wars and could significantly harm regional relations. So far, no one from Serbia has made any statements regarding the expansion of territory. The biggest challenge for Serbia at the moment is how to deal with pressures that are coming from the West rather than the annexation of territories.

When it comes to the influence of the Ukraine war on energy sources and food products, the concern was immediate because of two things: firstly, the upcoming heating season and secondly, elections. The additional problem for Serbia is that the country is scheduled to hold general elections on April 3, and the vast majority of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party voters have a strong pro-Russian sentiment (Miković 2022). High gas prices lead to higher costs for heating, electricity, and groceries—all the things, voters observe in the run-up to elections. At the beginning of the war, Serbian citizens formed a line at petrol stations, fearing that prices would rise, which they did. The government tried to reassure the citizens that there is enough supply of all resources and that Serbia will form, nine to ten teams to monitor the situation with oil, gas, and the supply of other products. Nevertheless, the concern about the gas dependency remained. It is worth mentioning that in 2008, Russia acquired the majority of shares in NIS, Serbia's National Oil and Gas company, 51% to 49%. Additionally, NIS became the major shareholder in Serbia's leading petrochemical producer, HIP Petrohemija (Miković 2022). In such a position, high gas prices would seriously impact the Serbian economy and citizens. Despite the alternative proposal, whereby the price would be determined 70 per cent by oil formula and 30 per cent by spot market prices, all in all, \$510 (€451) per 1,000 cubic meters, the

gas price for Serbia would remain at \$270 and the amount of delivered gas would increase for the next six months, decided after the Putin-Vučić meeting (Vuksanović 2022).

Given that work has been underway for years to build a narrative of Serbian-Russian friendship as well as the fact that Russia continues to support Serbia's territorial integrity, it was unrealistic to expect Serbian officials to turn their backs on Russia (SubotićiOmergaić 2022). Serbia's stance on the Ukrainian war is a difficult test of "balancing" the need to appear to be in line with the EU in foreign policy while maintaining a strong partnership with Russia. Western governments have expressed satisfaction over the condemnation of Russian aggression, despite the fact that in the days that have followed, Belgrade has once again been under increasing pressure to join the sanctions against Moscow. What makes this constellation even more complex is good relations with Ukraine, which does not accept Kosovo's\* independence and has good economic cooperation (Palombaro 2022). Serbia insists on Ukraine's territorial integrity because it considers Ukrainian efforts to keep Donbas tantamount to its attempts to maintain Kosovo\* within its borders. As the Ukrainian war has caused severe migration, Serbia has shown understanding and support for the Ukrainian people. On March 18, 2022, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Decision on providing temporary protection to displaced persons coming from Ukraine: citizens of Ukraine and members of their families who have resided in Ukraine; asylum seekers who have been granted asylum in Ukraine; temporary protection shall last for 1 year from the date of entry into force of this Decision (Odluka 2022).

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian war, Serbia's position is described as "sitting in two chairs." On the one hand, there is the EU perspective; on the other hand, there is Russia as friend and protector in terms of Kosovo\* and energy supplier. Thus, the future steps should be calculated because one wrong step could possibly lead to unpredictable responses from both sides.

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the Western Balkan countries with the most complicated internal political situation. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and RepublikaSrpska are quite opposed to a myriad of internal issues, and the condemnation of Russian aggression in Ukraine is one of them. The country's state bodies, which collectively serve as the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, comprise three

members, three constituent peoples: Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs, who look differently at Russia and the West (Lachert 2022). On one side is Republika Srpska, an entity of Bosnian Serbs oriented towards Russia and strongly opposed to NATO membership, and on the other side is Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Bosniaks are pro-Western oriented. Therefore, it is understandable why the two entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina faced major trouble in deciding a common position on the war in Ukraine.

