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# REPERCUSSIONS OF THE UKRAINE WAR FOR KOSOVO AND REGIONAL STABILITY IN THE BALKANS

**IDLIR LIKA**
22 AUGUST 2022

## EXPERT BRIEF
### REGIONAL POLITICS

**Abstract:** Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created both risks and opportunities for regional stability in the Balkans. While there is serious concern that the instability triggered by the invasion may spill over into the Balkans, there simultaneously remains the possibility that Russia's war in Ukraine may inadvertently activate mechanisms that will lead to lasting security for the region. This paper argues that Russian threat perceptions triggered by the Ukraine war may lead the four NATO member states that do not recognize Kosovo (Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) to change their position on the issue, making it possible for Kosovo to eventually join NATO. Kosovo as a member-state of NATO would make the Balkans a more secure region and contribute to overall European security. On the other hand, however, the paper also points out that Russia's war in Ukraine will likely increase the tendency of the West to prioritize stability over democracy in the Balkans.

Since Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, policymakers and scholars alike have voiced serious concerns that the instability and violence could potentially spill over into the Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth Bosnia) and Kosovo are singled out as the countries most at risk given their legacy of violence and ethnic cleansing in the 1990s following the dissolution of Yugoslovia. Leading decision-makers from both countries have indeed called on Western leaders to grant them the protection of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and to even consider granting Bosnia and Kosovo a fast-track NATO membership.[1] Such fears are not unfounded as stability in both countries (but especially in Kosovo) is largely captive to Serbia, which though nominally non-aligned, is in practical terms a geopolitical ally of the Kremlin. Indeed, Serbia is the only country in the region that has not joined Western sanctions against Russia in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Serbia exerts great leverage over Bosnia and Kosovo by patronizing the Serbian entity (*Republika Srpska*) in the former and by blocking Pristina's international recognition in the latter case. Serbia's leverage over Bosnia largely comes from its leverage over Kosovo, which is why Belgrade spends most of its economic and diplomatic resources in trying to isolate Kosovo.[2] As such, given that broader regional stability in the Balkans largely hinges on the settlement of the Kosovo question, one of the purposes of this brief is to discuss how Russia's (ongoing) invasion of Ukraine might affect the potential for further recognition of Kosovo's independence and Pristina's prospects for joining NATO.

On a similar note, the paper will also delineate how Kosovo and its Western-backed unilateral declaration of independence has been used by Russia both to justify its own disregard for territorial integrity in the former Soviet space and to accuse the West of disregarding

territorial integrity elsewhere. Finally, the paper provides some reflections on how the threat perceptions triggered by the invasion of Ukraine might affect the tendency of the United States (U.S.) and the European Union (EU) to prioritize stability over democracy in the Balkans.

**The Kosovo question and Russian revisionism in the former Soviet space**

Kosovo has featured prominently in official Russian narratives justifying Moscow's support for secessionist movements in former Soviet republics since 2008. The standard discourse is that Western countries and NATO set a dangerous legal precedent by supporting the armed struggle of a breakaway province like Kosovo with the pretext of preventing a potential genocide, first by unilaterally bombing Serbia in 1999 without United Nations Security Council (UNSC) approval, then by inciting the overthrow of the democratically elected Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 (the so-called "bulldozer revolution") and finally by backing (and still sponsoring) Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008.

In turn, Russian President Vladimir Putin has consistently invoked this "precedent," starting from when he invaded Georgia in August 2008 to support Abkhazia and South Ossetia's secessionism, to when Russia annexed Crimea in February 2014 all the way to the run-up to the (ongoing) invasion of Ukraine when Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of the two breakaway provinces in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's republics.[3] Even the overthrow of Milosevic (framed as the first Western-backed "color revolution") is used as an analogy to lambast the West for its role in allegedly staging a coup that overthrew the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014.[4] Putin arguably invokes the overthrow of Milosevic also as a justification for his absurd claims that Russian soldiers are in Ukraine to overthrow the "Nazi" ruling elite in Kyiv (i.e. "de-Nazify" Ukraine).

Revisionism in the former Soviet space has been more or less a constant of Russian foreign policy, and cannot be confined to only the Putin regime. Indeed, as far back as during the rule of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, Russia supported Armenia to occupy the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan and intervened in Moldova to support the separatist province of Transnistria, which has been *de facto* independent ever since.[5] The dynamics of Russian interventions in Azerbaijan, Moldova, Georgia and now in Ukraine are almost identical and all point to one of the major pillars of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy: destabilizing former Soviet republics in order to keep them under the Russian sphere of influence.

