

The War in Ukraine and the Western Balkans

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

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THE ISSUE

Russian President Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine is merely a continuation of the war it began 2014. Although he thought he would be able to seize Kyiv in a matter of days and install a pro-Kremlin regime, he likely miscalculated his military capabilities and the resolve of the Ukrainian army. Putin is now focusing on the next phase of Russia's war, which focuses on the Donbas region. Given Russia's military shortcomings in Ukraine, many in the West are already celebrating his failure. However, it is too early to do so, in part because Putin still has a powerful non-military tool at his disposal: information weapons. Russia has intensively used these information weapons since Putin came to power, and it is searching for weak links to distract the West. In particular, Russia is exploiting Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans as potential new avenues to undermine Europe where Russia resorts to its well-known playbook of exploiting existing divisions and exacerbating secessionist tensions. The war in Ukraine also has an impact on the Western Balkans and the West should look for early warnings in the information space, as they are good indicators of Russia's moves. Understanding these operations is essential in shaping an appropriate response from the West. That response must actively challenge and counter Russia's information operations in the Western Balkans.

KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

- **Russia is waging an information war in the Balkans.** The West must actively challenge and counter Russia's information operations in the region. The West should look for early warnings in the information space, as they are good indicators of Russia's moves. NATO should send its Hybrid Information warfare team to the Western Balkans. The Western embassies should actively debunk Russian disinformation campaigns that promote anti-Western sentiments and threaten the stability of the Western Balkans. Western embassies should issue statements responding to Russian propaganda in real time. They should make a concerted effort to appear in local media and debunk Russian propaganda publicly. The Russian government is running active and targeted social media campaigns. The EU and the US have been strengthening media in the Balkans, but such investments must be targeted towards running more effective social media accounts, since many

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Russia launched its illegal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, which is the continuation of Russia's war since 2014. The initial Russian offensive consisted of 4 main advances: on Kiev from the North, on Kharkiv from the Northeast, on Donbass from the East, and on Kherson/Mariupol from the South. Russia's advance on Kiev reached the outskirts of the city, but failed to take the capital city. Russia's advance on Kharkiv similarly failed to advance beyond the outskirts of the city. Russia's offensive in Donbass succeeded in reaching Mariupol from the East, but failed to achieve a broader breakout. Russia's offensive in the South was the most successful, capturing Kherson and reaching and capturing Mariupol from the West.¹

Russia retreated back to the Belarusian border from its failed assault on Kiev in late March, and retreated from its failed assault of Kharkiv in early May. Russia then redirected those troops to the Donbass front where it began the second phase of its offensive. With much more limited war aims, Russia is currently attempting to seize the entirety of the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts. Despite the increased concentration of Russian forces in the Donbass, Russian troops are making slow and limited gains. A recent breakthrough near Papsna may allow Russian forces to encircle the large Ukrainian city of Severodonetsk. However, even if Russia seizes these cities, they still have to capture the well-defended cities of Slavyansk and Kramatorsk to seize the entirety of the Donbass. If the rest of this war is anything to go by, achieving this task will be a long and bloody affair.

How did we get to this point in the war in Ukraine? Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 should not surprise the West given that Putin has been working on his goals for more than two decades. The West failed to counter Russian hybrid wars and actively challenge Moscow's information operations. The West has taken numerous defensive measures to prevent Russia from interfering in their elections or manipulating the information space. However, the West did not use offensive information measures to counter Russian information operations globally. The West also failed to constrain Putin's financial illicit activities and global corruption. The West also naively treated Putin as a partner and allowed him to escalate military tensions and then de-escalate the crisis that he manufactured by positioning Russia as a mediator.

PUTIN'S GOALS AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Putin described the fall of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, which prevented Russia from remaining one of the world's great powers. During his two-decade tenure, Putin has worked to restore a multipolar world. Putin also wants to recreate a sphere of influence within the former Soviet Union and control his near-abroad, especially Ukraine and Belarus. Putin has also aimed to break NATO and demonstrate that the alliance will not honor its Article 5 commitment

of them are dry and not appealing to the average consumer. Finally, the West should sanction media platforms that assist Russia's information warfare activities in the Western Balkans.