Strong, bitter memories of NATO and the West among Bosnian Serbs provide a platform for Russia to expand its influence. In the last decade, Russia has built close relations with Republika Srpska, investing in the entity's oil refineries and cooperating intensively in security. What serves Russia's interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to avoid the country's membership in NATO and to increase Republika Srpska's dependency on Russia in military, economic, and energy fields. So far, the Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, has strongly supported Russia and opposed sanctions. In March, Dodik abandoned a meeting of the tripartite presidency arguing that the other two members of the Presidency, the Croatian Željko Komšić and the Muslim Šefik Džaferović, did not want to discuss the position on Ukraine (Palombaro 2022). In the West, there are concerns that Russia could use Dodik, who insists that Bosnia and Herzegovina should maintain its neutrality in the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, to destabilize the situation in the country and the region (Miković 2022). However, Dodik represents the minority since Sarajevo, and the representatives of Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Bosniaks, supported the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion as well as the EU sanctions against Moscow (Palombaro 2022).

Similarly, Milorad Dodik opposes the entry of Bosnia and Herzegovina into NATO, whose negotiations have been ongoing since 2008. Even though the country has a Membership Action Plan (MAP), it is the only country in the Western Balkans (among Serbia and Kosovo\*) that remains outside of NATO. There is concern for Russia that Bosnia and Herzegovina's joining the alliance will undermine Russia's credibility in the Western Balkans. Russia maintains close ties with Republika Srpska in order to keep a loyal ally in the Balkans. Even Sergey Lavrov, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, claimed that Bosnia and Herzegovina (together with Albania and Kosovo\*) have deployed foreign fighters to Ukraine and pose a threat to the region due to terrorism and drug smuggling to show support for Republika Srpska (Isufi and Sinoruka 2022). For that reason, the West, primarily the EU and NATO, deems

RepublikaSrpska a factor of instability and a possible “powder keg” in the Balkans, for fear that it could try to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Russia’s help.

The Bosnian side hasn’t hesitated to react. Bosnian leaders urged NATO to send troops and warned of Serbia’s “aspirations” towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the UN has supported a number of resolutions denouncing Russian aggression and urging sanctions. For the first time since the 1990s, the EU has increased its military presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina in response to these worries. Concerns that the Ukrainian crisis could potentially lead to instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina led EUFOR, the EU’s peacekeeping force, to announce the deployment of 500 additional reserve troops from Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia to Bosnia and Herzegovina on top of the existing 600 troops (Reuters 2022). Despite the small number of forces involved, the strategic action is seen as a warning to the RepublikaSrpska and a reflection of Western expectations for provocations in the region, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The strongest support for Ukrainians comes from Bosnian Bosniaks who saw themselves as the victims of both Serbian and Croatian aggression and who connected with Ukrainians who had been targeted by Russians or insurgents who supported Russia. Bosnian Bosniaks also perceived the declarations of secession made by the self-declared People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk as being similar to those made by the Republic of Srpska (Anastasakis 2022).

Among political issues, the energy sector is also a topic that entails consideration as a challenging point in relations between Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sections of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s energy sector are controlled by Russian Zarubezhneft, which owns oil refineries in the towns of Brod and Modriča in the RepublikaSrpska entity (Miković 2022). Prior to TurkStream, Bosnia and Herzegovina was entirely dependent on Russian gas to meet its needs because its gas supply was secured through an interconnection point at Beregovo, traveling through Ukraine and Hungary before entering the country. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s distribution firm, BH Gas, had a receiving station in Hungary from which it sent gas, via Serbia, to the entire Bosnian territory (Čančar 2021).

At this point, it is challenging to make predictions on how the war will unfold and influence Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political and energy situation. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that this crisis has traced the division among an already divided society. In the next chapter, we

will analyze the political reaction in one of its neighboring countries, Montenegro, regarding the current war.

## Montenegro

What is peculiar to Montenegro's response due to the war in Ukraine are three things: internal, bloc divisions, Montenegrin orthodox church issue, and Russian real estate in Montenegro. Montenegro's government is having severe trouble regarding sanctions on Russia. Officially, sanctions haven't been imposed yet. Despite the fact that the government of Montenegro announced that it has joined all restrictive measures, including the EU's eight packages of individual and economic sanctions on Russia, the government has yet to make decisions on their implementation. The session of the Government of Montenegro, held in March, at which the decision on sanctions was supposed to be adopted, was interrupted after a quarrel between Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić and Foreign Minister Djordje Radulović over the imposition of sanctions on Russia. Nonetheless, now former Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, unanimously adopted a package of sanctions against Russia two days earlier, previously adopted by the Council of the European Union (RTS 2022). The quarrels among political circles in Montenegro are a clear indicator of conflict between "Serbian parties in favor of Russia" and "pro-Western" parties.

