

A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics

Editors

Jelena Džankić,
Simonida Kacarska
Soeren Keil



© European University Institute, 2023
Editorial matter and selection © Jelena Džankić, Simonida Kacarska, and Soeren Keil, 2023
Chapters © authors individually 2023.

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

ISBN:978-92-9466-408-2
doi:10.2870/275946
QM-03-23-131-EN-N



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

A Year Later:
**War in Ukraine and
Western Balkan (Geo)Politics**

Editors: Jelena Džankić,
Simonida Kacarska,
and Soeren Keil

European University Institute, Florence, Italy

Table of contents

Introduction	
A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo) Politics Simonida Kacarska, Soeren Keil, and Jelena Džankić	1
Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know It Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones	6
The Ukraine War: Response in the Western Balkans Dimitar Bechev	15
The War in Ukraine: Europe's Geopolitical Momentum. Will the Western Balkans Take Advantage of It? Klodiana Beshku	23
A “Zeitenwende” in the Balkans after the Russian Attack on Ukraine? Florian Bieber	30
Back on Track? The Impact of War in Ukraine on EU Integration of the Western Balkans Matteo Bonomi	39
A New Geopolitics for the Western Balkans, a Thessaloniki Moment for the Eastern Partners, and a New Big Project for Europe. The Effects of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on the EU's Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policies Davide Denti	46
The Russian War Against Ukraine as a Critical Juncture Defining a New Path for EU Enlargement Antoaneta L. Dimitrova	55
The Ukraine War and the Western Balkans: Fault Lines Uncovered Jelena Džankić	65
The Narrow Corridor Towards Democracy: EU Enlargement as an Opportunity to Establish Democratic States and Tackle State Capture in the Western Balkans Nisida Gjoksi	75
Stabilising the Western Balkans through a Common Market: Opportunities and Challenges Andi Hoxhaj	86

Russia Needs the Unstable Balkans Matea Jerković	98
The Impact of Geopolitics following the War in Ukraine on Autocratisation in the Western Balkans Damir Kapidžić	108
Enlargement Politics Based on Geopolitics? A Proposal for a Geopolitics-Driven Enlargement Policy Soeren Keil	117
A Push in EU Integration as a Silver Lining of the Ukraine Tragedy? Insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia Keiichi Kubo	125
The Western Balkans' EU Odyssey: Charting a Course through Geopolitical Winds in the Quest for Accession Milena Lazarević and Strahinja Subotić	134
Enlargement Back on the EU's Agenda: Western Balkans Moving Slowly Nowhere? Jovana Marović	147
Ukraine War: A Push towards Differentiated Integration for the Western Balkans? Marko Milenković	155
The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Western Balkans: What is at Stake? Ritsa Panagiotou	165
Missed Opportunities: Reheating Stale Policies in the Western Balkans after a Year of War in Ukraine Valery Perry	176
The Advent of Geopolitical Enlargement and its Credibility Dilemma Frank Schimmelfennig	185
The EU's Geopolitical Test: Western Balkans Amidst Global Security Challenges Senada Šelo-Šabić	194
Russia's War in Ukraine – An Imagination Challenge for the EU Corina Stratulat	201
The uncertain impact of the Russian–Ukraine war on the Western Balkans Milica Uvalić	210

The uncertain impact of the Russian–Ukraine war on the Western Balkans

Milica Uvalić*

Due to the emergency created by the Russian aggression on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the European Union (EU) has had to address a series of urgent tasks during the past year: from imposing different types of sanctions against Russia to securing future energy supplies due to the dependence on oil imports from Russia, and helping Ukraine through financial, military and other forms of assistance. The war has also led to a radical reconsideration of the EU's enlargement policy, to explicitly include countries in Union's eastern neighbourhood. As a gesture of strong support to Ukraine, in June 2022, the European Council decided to offer membership prospects to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – the “EU Associated Trio” – and, moreover, to grant Ukraine and Moldova the status of EU candidate countries.