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It bears emphasis that while Russia has been using Kosovo to justify its disregard for territorial integrity in the former Soviet space, elsewhere it has used Kosovo to accuse the West of disregarding territorial integrity. Such has been the case in Syria where, under the pretext of preserving Syrian territorial integrity against "Western-backed terrorists," Putin intervened in 2015 to keep in power a genocidal regime responsible for the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens and the displacement of millions more.[6] Similarly, the use of the analogy of the Western-backed overthrow of Milosevic to justify the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine is utterly baseless as the former Serbian President is also responsible for the genocidal mass killing of Bosniak Muslims and Kosovar Albanians during the Yugoslav dissolution wars of the 1990s.

Finally, Russia has been invoking Kosovo since 2008 not only to justify its own revisionism toward former Soviet countries, but also as a way to show off its resurrected great-power status under Vladimir Putin.[7] This is the case because for Russia, Kosovo and NATO's 1999 bombing of Serbia symbolized Western unilateralism and a stage of economic and political weakness that must somehow be overcome one day. For Putin, that day was supposed to arrive with the invasion of Ukraine.

All this, however, was supposedly not received well by regime-controlled tabloids in Serbia which have suddenly slammed Putin for drawing parallels between Kosovo and his parastates in the Donbas. "Putin stabs Serbia in the back, trades Kosovo for Donbas" averred *Srpski Telegraf*.[8] However, this seems to be a glitzy regime strategy intended to show Europe that Belgrade can take anti-Russian stances.

**Kosovo's prospects for joining NATO**

International crises both create serious risks and provide opportunities for countries. In the past two decades, Kosovo has calibrated its responses to international crises so as to maximize the prospects for further recognition of its independence. For instance, during the initial years of the Arab Spring (2011 – 2013), Kosovo adopted a very active foreign policy by rhetorically supporting the popular uprisings in the Arab countries, forging close diplomatic relations with post-uprising elected governments in Egypt and Libya and

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openly calling for Western military intervention against the Assad regime.[9] This foreign policy line paid off handsomely for Pristina as Yemen, Egypt and Libya indeed recognized Kosovo during their short-lived democratic transition periods.[10]

The war in Ukraine offers Kosovo even greater opportunities in this regard. Kosovo up to now has displayed a staunchly pro-Western stance by supporting Ukrainian territorial integrity, joining Western sanctions against Russia and by offering refuge to several Ukrainian journalists who fled the war.[11] Kosovo's stance is particularly worth noting as Ukraine does *not* recognize its independence. As a matter of fact, with the notable exception of the three Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), *none* of the remaining 12 former Soviet republics recognize Kosovo.

The war in Ukraine and Pristina's staunch support of Kyiv has the potential to become a game changer as it could facilitate Kosovo's path to NATO membership. More specifically, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered serious threat perceptions among European countries and this might lead the four NATO member states that still do not recognize Kosovo (Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) to change their stance, thus opening up the way for Kosovo to join NATO.  The position of these four NATO members is of vital importance for the security and stability of the Balkans. By recognizing Kosovo, they can reverse the greatest source of leverage Serbia has over the Balkans and as a result also deny Russia (and China) the opportunity to stir up trouble in the region.[12] By increasing the threat perception in Europe, the Ukraine war will likely push these four NATO non-recognizers to be more accomodating toward Kosovo and eventually change course on the issue of recognizing its independence.

Greece is regarded as the most likely to change its stance on Kosovo given that among the four non-recognizers it is the most directly threatened from any potential instability (and violence) in the Balkans.[13] The high-level diplomatic visits between the Kurti and Mitsotakis governments since last year are evidence of the *raprochement* between Pristina and Athens and the Ukraine war will definitely give further impetus to their cooperation. Moreover, since the *Prespa Agreement* in June 2018 that resolved the decade-long name

dispute with North Macedonia, Greece has abandoned its obstructionist role in the Balkans and there seems to be no difference among mainstream Greek parties in this regard. All this gives further hope that Athens will now be much more accomodating toward Kosovo.[14]

On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has certainly heightened threat perceptions for Slovakia and Romania. The former directly borders Ukraine, has received thousands of Ukrainian refugees up to now and is one of the European countries most involved in providing military aid to Kyiv.[15] The latter borders Moldova, part of whose territory has been under Russian occupation for the past 30 years and which is feared to be the next target of Russian aggression. Romania also faces the bleak prospect of Russian hegemony over the Black Sea if Moscow manages to capture the Ukrainian port city of Odessa.[16] Again, in the name of shoring up security in Europe, both countries may be induced to soften their stance on Kosovo. Finally, Spain's position among the four non-recognizers might be more difficult to tackle, but Madrid is aware of the huge security benefits to be reaped for Europe if the Balkans are stabilized.

