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Putin's influence in the Balkans calls the EU to action

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina defied Western unity on sanctions against Russia —reflecting Moscow's destabilising influence in the Balkans

In the series of the meetings with world leaders before the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin insisted that Russia is endangered and has a right to 'intervention' to solve disputes between the West and Russia. Led 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 went on, but Lenin's project, and it ought to be incorporated into Russia. Putin's rhetoric bears a striking resemblance to the narrative Slobodan Milošević employed to start the war in Yugoslavia in 1991 – and to today's narrative of a 'Serbian world' directed towards Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Now, weeks after the invasion started, 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 for war crimes. Some would say he resembles Milošević – only with nuclear bombs.

However, there are a few black sheep in Europe that defied the unified Western response: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina refused to introduce sanctions on Russia.

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 before to award Ukraine candidate status. Putin's increasingly desperate moves – making nuclear threats to everyone who dares to aid Ukraine, for instance – led to even his closest autocratic allies, such as Viktor Orbán, turn their backs at him. However, there are a few black sheep in Europe that defied the unified Western response: Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina refused to introduce sanctions on Russia. In Bosnia, it failed because of the

blockade of the Serbian and pro-Russian member of Presidency, Milorad Dodik.

The Western Balkans are Europe's weak spot

In this context, we can see ever more clearly how certain regimes in the Western Balkans played a role in paving the way for a wider conflict between Russia and the West, including the destruction of the well-funded Western security architecture in the Western Balkans. Moscow had worked towards the destabilisation of Europe and NATO for a long time, and primarily through two channels in the Western Balkans – politics and security.

The political channel operated in two ways. First, Putin tried to stall European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans. Second, he attempted to undermine NATO enlargement through the destabilisation of Montenegro and North Macedonia. In 2016, an attempted coup d'état and assassination of President Milo Djukanovic was supported by Putin's regime, as well as the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Church. In 2017, Russian intelligence supported the storming of parliament and attack on then opposition leader Zoran Zaev in North Macedonia.

From a security perspective, Moscow provided support to the project of changing borders in the Western Balkans through creation of three greater states: Serbia – the project of a Serbian world mirroring the Russian world –, Albania, and Croatia that would absorb little states and nations such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. In last consequence, this would lead to a new war in the Balkans.

Now, Putin's last trump card in Europe would be provoking a new conflict through his proxies in an attempt to divert NATO's and EU's attention to the Western Balkans.

Europe's opportunity to counteract

However, despite their weakness, Western Balkan states are more or less successfully resisting Russian hybrid aggression. The biggest challenge is regime in Serbia which is highly integrated into Russian and Chinese zone of influence. Formally, Serbia is 'militarily neutral', but it needs help to exit the grip of the Russian influence.

The EU should first finish its job in the Western Balkans and continue the integration of countries that are already negotiating.

The EU now has an opportunity to become more resolute in its foreign and security policy. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have applied for EU membership. This has evidently raised expectations elsewhere. This is why the EU should first finish its job in the Western Balkans and continue the integration of countries that are already negotiating. Montenegro, as a NATO member state that opened all negotiating chapters, could relatively quickly become part of the EU. This would come at an unsignificant cost for the EU considering its small number of inhabitants and its adaptable economy. More importantly, it would send a strong message to the Western Balkans and the democratic world – that EU does not give up on the vision of its founders.

Albania and North Macedonia, also NATO member states, could finally get long-expected dates for the start of negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs the EU's and NATO's attention because of its security issues, since there is still ongoing debate about the electoral legislation and organisation of the country which needs to be established on civic, and not ethnic, principles. Kosovo is likely to become a NATO member state, which would accelerate the comprehensive agreement with Serbia and remove the illusion about Kosovo joining greater Albania.

The international circumstances have changed – the Western world shows more unity and solidarity today than just a few days ago. This momentum should be used for a more agile EU policy in the Western Balkans – without forgetting that the ultimate priority is to stop the war in Ukraine.



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