What will be the impact of Russia's aggression on Ukraine for the Western Balkan states, particularly regarding their prospects of EU membership? There are a number of reasons for concern about the negative implications of the ongoing war for the Western Balkan countries that could also prolong the process of their entry into the EU. There are also some reasons for optimism, since the current situation could lead to new developments that could speed up the Western Balkans' accession to the EU. In any case, the future EU enlargement policy is bound to become even more complicated, requiring a thorough rethinking of its main policy instruments.

* University of Perugia, Department of Political Science.

Reasons for concern

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has significantly increased the security risks in the entire Western Balkan region. The implications of the war were immediately felt, as Russia tried to strengthen its influence in a region where several countries – Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – are not members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (in addition to Kosovo, already under strong United States' influence). The current strategic reflections on European security would therefore require a stronger participation of the Western Balkan countries in all EU policies. However, this is hampered by the fact that not all countries are fully aligned with EU's foreign and security policy, particularly as regards sanctions against Russia. Although Serbia has voted in favour of United Nations' Resolutions denouncing Russia over the Ukraine invasion (March 2022) and suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council (April 2022), and has also condemned Russia's annexation of the four Ukrainian regions (October 2022), it has not yet introduced sanctions against Russia. This has been unofficially justified by statements that Serbia's own experience in the 1990s has shown that international sanctions can be ineffective or even counterproductive.¹ In the meantime, Russia has been putting additional pressure on Serbia to obtain its continued political support (e.g., not to participate in international events where Russia has not been invited). Despite the risks that continue to particularly alarm Serbia's neighbouring countries, a Russian military intervention in the Western Balkans is unlikely (Bechev 2023).

The second concern regards the impact of the current energy crisis. The Western Balkans are less dependent on Russian gas compared to many other European countries, due to their still dominant reliance on coal and lignite in their energy usage (Uvalić 2023).² Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania currently

-
- 1 Despite very severe UN and EU sanctions from 1992 to 1995 against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, consisting of Serbia and Montenegro), Slobodan Milošević not only remained in power but was one of the signatories of the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. Similarly, the new UN sanctions introduced against FR Yugoslavia in 1998-99, due to its policies in Kosovo that led to violent clashes of the Yugoslav army and the Kosovo Liberation Army, did not lead to a normalisation of the situation. Not even did the 11-week bombing of FR Yugoslavia lead Milošević to surrender - he was forced to leave only after the October 2000 elections that brought victory of Vojislav Koštunica, the candidate of the democratic opposition, as president of FRY.
 - 3 The share of coal in electricity generation ranges from 44 per cent in Montenegro, 60 per cent in North Macedonia, 63 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 68 per cent in Serbia, to 95 per cent in Kosovo, while Albania's electricity production relies almost entirely on hydropower (Balkan Green Foundation 2022).

consume little to no Russian gas (European Parliament, 2022), while for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, imports of natural gas from Russia represent a relatively small share of their total energy consumption. Serbia has also concluded a new three-year contract with the Russian company Gazprom in May 2022, that has secured gas supplies at a price three times lower than on the spot market (Bechev, 2023). The main reasons for concern derive primarily from the consequences of increasing energy prices. Similar to trends in the EU, the enormous increase in energy prices has strongly contributed to the rapid rise in inflation, which in most Western Balkans has also reached double-digit figures in 2022. The rise in energy and food prices is currently having a significant impact on households real disposable income, further aggravating the socio-economic situation in all Western Balkan countries. The combination of these factors – triggered by the war in Ukraine – is likely to have a further negative effect on the implementation of the Green Agenda. The Western Balkans' Green Agenda sets various climate and environment-related targets (decarbonisation, reduction of environmental degradation, mitigation of climate change impact etc.; see Bartlett, Bonomi, & Uvalić 2022; Uvalić 2023). Despite commitments undertaken by the Western Balkan governments at the Sofia Summit in November 2020, the current energy situation is likely to postpone the Green transition due to its high costs, aggravating further the already precarious environmental situation in the region.

