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Security in the western balkans after the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine

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Abstract---Security continues to remain a crucial issue in the Western Balkans region, even after the end of inter-ethnic wars and conflicts for nearly two decades. After the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Balkan region, despite the presence of NATO forces in almost all these countries, there is a fear of eventual conflict, and this stems directly from the Russian influence that has had and continues to have in this region. In this regard, given the role that Russia has had, and still has, in the Western Balkans, it is natural to fear the eventual instigation of conflict in this region as well, even more so, when the strong ties between Serbia and Russia are known, as and the continued feeding of its population by nationalisms and hatreds towards other nations in the Western Balkans. However, the presence of NATO, and the role of the states of this region, excluding Serbia, during these months from the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, made us come to the conclusion that the beginning of any eventual conflict in this region is almost impossible. The paper deals with the fear that exists in the countries of the Western Balkans for the beginning of any eventual conflict, the real possibilities for conflicts in this region, the role of the USA and the EU in the Western Balkans after the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, as well as the clarification of state policies of the countries of the Western Balkans in accordance with the Euro-Atlantic future after the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Keywords---Aggression, Western Balkans, Russia, Ukraine, NATO, etc.

Introduction

A completely new situation on the stage of global politics has arisen after the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine. The fear of spreading the war to other countries was great at first, but after a few months of fighting, the world seems to have calmed down, and the war is increasingly being seen as impossible to spread to other countries of the world.

In the Balkan context, given the Russian influence in some countries of the Balkans, and especially the "fraternal" Slavic-Orthodox ties with Serbia, the concern for an eventual clash in this region was realistic. In this sense, the Center for Strategic and International Studies has rightly stated that, "The images coming out of Ukraine have revived the memories of the horrors that the region experienced in the 1990s, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Serbia and Kosovo. Given Russia's strong economic, military and soft power ties, the conflict has raised concerns that Moscow may seek to further destabilize the region to divert attention from its flawed campaign in Ukraine"¹.

In the global context, the Russian aggression on Ukraine represents a case of its own, due to the fact that the aggression was unprovoked, and in this sense, this could be a dangerous precedent for the future, where without any reason to attack a state, from another country. In fact, Russian aggression against Ukraine has lost the West's confidence in Russia. However, after more than six months of fighting, it can be concluded that the war was a miscalculation by Putin, and that the chances of the conflict spreading remain very minor, if not impossible.

The fear of the outbreak of war in the Balkans after the Russian aggression in Ukraine

The Russian aggression in Ukraine can be concluded to have been a miscalculation by Vladimir Putin, but it cannot be said that there will not be consequences, and not only for Russia and Ukraine, but far beyond. In fact, the democratic world will see Russia differently, and the approach to global security will not be the same as it has been until now. This means that the world has already changed, and measures towards global security, especially from the US and the EU, will be looked at more seriously.

Considering the role that Russia has had and has in the Western Balkans, it is natural to fear the eventual instigation of the conflict in this region as well, even more so, when the strong ties between Serbia and Russia are known, as well as the continuous feeding of its population from nationalisms and hatred towards other nations in the Western Balkans. Dejana Saric and Pierre Morcos rightly point out that "Russia's economic investment in the region has focused on

¹ Opinion of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, entitled: The War in Ukraine: Aftershocks in the Balkans, April 15, 2022, online: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans>

strategic sectors such as energy and has capitalized on patronage and party corruption systems. In recent years, Russia has also strengthened its military ties with Serbia, selling it weapons, aircraft and air defense systems. But it is Russia's Orthodox faith and its continued opposition to Kosovo's independence that has formed the foundation for its soft power in the region. This has opened the way for Russian influence to penetrate strongly in Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro, where important segments of politics are strongly pro-Russian. For leaders like Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic and Bosnia's Milorad Dodik, demonstrating close ties to the Russian leadership is a matter of political survival"². Furthermore, Saric and Morcos point out that, "nationalist factions across the region who see Putin's Russia as a protector of the Orthodox people, Russia's occupation of another Orthodox country like Ukraine is not an inherent contradiction. Separated from the historical context, these groups see Russia as reclaiming land that is rightfully theirs, just as they would like to see Kosovo "returned" to Serbia. Putin himself has often invoked the example of Kosovo as a justification for Russia's annexation of Crimea and its incursions into Donetsk and Luhansk³.

