




OPINION PAPER


What does Russian Invasion of Ukraine mean for the EU Accession of the Western Balkans?

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WHAT DOES RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE MEAN FOR THE EU ACCESSION OF THE WESTERN BALKANS?

In the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis, EU-Russia relations have undoubtedly been severed. The Russian conflict in Ukraine heightened ‘longstanding tensions’ within the Western Balkans¹. The Western Balkan Six comprises of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. With the current conflict in Ukraine, the Balkans is expected to become a “battlefield for ideas”, as Russian influence increases in the region.²

As the EU-Russian cohesion become untethered, the EU prepare to monitor the situation in the region as the vulnerability of the region becomes an increasing concern.³ The High-Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, sees the crisis between EU and Russia as a “moment to reinvigorate the enlargement process as to anchor the Western Balkans firmly to the [EU]”.⁴ However, with blurred cross-border linguistic ties, the EU had done little to dissolve tensions from its recent history, which may limit these efforts.

A botched accession

The crisis of the Dayton Accords in Bosnia had left unresolved tensions amongst its tripartite system⁵, the EU-Facilitated negotiations between Pristina and Belgrade had produced over 30 agreements with poor implementation.⁶ In Serbia, an EU foreign and security policy alignment continued with diplomatic support from Moscow to Belgrade⁷.

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement ensured that the EU foreign and security policy would be followed. However, the conflict in Ukraine has revealed that the alignment has been inconsistent.⁸ On the one hand, an increase in defence spending from EU members have been mirrored in some parts of the Western Balkans. The alignment was strongly felt in Albania, with the development of an airbase with NATO⁹ and in Kosovo, with the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) troops doubling.¹⁰

Yet, supporting the EU’s response was met with resistance. Montenegro and Bosnia were hesitant on implementing EU sanctions.¹¹ Serbia remained the only government in Europe, alongside Belarus, to not sanction Russia “at least until the elections in April 2022”¹². The resistance appeared to come from cross-border linguistic ties of Serb communities.

North Macedonia had experienced many demands in its application for candidacy. The Greek request of changing the name from FYR Macedonia along with Bulgaria and France’s prior application rejection,¹³ led to a decline in pro-European sentiment. However, the conflict in Ukraine was an opening for North Macedonia in its bargain power for its accession process.¹⁴

¹ <https://unherd.com/the-post/the-ukraine-crisis-is-dividing-the-balkans/>

² <https://www.intellinews.com/balkan-flashpoints-after-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine-238639/?source=serbia>

³ <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/03/17/in-kosovo-fears-that-russia-could-inspire-a-new-serbian-offensive>

⁴ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/112762/north-macedonia-remarks-high-representative-vice-president-josep-borrell-press-conference_en

⁵ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/113174/bosnia-and-herzegovina-statement-spokesperson-constitutional-and-electoral-reforms_en

⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2021/10/03/nato-led-mission-at-kosovo-serbia-border-after-deal-to-ease-tensions>

⁷ <https://ecfr.eu/article/bound-to-russia-serbias-disruptive-neutrality/>

⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/18/why-is-bosnia-not-joining-rest-of-europe-in-sanctions-against-russia>

⁹ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/20/nato-to-open-balkan-airbase-in-member-state-albania-converted-from-ex-soviet-facility>

¹⁰ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/15/eu-mission-to-boost-police-officer-presence-in-kosovo-amid-war-in-ukraine>

¹¹ <https://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/2022/03/07/garcevic-comments-on-montenegros-response-to-ukraine-crisis/>

¹² <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/16/serbia-resists-eu-pressure-to-impose-sanctions-on-russia/>

¹³ <https://spectatorworld.com/topic/neck-russia-heading-outright-defeat-francis-fukuyama/>

¹⁴ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/france-backs-start-of-eu-negotiations-for-north-macedonia/

In stark contrast, for Bosnia the support of separationist movements from EU member states had led to doubt for Bosniak and Bosnian Croat states.¹⁵ An uncertainty of the EU's interests in the region led to claims from the Bosnian Serb Presidency denouncing the process.¹⁶ Along with tensions with the tripartite system, the conflict in Ukraine has extended concerns on the EU's capability to understand Bosnia.

The credibility issues of the existing EU accession process have led EU stakeholders to develop more ways to create momentum for the Western Balkans, after a long period of stagnation.¹⁷ The EU seems to overlook cross-border ties, increasing concerns to the capability of EU responses in the region. Kosovo's efforts have been redirected to NATO as "persistent efforts by Russia to undermine Kosovo and destabilise the entire Western Balkans"¹⁸ was a concern not addressed by the EU. The region now has mixed response with continued work alongside the EU, as influences from Russia and China increase.

Pro-Russian sentiment shake the area

The presence of Pro-Russian sentiment has been promoted as a security challenge for some parts of the region. Bosnian Croat Presidency member Željko Komšić had claimed the Russian influence in Bosnia "has to be understood as a security challenge"¹⁹ with the Serb-speaking communities most likely to accept Russian influence.

In addition, Russia's alliance with Serbia has alarmed Kosovo since the conflict in Ukraine, due to a possible 'threat to the regional stability of the area'.²⁰ Taking this into consideration, a Serbian security analyst emphasizes the importance of the EU (as Serbia's main trading partner) in the deterrence of instability. They further argue Pro-Russian sentiment is more accurately used as a mobilisation tactic for the upcoming elections²¹.