The third concern regards the EU's enlargement policy. With three more countries knocking on the door of the EU, there is a risk that enlargement to the Western Balkans – a process that has already been extremely slow and has become increasingly uncertain during the past decade – will be postponed even further. Now that nine countries aspire to join the EU instead of six, the prospects of EU membership for the Western Balkan countries may become even less certain. Despite the EU's current strong support of Ukraine, negative attitudes of some Member States could substantially delay any future EU enlargement – both to the East and to the South. The consistency of the EU enlargement policy has also been put into question. Something that took the Western Balkan countries many years to achieve – the status of EU candidate countries – has been granted to Ukraine and Moldova in only four months. Does this mean that the EU will abandon its approach based on merit and strict conditionality, to give precedence to security-driven criteria in its future enlargement policy? The Western Balkan countries have come a long way in adopting many EU laws and standards in conformity with the *Acquis*, given that the Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU were signed already

between 2001 and 2008 (only Kosovo’s agreement was delayed until 2016). The Associated Trio started legal harmonisation primarily after signing the Association Agreements with the EU in 2014. Recent comparisons between the two groups of countries suggest that three countries - Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia – may have had a higher degree of compliance with most EU accession criteria than the countries in EU’s eastern neighbourhood (Emerson 2021), but the assessment refers to the pre-war situation. Irrespective of where the three new aspiring members stand now regarding these criteria, they are very eager (quite understandably) to align with EU security and foreign policy, which is not yet the case with some Western Balkan countries.

Finally, if a negative attitude prevails among the EU Member States, leading to an indefinite postponement of EU enlargement (also to the Western Balkans), this could have negative repercussions for domestic politics. Further delays would inevitably diminish public support for the EU in the region, leading to backsliding in the reform process (for years pushed forward primarily by EU conditionality), a further consolidation of authoritarian regimes (Keil 2018) and establishment of even stronger ties with non-EU countries. Twenty years after the 2003 Thessaloniki EU – Western Balkan Summit, the EU strategy has failed to carry forward the promised EU integration of the Western Balkans (except for Croatia). In the meantime, the enthusiasm for EU membership in the region has fallen continuously and the EU’s image has strongly deteriorated. We are witnessing the “three Ds” - phenomena of disappointment, disillusionment and disenchantment with the EU (Teokarević 2023). In Serbia, recent public opinion polls suggest that only 38 per cent of its citizens think that EU membership would be a good thing for Serbia, the lowest per centage registered since 2009, and as much as 41 per cent think it will never happen (Regional Cooperation Council 2022).

Reasons for optimism

There are also some reasons for optimism. Certain developments caused by the Ukraine war could act in favour of the Western Balkan countries and accelerate the process of their accession to the EU.

First, there is a growing awareness in the EU and its institutions about the strategic importance of the Western Balkans. Years of multiple crises have seriously affected EU Member States and have had a direct impact on the “enlargement fatigue”, impeding further progress in EU’s enlargement policy. With the war in Ukraine, the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU is increas-

ingly viewed as a geostrategic investment in a stable Union, for the sake of its own political, security and economic interests. Rising geopolitical concerns in recent years have amplified the strategic importance of the Western Balkans in various policy areas – security, migration, trade, energy, environment, transport and energy infrastructure. This has led to joint and coordinated sectoral policies and cooperation in an increasing number of policy areas. These forms of cooperation are likely to continue in the future to the benefit of both the EU and the Western Balkans. In the current emergency circumstances, the strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkan region is more important than ever.

Second, the EU has adopted concrete measures to support the Western Balkans' EU perspective over the past year. There has been a renewed emphasis and confirmation of the Western Balkans' EU integration prospects in statements of high-level EU officials. There has been praise for Serbia's progress toward EU accession, expressed by Ursula von der Leyen when visiting Belgrade last autumn. European Commissioner Várhelyi in January 2023 announced that with the geopolitical and economic crisis caused by the Russian aggression of Ukraine, EU enlargement has returned to be one of the three priorities not only of the EU but also of its leaders, so today it is even more important to offer stronger support to the Union's neighbours in the Western Balkans in order to keep them on the European path and accelerate their integration with the EU.