- **The Kremlin with the help of its proxies is undermining the peace in the Western Balkans.** Putin profits from creating the risks of war and then de-escalating the crisis he created. The West should closely monitor Russia's activities via its proxy groups in the region as Russia might provoke violent protests from pro-Russian nationalists. The US, the UK and especially the EU should impose sanctions on individuals who destabilize the region.
- **The role of NATO and the EU must be protected.** As Putin attempts to undermine NATO and the EU, the West should emphasize clearly that NATO will defend its members from Russia's information and conventional warfare in the Western Balkans. The EU should signal its clear commitment to the Western Balkans. NATO should send a Hybrid Warfare team to counter Russian information operations. NATO should also send additional troops to Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **Russia might also use the Western Balkans to evade sanctions through money laundering.** The West should not allow regional actors to assist Russia with sanctions evasion and the EU should join US and UK efforts to sanction individuals that threaten the stability of the Western Balkans. The EU should also advocate for sanctioning media platforms that amplify disinformation and assist Russia's information warfare efforts.

to its members. Although Russia does not have a "grand strategy" for the Western Balkans, the region is Europe's weak link and it is part of Moscow's game. Putin has no intention of occupying the Western Balkans. Putin wants to profit from creating the risks of conflict in the Western Balkans and then de-escalating the crisis he created by positioning himself as a mediator.

Given the ethnic and religious differences rife among the Western Balkan states, Putin understands well that a

“divide and conquer” strategy works well in the region. Putin’s campaign in the Western Balkans is a case study of the methods it uses to pursue its global objectives. Now that the Kremlin is using those differences to trigger new tensions via its proxies in the Western Balkans, continued peace in the region is no longer a guarantee. Russia’s “modern war” and “nonmilitary methods” playbook is well-known- It includes demonstrations, sabotage or subversion accompanied with the information campaign. This is a prelude to Russia’s mediation process and conducting peacekeeping operations.

Why does Putin continue to push the region to the brink? Because doing so allows him to accomplish three of his chief foreign policy objectives in one fell swoop: to invalidate the collective self-defense of NATO, to weaken the EU; and to distract the West from the war in Ukraine. By successfully escalating tensions in the Western Balkans towards outright violence, Putin can functionally demonstrate that neither NATO, the EU, nor their constituent societies are credible partners for any of the peoples of the region.

Russian investments in the Western Balkans are strategic despite their limited results. Russia strategically invests in media, energy, sports and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which exploits for its own ends. One of the primary factors that has made the Western Balkans an obvious target for Putin is the stalling out of EU and NATO enlargement. Russia employs constant information operations to destabilize the countries and delegitimize the EU and NATO. Russia provides large amounts of arms to the region, and invests in critical infrastructure such as gas to exert influence on its governments. Soft power, too, plays an important role, particularly through the longstanding religious and cultural ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Serbia acts as a vital player in the Kremlin’s bid for the Balkans. The Serbian government and the Serbian Orthodox Church’s allegiance to Moscow are undergirded by shared religious and cultural ties—and mutual isolation from Western powers. The Serbian President had elections in April 2022, during which he promised to maintain peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Serbia’s President Alexander Vucic benefits from the frozen conflicts in the Western Balkans that allow him to position himself as the region’s primary stabilizer. President Vucic is a rational actor whose main goal is regime survival and he will not purposely take actions that threaten the survival of his power. Since he came to power in 2012, Vucic has played a game of balancing between Russia, China and the West. With the war in Ukraine, he emphasizes Serbia’s neutrality and he refused to impose sanctions on Russia in order to align Serbia’s policy with the EU. As part of Russia’s hybrid warfare strategy, the Kremlin often uses the far-right groups to organize protests. Indeed, Serbia also had several pro-Russian protests in support of Putin’s war in Ukraine.²

This strategy of “neutrality” has worked relatively well so far. Serbia was able to attract China’s illicit investments and even its military support when it delivered military drones in 2021 and the FK-3 missile systems in 2022.

Chinese investments have also allowed Belgrade to become a “smart city” that is covered with Chinese facial recognition cameras. Meanwhile, Russia has sold significant amounts of military hardware to Serbia, including Kornet anti-tank missiles, Pantsir S1 air-defense systems, and fighter jets, to name a few. Russia and Serbia have also held regular joint military exercises called “Slavic Shield”, during which Russia deployed its most advanced S-400 anti-aircraft missiles in 2019. Serbia also hosts Russia’s “Humanitarian Center” in Niš, which is strategically located close to Kosovo and Camp Bondsteel.

