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**RESEARCH STUDIES 26**

**UNITY VERSUS DIVISION IN  
SOUTH EAST EUROPE ON  
GLOBAL CONFLICT ISSUES**

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Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS), Sofia

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## **I Introduction**

In the period after the end of the Cold War and especially after the end of the regime of Milosevic the region of South East Europe has been dialectically oscillating and slowly moving to the objective set by the EU in 2003 in Thessaloniki of integrating it in the Union.

The Russian invasion and unprovoked full-fledged aggressive war against Ukraine shook the slow movement towards the integration in the geopolitical by nature EU. The realities of the reborn by Russia Nazi behaviour in occupied Ukrainian territories poses fundamental moral questions and requires brave political decisions. Graham Green's words in his novel "The Quiet American" – 'sooner or later ... one has to take sides. If one is to remain human', could be considered the moral and geopolitical compass and navigator in these turbulent times, including in the region of South East Europe.

It is not easy for many people in Europe, including in the Western Balkans to realize that South East Europe has become a front-line region in a war that aims to reverse the course of history and change the way of living in free, peaceful, democratic and increasingly prospering societies. The perception of a rising danger from militarist Russia in the Western Black Sea coastal countries Romania and Bulgaria is a fact of life.

The Russian aggression of 24 February 2022 marks a *Zeitenwende*, a watershed that makes us reconsider older concepts and inclinations. It forces us to think again what is the meaning of minimum standards of international law, how to oppose geopolitical revisionism and how to upgrade our resilience to the level of the one that Ukrainians demonstrate after 15 months of war.

Olaf Scholz defined in his speech to the Bundestag on 27 February 2022 the essence of the required resilience in this new situation:

*“Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers. Or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check”<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> Olaf Scholz, Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the Bundestag, 27 February 2022, at: [www.bundesregierung.de](http://www.bundesregierung.de) . Last visited on 24 March 2023.

## II Divisions in South East Europe

The traditional for the region of South East Europe tendencies of uniting and dividing on various grounds are presently experiencing head-on collision with a tectonic geopolitical paradigm shift, caused not by luckily arising new geoeconomic opportunities, but by a brutal aggressive war of the military nuclear giant and permanent member of the UN Security Council Russia against non-nuclear neighbouring sovereign Ukraine. South East Europe is just next door to the most devastating war in Europe after the Second World War.

The sad experience of “our own” Balkan wars in the 1990s intensified the various dividing tendencies. The continuing for a second year war of Russia against Ukraine strained the evolving, though not smoothly, trends towards unity and European integration. A contest of narratives and interpretations of the war, many of them generated in the workshops for fake news in the Kremlin and distributed by local regional agents bear an additional potential of increasing the cleavages and squeezing the unification developments in the Balkans.

A rather comprehensive list of the persisting divisions in South East Europe can be found in the Situation Analysis part of the Policy Recommendations of the 43d workshop of the PfPC Study Group for Regional Stability in South East Europe, 22-25 September 2022 in Sarajevo<sup>2</sup>. The analysis took place when the war of Russia against Ukraine has already been raging for seven months and reflected the actual at that time state of affairs.

On 6 December 2022 in Tirana the leaders of the EU and of its member states in consultation with Western Balkan leaders and in the presence of regional and international stakeholders adopted a Declaration after a summit held for the first time in the Western Balkan region<sup>3</sup>. The

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<sup>2</sup> Policy Recommendations, Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe (RSSEE SG) “Democratic Transition and Multi-Ethnicity – Opportunities and Challenges for Bosnia and Herzegovina and its South East European Neighbours”, Austrian National Defence Academy, 2022, at: [www.bundesheer.at](http://www.bundesheer.at)

<sup>3</sup> EU-Western Balkans Summit, Tirana Declaration, 6 December 2022, at: [www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu), 2022/12/06. Last visited on 13 March 2023.

conclusions of this EU Summit Declaration were agreed also by the Western Balkan Partners.

The importance of this document was that it reflected the developing process of integration of the Western Balkans in the EU, including the pending divisions and issues in the context of the escalating aggressive war of Russia against Ukraine. The summit sent a clear message about the risks for peace and security and highlighted the particular real dividing issues that have the potential to be affected by the war as well as their capacity to influence the evolving new balance of powers in Europe and the world.