More important than positive statements, however, are the concrete steps taken in this direction. In June 2022, after nearly two years of a deadlock, the long-awaited accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have finally been approved. In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been granted the status of EU candidate, leaving Kosovo as the only potential candidate in the region. The Berlin Process II was successfully launched in early November 2022, confirming the intentions of continued support and intensified cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans.

Third, there has been increasing economic integration of the Western Balkans with the EU economy over the last twenty years, leading to strong interdependencies (Uvalić 2019). The established economic links are unlikely to be seriously affected by the ongoing war. For the Western Balkan countries, the choice between the EU and Russia is a false dilemma, because in comparison to the EU, Russia is an insignificant economic partner. In 2021, 70 per cent of the Western Balkans' trade was with the EU (only 3 per cent with Russia), EU companies accounted for 61 per cent of FDI stock in the region, and 75-95 per cent of banking assets are owned by banks from EU Member States. The

EU has had a stable surplus in its trade with the region over the past decade. All Western Balkan countries are highly euroised economies, with savings deposits of households and enterprises held mainly in euros. Monetary policies are similar to those in the eurozone. Kosovo and Montenegro already use the euro, while most other countries link their national currencies to the euro. The introduction of the European semester in the Western Balkans has increased EU surveillance over economic policies and structural reforms. The EU and the Western Balkans are therefore closely interlinked, the EU remains the main economic partner of the Western Balkans, and this is unlikely to change in the near future.

Finally, the conditions may finally be created to move forward on Kosovo, an issue that has fundamentally blocked progress in EU enlargement policy for over 20 years (Bonomi & Uvalić 2019). On the side of the EU, five Member States have not yet recognised Kosovo’s independence, which clearly poses problems for Kosovo’s entry into the EU. On the side of Kosovo and Serbia, despite the “Brussels Agreement” (see Government of Serbia, 2013) signed on 19 April 2013, that should have led to the resolution of some key issues (such as the creation of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo) and paved the way towards normalisation, the dialogue has not only been stalled for long, but there has been a serious deterioration in relations over the past years. Still, the current security concerns in Europe posed by the ongoing war seem to have contributed to the “internationalisation” of an issue that until recently was primarily seen as a bilateral problem between Serbia and Kosovo. Russia’s interest to maintain strong influence in the region has increased the urgency of finding a solution for the Kosovo issue acceptable to both Serbia and Kosovo. The new EU normalisation agreement drafted by France and Germany, recently presented to Serbia and Kosovo, could possibly deblock the situation, in this way contributing to the stabilisation of the Western Balkan region and enabling faster progress towards EU not only of Serbia and Kosovo, but of all countries in the region. Is this a highly unlikely scenario?

The EU’s pressure on Serbia to align with the EU’s foreign policy is increasing daily, through continuous diplomatic measures by EU officials, key EU Member States, the European Parliament, the US, meant to influence the Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić to change his position on sanctions to Russia. Although Vučić will try to postpone taking any definite decision because of good relations that Serbia still maintains with Russia, he may not be able to do so indefinitely, especially since Russia’s relevance as a guarantor

of Serbia's territorial integrity is likely to diminish further. Russia's increasing distance from the West will render Serbia's ambiguous position unsustainable, so Vučić may finally have to take sides, for the sake of his own survival as a political leader and the future of Serbia. The Ukraine war may push Vučić to unequivocally opt for the EU over Russia.