Serbia also relies on Russia’s gas, which Moscow uses as a negotiation weapon. Moreover, Serbia is also a target of Russia’s global nuclear energy market. In December 2021 the government of Serbia and ROSATOM signed an agreement to build a Center for Nuclear Science and Technology.³

Russia’s leverage also extends to the information space. Russia opened Sputnik in Serbia in 2014, which is a state-funded media outlet that amplifies the Kremlin’s information warfare by spreading propaganda and disinformation in the region. Sputnik has been recently promoting Russian vaccine propaganda⁴ and continues with pro-Kremlin messaging related to the war in Ukraine.⁵

As Bosnia and Herzegovina has three main ethnic groups: the Bosniaks, the Serbs and the Croats, religious and ethnic tensions are rapidly rising, and Russia has deliberately exacerbated these tensions. Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb leader who threatened to secede has fomented nationalist rhetoric using local media platforms. At the same time, Bosnia’s Croats have insisted on having their own “third political bloc,” which would divide the country more than it already is. Russia has actively supported the Croats’ efforts for many years to exacerbate tensions. Also, Christian Schmidt’s appointment as the new High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina is not recognized by Russia without the authorization of the UN Security Council. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, said that the Bosnian Serbs, “rightfully refuse to recognize [Christian] Schmidt as a legitimate representative of the international community.”⁶ During the war in Ukraine, Russia has also been exploiting existing tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnian Serb nationalists also organized a rally in support of Putin’s war in March in Banja Luka. This event was supported by the Night Wolves, Russia’s motorcycle club⁷. They are often described as Russia’s government proxy group that operates across Russia and Europe.

In Montenegro, Russia attempted an outright coup d’etat in 2016 just before the country’s successful bid to join NATO. Russia’s most powerful influence tool in Montenegro has been the Serbian Orthodox Church; Putin worked through the Church to stymie Montenegro’s independence from Serbia in 2006, as well as its 2017 NATO membership.⁸ Montenegro is important for Russia because of its location on the Adriatic Sea and its associated naval presence. Moscow’s exploitation of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro mirrors its earlier approach to Ukraine. In 2014, the Russian Orthodox Church’s branch in Ukraine actively supported Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

Likewise, in Montenegro, the Serbian Orthodox Church often undermines pro-NATO and pro-Western initiatives. Both churches downplay the existence of Montenegrins and Ukrainians as distinct peoples, and deny the legitimacy of the countries' indigenous Orthodox churches.⁹

The Kremlin also benefits from ethnic tensions in Kosovo. Although Kosovo's population is more than 90 percent ethnic Albanian, Serbs see the region as an ancestral homeland that contains some of the Serbian Orthodox Church's holiest sites. Russia benefits from this frozen conflict and Moscow has made it clear that no recognition is possible without Russia's approval in the UN. Vladimir Putin often cites Kosovo as a precedent to justify Russia's actions in Ukraine.¹⁰ Putin often argues that illegal use of force by NATO and Kosovo's declaration of independence allow him to mirror this approach in Ukraine.

For Putin's goals to work, Russia does not need to "occupy" the Western Balkans. Instead, Russia can employ its well-known, non-linear warfare methods. For

instance, Russia can use Russian agents to organize and lead demonstrations and paramilitary activities. Russia already used this approach in Ukraine with the importation of "little green men."¹¹ Moscow, can also intensify the use of information operations and cyber-attacks, which is the part of Russia's information warfare playbook. Russia already used this strategy in Montenegro. Before it joined NATO, Moscow used anti-NATO propaganda and the hacking group APT 28 (Fancy Bear) launched cyber-attacks.¹² To prevent Russia from undermining the stability in the Balkans, the West should put Russia on defense. Events such as NATO's military exercise in North Macedonia in May, EUFOR military exercise in Bosnia and Herzegovina in March or the establishment of American Special Forces base in Albania in January are important steps for countering Russia. However, NATO should put additional troops in Brčko in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³

RUSSIA'S INFORMATION WARFARE PLAYBOOK

Unlike the West, Russia considers information as a weapon. Indeed, in 2021 Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu declared that "information has become a weapon."¹⁴ Russia also published a new National Security Strategy in 2021 in which it devoted a separate section to information security. It is important to note that Russia understands information security in a different way than the West. While many in the West draw a distinction between "information operations and "cybersecurity", Russia actually includes "informational-technical" and "information-psychological" aspects. Russia used psychological manipulation during the Cold War as part of its "active measures", which is Russian political warfare tool.¹⁵ Today, the Kremlin adapts "active measures" to the modern world by making use of new technologies and social media platforms.