The leaders of the EU member-states pointed to the fundamental standards of the accession process to the Union of the Western Balkan countries, mainly the need of credible reforms, fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits. At the same time they clearly defined the strategic role of the full alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and of the common actions on the Union's restrictive measures, provoked by the Russian aggression and the violation by Moscow of international law and human rights.

For many years the EU has been stressing that Serbia's progress towards EU membership depends on the country's alignment with the foreign policy of the Union. It has become crystal clear that the Yugoslav method of playing "equidistantly" does no longer work for Belgrade and is not in the interest of the region of South East Europe. In an article by the Carnegie Europe author, Dimitar Bechev, of 19 January 2023 with the title "Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU"<sup>4</sup> he reminds very directly of the expectation that Belgrade cannot sit on two chairs at the same time, especially if they are that far apart.

It is really sad that a large part of the Serbian society believes that Russia started the war on Ukraine because of NATO's intentions to enlarge. Actually by February 2014 the Alliance has not been changing its strategic posture after its expansion in 1997 and 2004. The so called

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<sup>4</sup> Dimitar Bechev, "Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU", Carnegie Europe, 19 January 2023, at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu> . Last visited 26 March 2023.

threat perception of the Russians from NATO is the euphemism of the real and sincere Kremlin's fear of the free, open and democratic East European societies with which Ukraine is also joining ranks via the European Union. The fact that Serbia with its limited capacity has added to its 'great powers balancing board' China, alongside with Russia, the EU and the United States does not change the fact it is geopolitically overstretching itself. While this is a sovereign Serbian issue it is also a major obstacle for the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU.

Serbia's Yanus-faced policy towards Russia and its aggressive war is a serious geopolitical issue for the region of South East Europe, especially of its two Black Sea countries and the rest of the Bucharest-9 states. While these states are preparing for an eventual Russian aggression, Serbia is playing double games in the rear of these NATO countries. And if the Roman god Yanus was able to see both in the past and in the future, Serbia's temporal orientation in this case is definitely to the past – similar to the anachronistic policy of the Nazi regime in Moscow. A recent research by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty investigative journalists provides a lot of evidence that at this moment Serbia has become the last refuge in Europe for the safe intelligence work of Russian operatives, kicked out from different European states and pretending to work as diplomats in Belgrade<sup>5</sup>.

Another dividing issue is the persistent lack of political will of Serbia to come to terms with the wrongdoings of the past and finally recognize the independence and sovereignty of the state of Kosovo. To be fair, five EU member-states – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain, also continue to send destabilizing impulses to the Balkans by not recognizing sovereign and independent Kosovo. All these dividing issues are welcome presents for the Russian foreign and security policy of hybrid warfare, an additional argument for spoiling the process of integration of South East Europe in the EU.

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<sup>5</sup> Maja Zivanovic, Sonja Gocanin, Riin Aljas, Mark Krutov and Sergei Dobrynin, Expelled Russian Diplomats With Spy Links Resurface in Serbia – Analysis, in: Eurasiareview news&analysis, at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/category/analysis>, March 13, 2023. Last visited 26 March 2023.

And finally, the unfinished business in a still fragmented Bosnia and Herzegovina has provided Moscow with diplomatic and political tools for exerting pressure in recurrent opportunistic circumstances.



### **III The Global Conflict Issues and Their Galvanizing and Polarizing Role in South East Europe**

Global conflict issues exert galvanizing influence on the international relations and domestic politics of the South East European countries. A brutal Russian aggressive war against Ukraine is such a galvanizing political factor.

Conflicting attitudes in an evolving multipolar international system is the second factor with galvanizing effect.

Contesting values of assertive autocratic regimes and democracy of enlarging EU and NATO also affect South East Europe and stimulate activity of the individual states in the region.

The flagrant violation of international law by the criminal regime in Moscow has both a galvanizing and polarizing political impact on the relations in the South East European region and the policies of the Balkan countries.

#### **1. The Aggressive War of Russia Against Ukraine**

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the concept, ideology, objectives, means and consequences of it after one year of war have been dealt in detail in an earlier study<sup>6</sup>. The imperial drive for restoring a "great power" status in combination with pre-emptively devastating a medium sized country and potential dangerous competitor of the Russian federation, including de-Ukrainizing the neighbouring state, more or less defines the wrong conceptual foundation of this war.