The significance of the orthodox church should be mentioned in this matter as well. In terms of church issue, Montenegro and Ukraine have experienced some similarities, as well as sporadic Russian interventions. The Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches have both vehemently condemned acts of religious autonomization and aren't willing to accept the existence of distinct Ukrainian and Montenegrin religious orthodox identities. President Vucic requested assistance from Russia to safeguard the unity of the Orthodox Church in the Balkans after the Montenegrin Parliament passed the law on religious freedom in December 2019. He saw this as an attempt by the Church of Montenegro to obtain autocephaly, as had happened in Ukraine, and the Serbian Orthodox Church reacted angrily. Russia's engagement in this case is another indication of how the country uses cultural and historical ties and religious diplomacy for political matters (Anastasakis 2022).

Another aspect that has already started to feel the implications of the war is the real estate market. The real estate market in Montenegro is in the public eye due to its popularity among Russian tourists. According to the data of the Real Estate Administration of Montenegro, the citizens

of Russia own or co-own 18,906 real estate properties and 3.9 million square meters of land (Despotović 2022). Even though there is no official information about the potential freezing of Russian property it is noticeable that the number of Russian tourists has drastically decreased since the beginning of the war. On the other hand, the latest data shows that roughly 300 Ukrainians enter Montenegro every day on average (Stekić 2022). The majority of Ukrainian refugees arrive in Montenegro via Serbia. A large number of those people had already visited Montenegro for summer vacations. Until now, 588 people have applied for temporary protection in Montenegro today, with 391 adults and 197 children among them. The government of Montenegro has agreed to provide temporary protection to those from Ukraine who are unable to return home and have been forced to flee due to conflict (Stekić 2022).

### **Albania**

Albania is a NATO member (joined in 2009) and EU candidate country which has a solid track record of aligning with the EU's foreign and security policy. As part of the Transatlantic family, Albania is clear when it comes to the approach to the current war in Ukraine. Albania condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, imposed economic sanctions on Russia and banned Russian aircraft from its airspace. Albania also voted at the UN General Assembly to exclude Russia from the Human Rights Council. There are certain claims that the war in Ukraine is affecting some backstage NATO countries, including Albania, North Macedonia, and Greece, being asked to contribute with their own bases and resources, if these are needed. If so, Albanian President, Ilir Meta stated that Albania is ready to participate in any future mission to Ukraine (Popović 2022). Due to Albania's alignment with the EU and NATO, Russia added Albania to its "enemy list", along with Montenegro and North Macedonia. Shortly after, on March 8th, Russian missiles demolished the Albanian honorary consulate in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, which was immediately condemned by the Albanian government (EURACTIV 2022). As an act of support, it renamed a street in its capital, Tirana, where the Russian and Ukrainian embassies are located, "Free Ukraine", to honour Ukraine's resistance to war (Reuters 2022). This retaliation clearly indicates that relations between Albania and Russia are under pressure as Russia is particularly vigilant due to Albania's membership in NATO.

Albania, like other Western Balkan countries, is suffering from the Ukraine conflict in terms of food and energy. The impact could be defined as direct due to Albania's dependence on wheat and oil supplies

from Russia. The indirect impact, on the other hand, is related to rising commodity prices because they are imported from Ukraine. In other words, trade volume is dominated by imports of goods, which is clearly indicated in the latest data: “Albania imports from Russia and Ukraine all 19 billion of goods, which constitutes 99.5% of the trade volume, and 0.5% is represented as Albanian exports to these countries” (Kote 2022). As a consequence, the negative impact is notable through increased food and energy costs as well as rising external finance expenses. Since Albania can cover only 30% of the country’s oil needs with domestic production, it is quite dependent on Russian oil. Therefore, the oil supply will be dictated by the war’s trajectory.

### **North Macedonia**

Similar to Albania, North Macedonia rapidly joined EU economic sanctions, condemned Russia’s invasion, and banned Russian aircraft from using its airspace. The fact that North Macedonia joined NATO only two years ago, in 2020, and hasn’t experienced a comparable circumstance makes it significant. Thus, this conflict serves as something of a test for its members. Although there are no official NATO decisions on the potential participation of Macedonian forces in the war, the Macedonian government has already considered possible engagements in the conflict.