Even Putin's approach is similar to that of Milosevic, as well as his successors, who are in power in Serbia today. In this context, it is rightly viewed by Balša Božović, who is the president of the Academy for Democratic Development in Belgrade and a former member of the Assembly of Serbia, who emphasizes that "in the series of meetings with world leaders before the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin insisted that Russia is in danger and has the right to 'intervene' to resolve disputes between the West and Russia. Guided by the nationalist narrative of the "Russian world" - that all Russians have the right to live in one country - he claimed that Ukrainians are not a nation, but in fact Russians. Ukraine is not a state, he continued, but Lenin's project, and it must be incorporated into Russia. Putin's rhetoric bears a striking resemblance to the narrative Slobodan Milosevic used to start the war in Yugoslavia in 1991 – and to today's narrative of a 'Serb world' directed at Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina"⁴. Moreover, Božović points out that "a few weeks after the start of the invasion, Putin and Russia are in the most difficult situation since the end of the Cold War. The Russian economy is suffering from unprecedented sanctions and Putin may be charged with war crimes. Some will say he looks like Milosevic - only with nuclear bombs"⁵. Also, Božović continues with his analysis, where, among other things, he states that "in response to Putin's aggression, the West has become more united than ever before. It has isolated Russia financially and the EU is closer than ever to granting Ukraine candidate status. Putin's increasingly desperate moves — making nuclear threats to anyone who dares to help Ukraine, for example — caused even his closest autocratic allies, such as Viktor Orbán, to turn their backs on him. However, there are some black sheep in

² **Dejana Saric** is a research assistant with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. **Pierre Morcos** is a visiting fellow with the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at CSIS, **The Center for Strategic and International Studies**.

See online: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans> - (https://www.csis.org/) - 31.05.2022

³ IBID: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/war-ukraine-aftershocks-balkans> - (https://www.csis.org/) - 31.05.2022

⁴ Balša Božović, EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 16.03.2022, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/european-integration/putins-influence-in-the-balkans-calls-the-eu-to-action-5791/> - (https://www.ips-journal.eu/) - 30.05.2022

⁵ IBID, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/european-integration/putins-influence-in-the-balkans-calls-the-eu-to-action-5791/> - (https://www.ips-journal.eu/) - 30.05.2022

Europe who defied the unified Western response: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina refused to impose sanctions on Russia⁶.

The role of the USA and the EU in the Western Balkans after the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine

Problems in one country, especially in countries with global influence, are reflected in many other countries, or even in all the countries of the world. In this sense, Grigorij Mesežnikov rightly points out that in his article entitled "How Putin's war can affect the Western Balkans" he points out that, "in a globalized world, events in one region have echoes on the other side of the globe. Thus, the Russian-Ukrainian war has consequences not only in the immediate neighborhood of the parties to the conflict, in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in more distant countries, for example in East Asia, where the leaders of communist China and democratic Taiwan are watching with the struggle of the Ukrainians against the Russian invaders"⁷.

The role of the US and the EU is focused in two directions, in the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia, and in military and economic assistance to Ukraine. Moreover, the US and the EU were vigilant and took swift action to prevent the war from spreading to other countries. The military aid you gave to Ukraine made Putin's plan for the quick subjugation and overthrow of the Ukrainian government, which is pro-Western and with EU and NATO membership goals, fail.

As for the Balaknik context, it should be borne in mind that the USA played a decisive role in ending the wars and establishing peace and security in the region. It is rightly said that the United States has played a major role in shaping the political and security landscape of the Western Balkans as we know it today. In this regard, during the 1990s, Washington was the main architect of the Dayton agreement, which ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and ensured peace through the Western military presence in the country. It later played a key role in how Kosovo seceded from Yugoslavia as a result of the US-led NATO air campaign against the Milosevic regime in 1999 and subsequent political developments, and in the case of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, with the Ohrid Peace Agreement in 2001⁸. Furthermore, it can be said that the US has played a historic role in building regional peace and security throughout the decades in the Balkan region, "through its leading role in NATO-led peace support operations in the region, the cooperation of with the European Union for democracy, rule of law and economic reforms, along with the importance of the promise of accession to NATO and the EU, the US was an indispensable power for much of the post-Cold War period in the Western Balkans⁹.

⁶ IBID, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/european-integration/putins-influence-in-the-balkans-calls-the-eu-to-action-5791/> - (https://www.ips-journal.eu/) - 30.05.2022

⁷ Grigorij Mesežnikov, opiniononi me titull: "Si mund të ndikojë lufta e Putinit në Ballkanin Perëndimor", online: <https://visegradinsight.eu/how-putins-war-may-affect-the-western-balkans/>

⁸ Gergely Varga and Tamás Levente Molnár, Western Balkans Playbook: Competition for Influence of Foreign Actors, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade Budapest, 2021, pg. 15

⁹ IBID, pg. 15

In this regard, even after the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the region has been given special attention by the EU and the US, considering the reasons mentioned above.

Russian aggression towards Ukraine and the clarification of the state policies of the Western Balkan countries against the Euro-Atlantic future

The countries of the Western Balkans have expressed their intentions for more than two decades to be part of the European Union. Their democratization is seen as an inevitable process. However, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has clarified the political orientation of the countries of the Western Balkans. Serbia continues to remain an ally of Russia by not joining the list of countries imposing sanctions on Russia. The war revealed that Serbia's ties with Russia are stronger than its interest in becoming part of the family of states in the European Union.