The practical performance of this concept, the ideological motivation of some Russians and the armed forces, the objectives and the means used by the invaders characterise them as the "Nazis" or "Ruscists" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The future of the Black Sea region, including of its Western

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<sup>6</sup> Plamen Pantev, Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine: Concept, Ideology, Objectives, Means, Consequences. Research Study 25, Institute for Security and International Studies, Sofia, February 2023, at: [www.isis-bg.org/ResearchStudies](http://www.isis-bg.org/ResearchStudies) , 62 pp.

coast countries Romania with 6% (244 km) of the sea coastal line and Bulgaria with 9.3% (378 km) of the sea coastal line is contingent on the results of the war. The bleak future of the Russian federation, the danger of producing another frozen conflict before driving the aggression further to the West generate additional geostrategic, economic and political problems for the Eastern part of the South East European region.

While the war of Russia against Ukraine has strong global implications, it has existential consequences for Europe and especially for the neighbours of the aggressor. That means that the EU and NATO are directly influenced by the ongoing occupation by Moscow of sovereign Ukrainian territories. If Russia wins in this war the dismantling of the European security order will continue on the whole continent. The victory by Ukraine will lead to the restoration of the rules-based security order in Europe that will exclude Russia for some time until its overall potential guarantees a peaceful foreign and security policy.

Though the reactions to the war of the so called “Global South” matter and should not be ignored, the major focus of the European countries, including in South East Europe, must be facilitating a Ukrainian victory. From this point of view it is a success for the Balkan region that Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo have joined the EU member-states from South East Europe in imposing sanctions on the aggressor, while the formal support by Bosnia and Herzegovina for this policy has been paralysed by Republika Srpska’s links with Moscow.

## **2. The Strange Multipolarity**

It will not be an exaggeration to say we live in a messy world: the present structural levels of the centres of power relationships in the international system functions in the situation of an unstable order:

First, the highest institutional regulative authority – the UN Security Council, is not efficient as one of its permanent members and major military nuclear power, the Russian federation, aiming territorial grab, initiated an aggressive war against a non-nuclear neighbouring country.

Second, Russia strives for elevating its status of big country to the status of “great power”, presenting only one argument – its huge strategic nuclear arsenal.

Third, India, the second or maybe first most populated country, is decades away from turning into a genuine power pole.

Fourth, China is close to reaching the status of a superpower.

Fifth, the United States is no longer the uncontested superpower, hegemon of the international relations system.

Sixth, the EU, an economic global centre of power, is still in the process of turning into an effective single geopolitical and strategic world actor.

Seventh, the so called P-5 countries, the permanent five members of the UN Security Council and “legal” possessors of nuclear weapons, because of Moscow, could not implement strictly the details of their joint pledge of 3 January 2022 that nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought<sup>7</sup>. For more than a year the Russian federation is sending nuclear threats, bluffs and compromises the last major treaty reducing nuclear arms and the danger of nuclear war – the START treaty.

It is no secret that the centres of power relationships of the international relations system generates galvanizing and polarizing influences on medium and smaller countries, especially with the conflictual structural level of the system. The war of Russia against Ukraine creates this polarizing effect on the states of South East Europe.

The problem in this case is not just of aligning because of belonging to or applying for membership in the EU and NATO, or because the multiple power poles attract specific interests of the Balkan countries. The problem is also not just of taking side in the great power competition, characterised today by the only two actors with encompassing power potential – the United States as the undisputable superpower with

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<sup>7</sup> Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races, January 3, 2022, at: [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) . Last visited on 27 March 2023.

uncontested military force, and China – the eventual soon-to-be full-fledged superpower.

The balance that the countries of South East Europe need in the present conflict situation, for which reason they either belong to the EU and NATO or strive for membership in these institutions – with the exception of Serbia, is not against a powerful country, but against the threats Russia produces<sup>8</sup>. The danger of extending Russia's aggressiveness to the west is real and taking sides today means to elect for security or for war. The sophisticated multipolar/bipolar world and competing centres of power are no excuse for the individual South East European states to make responsible, open and clear geopolitical choice. The regional orientations in the multicentric world also add significantly to the future of the global security order.