As Russia's war in Ukraine continues, there are also intensified diplomatic efforts to pressure both Vučić and Kurti to accept the new EU normalisation agreement (the text is still kept secret at the time of writing). Vučić has been fully aware for some time that Kosovo is "lost" and seems inclined to accept the new EU plan for normalising relations with Kosovo, since otherwise, as he himself claims, Serbia could face international isolation and become a "pariah" (AP News, 2023). His recent statements appear to be a shift from his previous hardline rhetoric: 'I would not agree to lead the country that is alone and isolated' (AP News, 2023). Although he is facing strong opposition by some of the extreme, but also moderate, right-wing nationalistic parties in the Parliament that continue to claim that "Kosovo is Serbia", he could possibly be supported by some pro-EU parties. However, this would probably also require a much firmer promise on Serbia's entry into the EU. Such a direction, that could accelerate the country's entry into the EU, could bring him additional domestic popularity. Although political support for Vučić of his party followers remains high, there is a part of the population in Serbia that is deeply unsatisfied and disappointed. Protests by citizens and civil society organisations due to problems that directly affect their daily lives – air and water pollution, non-respect of environmental norms and labour laws, exploitation of mines to the detriment of rural development – are on the increase. Many of these activists are aware that Serbia's entry into the EU would facilitate the resolution of some of these problems, and therefore would welcome such a change in Serbia's course.

References

- Associated Press News. ‘Serbia could become “pariah” over Kosovo, president warns’. 2 February 2023. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-politics-kosovo-government-european-union-e180b7591ae-eaadd8781d820c4052116>.
- Balkan Green Foundation. *Energy Crisis in the Western Balkans: Measures undertaken amid energy price shocks*. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, September 2022. Available at: [Energy Crisis in the Western Balkans1664525063.pdf](https://www.balkan-green-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Energy-Crisis-in-the-Western-Balkans-1664525063.pdf).
- Bartlett, Will, Matteo Bonomi, & Uvalić Milica. *The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans: Assessing the Possible Economic, Social and Environmental Impact of the Proposed Flagship Projects*. Study requested by the AFET Committee, European Parliament, June 2022. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702561/EXPO_STU\(2022\)702561_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/702561/EXPO_STU(2022)702561_EN.pdf).
- Bechev, Dimitar. ‘Hedging its Best: Serbia Between Russia and the EU’. Carnegie Europe, January 19, 2023. Available at: <https://carnegie-eeurope.eu/2023/01/19/hedging-its-bets-serbia-between-russia-and-eu-pub-88819>.
- Bonomi, Matteo, & Milica Uvalić. ‘Serbia and the European Union’. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1052>.
- Emerson, Michael (with Steven Blockmans, Denis Cenuša, Tamara Kovziridze, & Veronika Movchan). *Balkan and Eastern European Comparisons. Building a New Momentum for the European integration of the Balkan and Eastern European associated states*. Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2 March 2021.
- European Parliament. *Russia’s influence in the Western Balkans. European Parliamentary Research Service*, 2022. Available at: <https://eprthinktank.eu/2022/06/09/russias-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>.
- Government of the Republic of Serbia. *Brussels Agreement. First agreement of principles governing the normalisation of relations*, 2013. Available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en/120394> and <https://normalizacija.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Први-споразум-о-принципима-који-регулишу-нормализацију-односа-ENG.pdf>.

Keil, Soeren. 'The Business of State Capture and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia'. *Southeastern Europe* 42 (2018): 59-82.

Regional Cooperation Council. *Balkan Barometer 2022. Public opinion: Analytical Report*. Sarajevo: Regional Cooperation Council. Available at: <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/139/balkan-barometer-public-opinion-2022>.

Teokarević, Jovan. 'The image of the European Union in the Western Balkans'. In *Integrating the Western Balkans into the European Union. Overcoming Mutual Misperceptions*, edited by Milica Uvalić. London: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer, 2023 (forthcoming).

Uvalić, Milica. 'Economic integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union: The role of EU policies'. In *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans - A Failure of EU Conditionality?* edited by Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, Marko Kmezić, 207-235. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Uvalić, Milica. *Implementing the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans: Just Transition and Political Barriers*. Aspen Institute Germany, Europe Program, 2023 (forthcoming).



Publications Office
of the European Union

ISBN:978-92-9466-408-2
doi:10.2870/275946
QM-03-23-131-EN-N



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