As a part of regional unity in terms of support for Ukraine, North Macedonia, along with Bulgaria, Romania, and Montenegro, attended NATO’s Multilateral Business Union meeting organized by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov in Sofia. Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski said the meeting sent another strong message of unity and solidarity with Ukraine. He said its participants “remain firm in condemning the war in Ukraine as an illegal and illegitimate invasion of Russia (Öztürk 2022). However, North Macedonia is unique for one more reason: its relationship with the EU as a whole and Bulgaria. It is well-known that North Macedonia changed its name as one of the EU measures, but with no improvement in its EU path. This situation has raised euroscepticism, and a certain number of North Macedonia’s citizens have become restrained towards the EU and more open towards Russia. There appears to be a growing popularity on social media for Russia’s role in Ukraine. These pro-Russian attitudes are quite recent and predate the invasion. Part of the public seems to accept the Russian narrative of its legitimacy to intervene in the “denazification” of Ukraine. For instance, Levica (The Left), established in 2015, was the 3rd in the last local elections among ethnic Macedonians who appear to support Russia. Why this shift? Due

to the Bulgarian veto on opening accession talks in 2020, resentment toward the EU is evidently growing. The resentment toward, what is felt to be an EU betrayal, of North Macedonia is fueling the turn of a portion of the public toward Russia (Marušić 2022).

Historically, political pro-Russia sentiment in North Macedonia has been negligible. From independence in 1991, there has been an almost absolute consensus for Euro-Atlantic integration across the political spectrum and across ethnic lines. Public opinion polls have consistently reflected this consensus. However, the rise of euroscepticism could undermine years of progress in North Macedonia and could also undermine the EU's influence in the region, opening avenues for increased Russian meddling in the neuralgic spots of the region. In terms of the influence of this war on the economy of North Macedonia, it doesn't differ much from the challenges that other Western Balkan countries are facing. North Macedonia has faced "supply shock" when it comes to food, the metal industry, and electricity. It is a significant importer of supplies because it can fully meet domestic food needs. The same situation could be applied to the energy sector. This situation has caused a dramatic rise in prices on the market. In this situation, North Macedonia should find a way to acquire enough energy and food for its citizens and maintain the economy.

## CONCLUSION

It is undoubtedly true that the war in Ukraine has generated a re-examination of certain issues in the Western Balkans, as its influences have been visible in many aspects. The economy, energy, and food supplies, as well as regional relations, appeared to be the most vulnerable to this war. This war has proved that the Western Balkan countries find themselves in a difficult position due to scarcities in food and energy, followed by a high rise in prices, as they cannot meet their domestic needs. These countries are big importers of grains, oil, and gas from Ukraine and Russia; thus, this war makes the exportation of these goods uncertain and limited. The current situation clearly indicates that food and energy supplies should be reconsidered and new, alternative production methods developed. What else makes the war in Ukraine specific for the Western Balkan countries is its impact on sensitive regional relations, especially those related to sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is well known that, after the war in the 1990s, the question of borders and regional relations became sensitive, and it has intensified even more since 2008, when so-called Kosovo\* declared independence. Therefore, it makes it impossible for the Western Balkan countries to have a unanimous

response to Russian aggression. Among all Western Balkan countries, Serbia is deemed particularly vulnerable due to its very close historic ties with Russia. It is the only country from this region, besides Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is still not part of the U.S.-led military alliance, which has continued to maintain good relations with no restrictions. As a candidate country, Serbia's position isn't well accepted on behalf of the EU and other countries in the region, which perceive Serbia as a potential threat to regional cooperation due to its "isolation" from the Western attitude towards this crisis. It is certain that the war has caused trauma and fears of new wars in the region among the population that still have vivid memories of the war in the 1990's, which is causing a sense of trepidation, distrust, and identification with either Russia or Ukraine. While Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo\* have openly supported Ukraine and condemned Russia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have faced deep internal political division regarding the war. During the current seven months of the war, Western Balkan countries have confronted each other's reactions to Russian aggression and will have to balance in the future as the war unfolds to preserve peace and stability in the region.

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