### **3. The Force of the Values**

The theory of foreign policy is clear on the decisive role interests play in defining the course of a state on the international arena. This same theory has no doubts, however, that the priority factor in formulating the foreign policy interests, including the geopolitical ones, is the value orientation.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its amorality and archaic imperialism brought in a forceful way the debate of democracy vs. autocracy. It is true that there was not a black-and-white alignment of the democratic and autocratic nations to this war. The general picture is much more nuanced.

However, the demonstrative failure of Russia to stay in the concert of civilized nations, the courage, heroism and resilience of the Ukrainian people and its leadership have a galvanizing ideational and political effect, including for the societies of South East Europe. The people of the Balkan countries were reminded by the Ukrainian example of the existential value of freedom and democracy. Putin galvanized something in our societies from which one cannot escape – when freedom and human dignity are at stake, our divisions should stop here. Kremlin's

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen M. Walt, Friends in Need: What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Alliances, Foreign Affairs, February 13, 2023, at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com> .Last visited on 27 March 2023.

“Russian World” (“Русский мир”) brought associations with the Nazi “Lebensraum”. Bucha, Mariupol and hundreds of other sites in Ukraine awoke memories of similar atrocities and war crimes in the past.

The Munich Security Report 2023 rightly highlights the intensification of autocratic revisionism<sup>9</sup>. The aggression against Ukraine is an attempt by an authoritarian power to eliminate a democracy as a sovereign nation-state.

Apart from an existential threat to liberal democratic countries autocratic revisionism as demonstrated by Russia and China, seeks to impose its interpretation of human rights, ensuring that collective rights as defined and upheld by the state take precedence over individual civil and political liberties. A logical continuation of the autocratic revisionism is the effort to dominate the digital realm, the developmental model, depriving it of such conditionalities as democracy, good governance, free markets, accountability and transparency. The weaponization of energy resources by autocratic regimes indicates the eventual future of the energy order. Autocracies left their mark on the military nuclear order, putting the world at risk. The behaviour of Russia, the accelerated piling of nuclear arms by China, the irresponsible demonstrations of North Korea, the nearing of capacity to produce nuclear weapons by Iran – all this should be honestly attributed to the above mentioned autocratic regimes.

#### **4. The Flagrant Violation of International Law by Russia As a Galvanizing and Polarizing Factor in South East Europe**

The invasion of Russia on 24 February 2022, as in 2014, when the same aggressor annexed Crimea from Ukraine, flagrantly violated the principles and norms of the UN Charter-based international law.

Moscow has already trampled down in 2014 a long list of international political and legal treaties<sup>10</sup>. It has been hard to be conceived by

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<sup>9</sup> Re:Vision, Munich Security Report 2023, February 2023, at: [www.securityconference.org](http://www.securityconference.org) . Last visited on 27 March 2023.

<sup>10</sup> The Helsinki Act of 1975 provides inviolability of borders unless peaceful negotiations lead to other solutions; The Belovezh Agreement of 1991 for the dissolution of the USSR provides for guarantees of the territorial integrity of the constituent Soviet republics and for the inclusion of Crimea as an autonomous part of the Ukrainian state; The Lisbon Protocol of 23 May 1992 of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belorussia, the Russian Federation and the United States about the mechanism of formalizing the

international legal scholars how was it possible for the Russian diplomacy to present so simplistic arguments to exculpate the aggression against Ukraine. The imperative international legal principle of self-determination has been highlighted by Russia as the sacrosanct UN Charter norm that has paved the way for the “righteous” military intervention in Ukraine in 2014. It is a notorious theoretical truism that imperative international legal norms and principles act in a system and no state or its foreign ministry is allowed to pick one and ignore the others to explain and justify acts that violate the UN Charter.

Russia never explained after 2014 why did it violate bilateral and multilateral legal and political treaties with Ukraine, in which the inviolability of the state borders of the two sovereign and independent countries has been agreed after voluntary, free and transparent negotiations. Moscow never explained why it deprived the Ukrainian state of organizing a referendum in Crimea as provided by the Ukrainian Constitution and legal system. Violating other countries’ national legal norms as well as international law instead of fulfilling them became a key feature of the Russian armed forces – regular and mercenary, of the servile diplomacy and all the other state institutions. The ‘rule of law Russia style’ has been displaced for years already by the administrative commands of the supreme leader in the Kremlin.