**Stability versus democracy in the Balkans**

Western countries have a robust record of promoting regional strongmen in the name of preserving stability in the post-Cold War Balkans. The most notorious example of this was the West's appeasement of Slobodan Milosevic leading up to the 1995 Dayton Peace Accord that ended the Bosnian War, during which Milosevic was hailed as a partner for peace.[17] Likewise, Western countries supported the current Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic to monopolize power for thirty consecutive years in the tiny Adriatic republic (1990–2020) and they have not held him to account for his assistance in Milosevic's war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia up to 1995.[18] The Russian threat perceptions triggered by the Ukraine war will likely accentuate the West's tendency to prioritize stability over democracy in the Balkans and this in turn will reflect itself in weakening the rule of law and increasing corruption in the region. Recent examples that prove this point are not hard to come by.

The Serbian strongman, president Aleksandar Vucic (a former minister of Milosevic during the 1990s), was reelected by a landslide in April on the glitzy slogan "Peace, Stability, Vucic."[19] Despite his domestic authoritarianism and open overtures to Moscow, the U.S. and the EU continue cozying up to Belgrade by hailing Vucic's regime as "the political and economic leader in the region"[20] and by rhetorically throwing their weight behind Vucic's "Open Balkan" project. "Open Balkan" (also known as "Mini-Schengen") is a joint cooperative framework launched by Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia in October 2019 that supposedly aims

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to reduce trade barriers and promote economic cooperation in the Western Balkans. It was originally put forward as an idea by the Trump Administration and recently even obtained the "blessing" of Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov.[21]

While "Open Balkan" is built on the premise that economic normalization will eventually spill over into political cooperation among regional countries, the logic is flawed.[22] The most important problem in this line of thinking is that "Open Balkan" rests on highly asymmetrical power dynamics. Serbia's population and economy is disproportionally larger than that of Albania and North Macedonia. Equally important, three of the six Western Balkans countries (Bosnia, Kosovo and Montenegro) have refused to join "Open Balkan." Not coincidentally, the countries which have refused are *precisely the* three Balkan nations that Belgrade seeks to destabilize and which, as a result, are deeply suspicious of Belgrade's motives. If we also add the fact that no cooperative framework in the Balkans can function unless Serbia first recognizes Kosovo, in its current form "Open Balkan" appears to be a platform for Serbia to use its economic superiority to further its political agenda. The fact that the U.S. and the EU have renewed their support for this Serbian-led effort more than three months after Russia invaded Ukraine demonstrates the degree to which the West is invested in prioritizing stability over democracy in the Balkans.

Another recent example that proves this point comes from Montenegro. In the tiny Adriatic republic, DPS's uninterrupted power monopoly was suddenly broken after the August 2020 general election when a pro-Russian/pro-Serbian – led bloc formed a new government with help from the small civic Montenegrin party *United Reform Action* (URA).[23] To be sure, the coalition government was already very weak but since Russia invaded Ukraine, Western countries strongly pressured URA to withdraw from the coalition and form a new minority government. The new URA-led minority government was indeed formed in mid-April 2022, but could do so only with the support of President Djukanovic and his DPS. Even though the new government is hailed by the West as "liberal" and "progressive,"[24] the return of DPS will likely torpedo any domestic effort to advance democracy and fight corruption in Montenegro.

**Conclusion**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created both risks and opportunities for regional stability in the volatile Balkans. On the positive side, the current conflict holds the potential to facilitate Kosovo's path to NATO membership as the four NATO non-recognizers may be inclined to change their stance after witnessing the threat of Russian revisionism for Europe. With Kosovo becoming a NATO member, the Balkans will be more secure. On the other hand, however, Russia's invasion of Ukraine will likely increase the West's tendency to prioritize stability over democracy in the Balkans and this in turn will reflect itself in weakening rule of law and increasing corruption in the region. The challenge for liberal and democratic-minded forces in the Balkans is to convince their Western mentors that such a trade-off is unsustainable in the long run.

## Endnotes

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24- As a matter of fact, the prime minister of this minority government is URA's leader Dritan Abazovic who is an ethnic Albanian. This is a first for Montenegro and for the entire region.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idlir Lika is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Istanbul Gelişim University where he teaches diplomatic history, ethnicity and nationalism and Balkan politics courses. He received a BSc from Middle East Technical University, an MA degree from Bilkent University and a PhD in International Relations from Koç University. Lika specializes in comparative politics of ethnicity and nationalism with a regional focus on Southeast European / Balkan countries. The article version of his dissertation "Nationhood cleavages and ethnic conflict: a comparative analysis of postcommunist Bulgaria, Montenegro and North Macedonia" published in _Mediterranean Politics_ was selected as runner-up for the 2021 "Richard Gillespie Mediterranean Prize". His research has been published in top area studies journals such as _Mediterranean Politics_, _Problems of Post-Communism_ and _Ethnic and Racial Studies_.