What poses more of a security challenge for the Bosnian Serbian Presidency is religious nationalism from the Muslim communities.²² The conflict in Ukraine has emphasised Russia's foreign policy, particularly in Serbia, where some MPs justify a military aggression in Bosnia.²³ In the background of this claim, Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović makes aware the "manipulation of the endangerment...in the neighbourhood"²⁴

The deterrence of instability with EU as a trading partner doesn't seem to extend outside of Serbia.²⁵ Montenegro relies on Serbia as a main trading partner, causing the government to delay definitive

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/13/meps-accuse-eu-commissioner-of-colluding-with-serb-secession>

¹⁶ <https://www.eubulletin.com/12726-ukraine-war-echoes-across-balkans-a-chorus-of-warnings-about-russian-meddling-in-bosnia-and-kosovo.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/western-balkans-silence-over-ukraines-eu-membership-bid/>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-president-asks-washington-help-joining-nato-2022-03-17/>

¹⁹ <https://euobserver.com/world/154536>

²⁰ <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/kosovo-pm-albin-kurti-says-russian-ally-serbia-a-threat-to-regional-stability-of-balkans-articleshow.html>

²¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/interview/analyst-says-if-putin-was-a-candidate-in-serbia-he-would-get-over-70-of-the-vote/>

²² <https://euobserver.com/world/154536>

²³ <https://bih.bird.tools/data?caseId=600>

²⁴ <https://www.cdm.me/english/djukanovic-kremlins-decision-to-classify-us-as-enemies-anti-historical-political-crisis-in-montenegro-a-product-of-greater-serbia-and-russian-destruction/>

²⁵ https://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2022/03/21/ukraine-djukanovic-says-dangers-could-extend-into-balkans_01315475-caf6-4938-8483-caedf13cab24.html

actions against Russia.²⁶ In contrast, Dukanović finds Pro-Russian sentiment and Russian support of cross-border communities destructive.

According to Russian think tank Valdai Club, Russia sees no threat with Serbia joining the EU, stating the opportunity as a “great agreement between the [EU], Russia and the USA”²⁷ hinting towards a security belt. Yet, contradictions occur when looking at the region.

For instance, the Russian Ambassador to Bosnia Igor Kalabukhov had stated that there would be a “tacit threat to [Bosnia] over its proposed bid to join NATO”.²⁸ Furthermore, Russian ambassador to North Macedonia has met with members of its parliament where there’s been an alignment in its decision to attack Ukraine.²⁹

In addition, there has been an increase in activity from Russian intelligence officers in Bosnia and Montenegro.^{30 31} Other states in the region now remain concerned for Russia’s influence and its potential for destabilisation in the region.³²

Still a demand for the EU?

A lack of EU progress in the area and increased Russian influence has heightened political activity in the Western Balkans. Prior to the conflict, the EU had responded to Russian influence in the area through appeasement of Pro-Russian sympathisers. This has resulted in a failure of the Western Balkan enlargement.³³ European Parliament group Renew Europe had requested to call for a temporary suspension of Serbia’s accession process due to its alliance with Russia.³⁴ But, is isolationism the best approach considering the EU’s hand in allowing the alliance?

The European Council now remains focused for the potential in “new political dynamics to the region of the Western Balkans”,³⁵ as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. Isolating reactive groups may not work if spheres of influence are competing in the region. Accelerating the accession process, where 4 out of 6 are not full candidates, also may be an ineffective response. The requirement of unanimous consent for enlargement may render an incomplete process to the region.³⁶

If the conflict in Ukraine is to continue, the Western Balkans may become a playground yet again for international spheres of influence. The EU’s influence remains structurally weak due to a slow ascension process and exploited appeasement. Along with pro-Russian sentiment since the Russian military aggression in Ukraine, an abyss for international involvement could be recreated like its recent history. The EU needs to be more united and ahead of the game to prevent further destabilisation of the Western Balkans.

²⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/17/divided-montenegro-again-delays-imposing-sanctions-on-russia/>

²⁷ https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-european-union-to-the-balkans/?sphrase_id=1375175

²⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/us-condemns-russian-threat-to-bosnia-over-nato-bid/articleshow/90308768.cms>

²⁹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/18/north-macedonias-left-condemned-for-aligning-with-russia-on-ukraine/>

³⁰ <https://www.zurnal.info/clanak/putins-supporters-in-bih-did-not-disappear-they-are-just-changing-the-tactics/24819>

³¹ https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/montenegro-expels-russian-diplomat/

³² <https://exit.al/en/2022/03/22/russias-ally-serbia-threatens-stability-in-the-western-balkans-says-kosovo-premier/>

³³ <https://ecfr.eu/article/southern-discomfort-the-wests-competition-with-china-in-the-balkans/>

³⁴ <https://exit.al/en/2022/03/14/meps-urge-eu-to-freeze-serbias-accession-talks-over-putin-support/>

³⁵ <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/>

³⁶ <https://exit.al/en/2022/03/19/what-ukraines-eu-membership-bid-means-for-western-balkans/>

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