It took some time to realize that implementing the norms and principles of international law – a normal foreign-political strategy, has become part of the Russian war-making arsenal. The term “lawfare” was born recently – a combination of “law” and “warfare”, describing a form of asymmetric warfare. What is specific of Russia’s misuse of the international legal arguments in the context of its “lawfare”?

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accession of all 5 states to the START, and for Belorussia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan – to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968 as non-nuclear states; The Budapest Memorandum of 5 December 1994 of the United Kingdom, United States, Russian Federation and Ukraine that guarantees the security of Ukraine in light of the country’s accession to the NPT against nuclear attack and of its territorial integrity; The Bilateral Treaty of the Russian Federation and Ukraine of 2003 for the regulation of the border between the two states – signed by Putin and ratified by the Russian Duma, and, The Harkov Agreement of 2010 between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, signed by Medvedev and Yanukovitch, about the right of Russia to base its Black Sea Navy in Sevastopol by 2042.

A perfidious Russian hybrid foreign-political strategy is “Russia – a defender of international law”. In its aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 this argument was declared as the solid, undeniable ground for launching the war. The argument has been Russia had to defend international law against the acts of genocide against Russians in the Donbas region.

As already mentioned, the permanent mission of the OSCE in this area rejected categorically this statement. On its side the UN International Court of Justice issued on 16 March 2022 an Order, concerning the allegations of the Russian federation against Ukraine of genocide under the Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. According to Art. 59-60 of this Order:

*“59. The Court can only take a decision on the Applicant’s claims if the case proceeds to the merits. At the present stage of the proceedings, it suffices to observe that the Court is not in possession of evidence substantiating the allegation of the Russian Federation that genocide has been committed on Ukrainian territory. Moreover, it is doubtful that the Convention, in light of its object and purpose, authorizes a Contracting Party’s unilateral use of force in the territory of another State for the purpose of preventing or punishing an alleged genocide.*

*60. Under these circumstances, the Court considers that Ukraine has a plausible right not to be subjected to military operations by the Russian Federation for the purpose of preventing and punishing an alleged genocide in the territory of Ukraine.”<sup>11</sup>*

Genocide of Russians by Ukraine became another futile excuse of the treacherousness of the aggression. Ukrainian, other nations’ governmental and nongovernmental institutions and organisations have collected evidence of the Russian-committed genocide against Ukrainians. Sooner or later the perpetrators of this crime will be put on

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<sup>11</sup> UN International Court of Justice, 16 March 2022, Order, Allegations of Genocide Under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Ukraine v. Russian Federation), at: [www.icj.org/public/files](http://www.icj.org/public/files) , Art. 59-60, p. 13. Last visited 27. March 2023.

trial and convicted. The present Russian president Putin will surely lead the group of war criminals for his army's crimes against humanity and for the orders he has given to start the war and to commit so many evil acts and atrocities.

The Russian lawfare trick with deluding public opinion at home and abroad relies on the exploitation of the lack of legal expertise of the large majority of people. Claiming all Russia does in its international relations is based on international law requirements suggests the position of Moscow is the moral one ("Our war is just and the victory will be ours"). The defenders of international law are considered the moral leaders and examples in an anarchic international system.

Though this Russian "maskirovka" (disguise) has worked from time to time, the aggressive full-scale war against Ukraine pulled down the mask of this false policy. A famous aspect of Russia's "intellectual" contribution to the beloved "maskirovka" methods dwindled away. The total disunity between the Russian objectives in the war and contemporary international law led to the mobilization of the democratic people and countries of the world against the aggressive war. Furthermore, Russia's violations of international law led to unprecedented and ever mounting sanctions against the invaders. Tens of countries provide military support to the Ukrainian armed forces (3CY). Ukraine's international status grew up – the country is already a candidate for EU membership and a *de facto* member of NATO. Russia's status of a permanent member of the UN Security Council has been strongly diminished politically and morally. Moscow's isolation in the UN General Assembly – with the exception of 6-7 countries out of 193, is a fact of life.

Violation of international law is a heavy shock on vital interests of smaller states, for which the legal protection is among the few security guarantees. Most of the countries in South East Europe are small and violating the UN Charter by a permanent member of the UN Security Council definitely carries galvanizing and polarizing geopolitical effects. Rules-based international order serves as a protective shield for small countries. That is why small states are usually active defenders of



international law and its implementation. On 24 February 2022 the Albanian Ambassador to the United Nations and non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Ferit Hoxha, bravely asked the question: ‘Who is next after Ukraine?’, dealing a moral blow on the aggressor from the name of the big majority of small states in the United Nations Organisation.