Serbia's stance is a clear indication that Slavic-Orthodox fraternal ties have dominated, and that Serbian politics continues to be aligned with Russian politics, which, with its aggression in Ukraine, is clearly destructive and non-peaceful. This contradicts the principles proclaimed by the European Union, therefore, in this regard, the integration process of the Western Balkans region should focus more on the political approach that the states of this region have shown, against the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

In this sense, it is rightly stated that "one of the prerequisites for EU membership, the alignment of foreign policy, has proven to be the main challenge in the case of Serbia. In the wake of Russian aggression, the country has tried to maintain a policy of balancing, justifying it with Russian support of its position towards Kosovo and dependence on Russian gas, as well as with clearly pro-Russian public opinion. A pro-Russian rally held in Serbia on March 4, ostensibly in support of the Russian people affected by sanctions, attracted considerable international attention and was met with widespread condemnation. Experts pointed to the fact that the mainstream media, as well as the ruling parties, have been perpetrating pro-Russian narratives in Serbia for years¹⁰.

The democratization of the region is a necessity for progress, integration, peace and security

Although all the states of the Western Balkans have proclaimed democracy, and are determined in their journey towards the European Union, the advancement of democracy still leaves much to be desired. Integration in the European Union is closely related to democratization, a condition that must be fulfilled by the aspiring states, in this case the countries of the Western Balkans region. It is rightly emphasized that three decades from the beginning of the democratization processes, the countries of the Western Balkans have built a democratic 'facade' by holding elections, announcing legal acts that guarantee freedom of expression, or declaring with the constitution a strict system of controls and balances. In

¹⁰ Dejan Jović, Political Trends & Dynamics Vol. 1/2022 – The Russian invasion of Ukraine, The Russian invasion of Ukraine: what are the consequences for southeast Europe? Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, pg. 24

reality, however, political elites rely on informal structures, clientelism, and media control to undermine democracy¹¹.

The European Union has continuously helped in the democratization of the region, in this direction "the pre-accession requirements of the EU, as well as the aid and funds have made progress and economic, political and cultural transformation towards liberalization and democratization in the countries of the Western Balkans"¹². The governments of the countries of this region have an obligation to undergo democratic reforms, if they wish to become part of the European Union and Euro-Atlantic structures. Without raising the level of democracy, the region will continue to be in a state of insecurity and lack of economic development. This is due to the fact that the region continues to be under the fever of inter-ethnic clashes and political crises. In this case, it is worth mentioning the fact that, "democracy does not come easily, nor is it created quickly in an environment. Consolidating a democratic regime, especially in multi-ethnic countries like the entire Balkan region, is more difficult than homogeneous countries. First it must be desired by local people and governments, later external help can be obtained"¹³.

The proclamation of democracy by the countries of the Western Balkans continues to face various challenges. First of all, policy-making should change the nationalist approach for political gains, and the acceptance of the new global political reality, for the construction of regional peace and security. Each of the countries of the Western Balkans has its own specifics in building democracy, therefore, it is said correctly that "aid for democracy must be adapted to the specific needs and expectations of each country and treated with tact and respect for local democracy activists"¹⁴. It is worth noting that despite all these challenges, recent history has provided abundant evidence that human spirit and solidarity can overcome even the greatest obstacles and can be our strongest resource in the search for democracy and cooperation in Europe and beyond¹⁵.

Conclusions

From the analyzes and findings of various authors, it can be estimated that the Balkan region should not feel threatened, but of course, it should be alert and fully prepared against events. What can be said in the context of regional security is that events can change due to the nationalist politics that has prevailed in the Western Balkans for decades, and that continues to this day.

From what was discussed above, we can draw some conclusions:

- A completely new situation on the stage of global politics has arisen after the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine. The fear of spreading the war to other countries was great at first, but after a few months of fighting, the world seems to have calmed down, and the war is increasingly being seen as impossible to spread to other countries of the world.

¹¹ Marko Kmezić, Recalibrating the EU's Approach to the Western Balkans, *European View* 2020, Vol. 19(1), pg. 54 –61

¹² Cüneyt Yenigün, EU's role on the Western Balkan Democratization, *ICBS* 2008, pg. 108

¹³ *IBID*, pg. 114

¹⁴ Pavol Demeš, Twenty Years of Western Democracy Assistance in Central and Eastern Europe, *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, Stockholm Sweden, 2010, pg. 3

¹⁵ *IBID*, pg. 3

- Considering the role that Russia has had and has in the Western Balkans, it is natural to fear the eventual instigation of conflict in this region as well, even more so, when the strong ties between Serbia and Russia are known, as well as the continuous feeding of its population from nationalisms and hatreds towards other nations in the Western Balkans.
- The US and the EU were vigilant and took quick measures to prevent the war from spreading to other countries. The military aid you gave to Ukraine made Putin's plan for the quick subjugation and overthrow of the Ukrainian government, which is pro-Western and with EU and NATO membership goals, fail.
- The Russian aggression against Ukraine has clarified the political orientation of the countries of the Western Balkans. Serbia continues to remain an ally of Russia by not joining the list of countries imposing sanctions on Russia.
- The fear that existed in the countries of the Western Balkans at the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, after the passage of several months from the fighting there, the region feels more and more safe and not threatened by the war.

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