Defending international law is one of the important sources of resilience of South East Europe. From this perspective the region can perform unifying acts in the international political and security forums and organisations.

## **IV The Regional Resilience of South East Europe as a Deterrent for Divisions and a Driver of Unity**

Three aspects of a resilient attitude by South East European states can serve as factors of overcoming divisions and of stimulating unity while facing the global conflict issues:

First, the continuing attraction of EU and NATO membership for Western Balkan countries.

Second, the real situation of South East Europe as a front-line region, necessitating a stronger voice against the aggressive power Russia.

Third, intensifying the activity for coping with the three most dividing issues – Serbia’s two-faced policy towards the EU, the threat of a separatist Republika Srpska and the continuing non-recognition of Kosovo by Belgrade and by five EU member-states.

### **1. Continuing Attraction of EU and NATO Membership for the Western Balkan Countries**

There are analysts who state that the “West’s greatest leverage” in the region of South East Europe – the prospect of accession to the European Union, has lost credibility in the recent years<sup>12</sup>. However, for the time being there is no better driving force of overcoming the belated modernization and achieving the needed stabilization of the Western Balkans than the EU integration process. Neither the Chinese projects of economic embrace, nor Russia’s centuries-old policy of pulling the wires of Balkan conflicts can replace a conscientious, benign, sometimes contradictory, but no doubt – progressive social process of improving the life of the people on the basis of democracy and the rule of law. The fact that Ukraine and Moldova have been included in this process does not mean the merit-based process, linked to governance reforms has been

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<sup>12</sup> The effects of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans, “Strategic Comments”, IISS, London, 26 September 2022, at: [www.iiss.org/publications/strategiccomments](http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategiccomments) . Received by e-mail as an individual member of the IISS.

given-up as a prerequisite for accession of any candidate country for EU membership.

The invasion of Russia in Ukraine imposed a new range of issues on the EU and on the European integration of the Western Balkan countries. The integration in EU is by nature geopolitical and the driving forces of this unique for Europe social experiment have never quitted this dimension of the developing process. If we consider just the change of foreign-policy attitude of the leading economic power of the Union, Germany and its *Zeitenwende*, the contenders for EU membership from the Western Balkans should register the huge shift of Berlin in the geopolitical and geostrategic direction. Germany's steadiness in this new situation turned to be the key factor of the Union's togetherness. Germany is the largest donor of economic and military help for Ukraine and Berlin became the major agent of shaping a "geopolitical Europe" in coordination with France, the UK and the USA. The Western Balkan states consider for sure this fundamental change of policy, paralleled in the same direction by Finland, Sweden and the other EU countries, especially of the B-9 group. Narrowing the region's own divisions and strengthening the unity against the aggressor is just logical to expect.

## **2. A Stronger Voice Against the Aggressor**

The geopolitical nature of the EU requires considering the developments in the Western and the Eastern parts of South East Europe as intertwined and systemically interdependent.

As already mentioned Romania and Bulgaria – two Black Sea and Balkan countries, belong to the front-line of NATO in the aggressive war of Russia in this region, alongside with the other countries of the Bucharest-9 group. The resilience of South East Europe is very much connected with the eventual enlargement of the war in the aquatorium of the Black Sea. Bulgaria and Romania are deeply involved in upgrading the NATO defense, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The success of these two NATO and EU countries in withstanding the pressure of the aggressive war of Russia against Ukraine will influence substantially the

region's capacity to respond adequately to the invasion against an EU candidate state.

Another aspect of the region's toughness and capability to neutralize Russia's imperial ambitions is connected with the individual Balkan countries' efforts to put their own houses in order – in the broadest sense of these words. There are issues of various kinds everywhere. Now is the time each EU and NATO member or candidate to prove democratic values and respect of international law matter in the individual countries' policy. It is vibrant democratic states and societies that can deal successfully with autocratic and imperial-minded aggressors. A special responsibility lies on the Serbian democratic forces in preventing a repetition of the Kremlin-backed “Russian world” (“Русский мир”) by the so-called “Serbian world” (“Srpski svet”), in which Belgrade would exert influence beyond Serbia's border. Many South East Europeans consider this formula as code word for irredentism and revanchism.

A potential third format of declaring the regional countries' position against the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the United Nations Organisation – both the General Assembly and the Security Council.

Defending international law is a very appropriate strategy for the small South East European states in the UNO. The countries of the region can be active in applying a standard method of interaction in the UN realm as insisting the Russian federation or the PRChina to explain publicly their vetoes or abstentions in connection with Moscow's aggression against Ukraine as a form of political pressure. The unprecedented assault on the principles of the UN Charter by Russia, the outrageous project of this permanent member of the UN Security Council and major nuclear power to erase a country from the map deserves strong reaction.

In the multilateral forums as the UNO it is possible to initiate and participate in building public support, a multilateral coalition in favour of Ukraine. This can take place by proposing a definition of this war as a “criminal act” and proclaiming Putin “a criminal leader”.

Proposing and supporting a UN General Assembly resolution of expelling the Russian federation from the United Nations and suspending by a 2/3 majority of votes its membership in the UN Security Council is another possibility. Unless such pressure is put on Moscow there are low chances of drafting and adopting a resolution for compensating the invaded country for the destruction, caused by the invader.

It is good to remind also of another possibility of exerting diplomatic pressure on Russia. Unlike all former Yugoslav constituent countries Russia has not passed in 1992 the procedure of joining the United Nations Organisation after the dissolution of the USSR. Many international lawyers consider this a violation of the procedural rules of the UN as a reason to consider the very membership of Moscow as illegal in the world organisation.

### **3. An Intensified Political Leadership to Deal with the Dividing Issues**

The fragile democratic societies of the Western Balkans, the faltering “rule of law” reforms, the threatening the stability disputes, the Serbian opposition to the EU sanctions against the Russian aggressor, Belgrade’s non-recognition of Kosovo, the persisting danger of Republika Srpska’s separatism from the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – all these issues do provide chances for the opportunistic Russian policy to meddle in the affairs of the South East European countries.

However, the balance of political forces in the region does not provide easy freedom of action for the Moscow diplomats and spies. Preventing a Russian political “success story” in the Balkan region depends mostly on the performance of the local political parties, activists and leaders. We can expect pro-Russian politicians to try to preserve the status quo of the existing divisions and reducing the unification potential. Following Russia’s war agenda is publicly unpopular and Russian foreign policy activism is not much visible. There are, though, invariant trends in Russia’s policy – the support of Vucic on Kosovo, keeping active formal relations with Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina and concentrating the activity of expelled Moscow’s spies from other European countries in Belgrade.

So, it is very much up to the Balkan state and government leaders that a pro-West or anti-West policy would dominate. Not taking clearly and openly sides is no longer a political option. The slightest chances of moving from crisis-management to normalization in the Serbia-Kosovo relations must be utilized. That would strengthen decisively the Balkan voice against the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Making the support of Ukraine a priority number one of the Swedish Presidency of the EU additionally helps the strengthening of the geopolitical identity of South East Europe as an EU/NATO zone of interest.

## V Conclusions

Shortly – it is time for a “*Balkan Zeitenwende*”. The aggression of Russia in Ukraine changed our continent, including South East Europe forever. Many political leaders realized they have lived and worked with illusions about their joint business with Putin. The annexation of Crimea – the first war of Russia against Ukraine in 2014, was not perceived adequately in many European countries and an aggressive, imperialist, revanchist, brutal and militarist Russia assumed it was following the right course.

On 24 February 2022 the Europeans, the EU leaders were awoken for the truism that peace must not be taken for granted and military power is needed to protect it. And Europe was quickly galvanized for the policy of saving freedom, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, realizing this was an effort of protecting our own free and democratic way of life. Berlin’s “*Zeitenwende*” symbolized the epochal turning point of the Union in its policy to Russia. EU is becoming a credible and strategically responsible military power with a meaningful contribution in NATO and with a potential to act globally in the strategic area in the years to come.

South East European countries and their societies need to realize that after Ukraine, if successful, Russia will continue its aggressive policy further to the west. The presence and membership in NATO is the only deterring argument for the Kremlin. There are again front-lines in Europe and there is no such place as “in-between”. Mental “*Zeitenwende*” is ripe for South East Europe too – by dealing with residual divisions and closer unifying in the European Union and NATO. It would be perfect if more *Wende* takes place in less *Zeit*.

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