Russia's National Security Strategy does not acknowledge the use of information operations offensively. However, a close read of the Russian Ministry of Defense definition of information warfare refers to the offensive purpose of information operations. Namely, the Russian Ministry of Defense defines information war as the confrontation "between two or more States in the information space with the goal of inflicting damage to information systems, processes, and resources, as well as to critically important structures; undermining political, economic, and social systems; carrying out mass psychological campaigns"... "in order to destabilize society and the government."¹⁶

Furthermore, in 2016, General Chief of Staff of the Russian Army Valery Gerasimov discussed the impact of "color revolutions" and the use of information operations. According to Gerasimov, "Essentially, any 'color' revolution is a state revolution organized from without. ... Information resources have essentially become one of the most effective types of weapons. Their extensive use

makes it possible to "shake up" the situation in the country from within in a matter of days." This statement makes sense because a close read of the NSS emphasizes that Russia merely defends itself from Western efforts to use combined technical and psychological information tools to undermine its "cultural sovereignty" and "spiritual and moral values.

Despite Shoigu recently blaming the West for establishing propaganda centers in Eastern Europe, Russia's new NSS emphasizes expanding cooperation with foreign powers on information security. This emphasis will likely manifest itself in an increase in cooperation between Russia and its allies. Indeed, in 2021 Serbia and Russia pledged to fight color revolutions together.¹⁷

With the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin continues to use information operations.

Moscow was setting the informational conditions for its military campaign even before it invaded in February. For instance, Russia attempted to establish the false narrative of fighting "Nazi" leadership and protecting its own people from genocide even in December of 2021.

The Russian government and Russian state media have also issued public statements about alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), claiming that the United States and NATO are planning a chemical attack on Russia or Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine. Russian officials were making such claims as early as December 2021, when Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu accused the United States of planning a chemical attack in the Donbas.¹⁸

The Russian government has also accused the US of operating bio labs in Ukraine, while Russia's Ministry of Defense has accused the US of training migratory birds to fly onto Russian territory to deliver a viral payload¹⁹. Russian defense ministry spokesperson Major General Igor Konashenkov has argued that the US had planned to

infect birds with a spreadable form of the H5N1 flu strain "with a mortality rate of 50 percent."²⁰ This story spread rapidly through Russian media. The Russian government also spread false accusations that the US was planning to use drones that would spray poison on Russian troops. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova emphasized on her Telegram account that the US media warned that Russia would use nuclear weapons and accused the United States of "laying the groundwork in the media space for staging yet another provocation, but this time on an apocalyptic scale".²¹

Russian embassies in the Western Balkans also published this disinformation on their social media platforms, which succeed in getting their stories covered in local media. Stories about American bioweapons labs in Ukraine were published in major news outlets in Serbia such as Politika, Novosti, Alo, Informer or Kurir. Although several news outlets apologized for publishing disinformation on bio labs in March,²² they continued promoting anti-American campaigns soon after.²³ Also, in March the far-right political party in Serbia, "Zavetnici" asked for the examination of bio labs in Serbia and their relations to the Faculty of Medicine in Niš and the US military.²⁴

Russia understands very well that "selling" a story about anti-western democratic values will not work in the region. Instead, they use very emotional language, blaming the West for provocations and making analogies with "unjust" wars during the 90's in the Balkans. Local media

also spread disinformation about the Western war on the Orthodox Church and the "traditional values" of people in the Balkans and Russia.²⁵ The above-detailed disinformation campaigns are just the tip of the iceberg.

US and allied intelligence services have "pre-bunked" many planned Russian false-flag attacks intended to justify the invasion. The US has also countered disinformation about the alleged WMD attacks. However, the West must take a more active role in countering Russian disinformation globally. Namely, Western embassies should issue statements responding to Russian propaganda in real time. Embassies should also make a concerted effort to appear in local media and debunk Russian propaganda. The EU and the US have been investing in free media in the Western Balkans, but such investments must be targeted towards running more effective social media accounts, since many of them are dry and do not appeal to the average consumer. The Russian government is running very active and targeted social media campaigns where they are repeating messages often, which is important for effective messaging. There is much room for Serbia to bring its foreign policy into alignment with that of the EU as it continues on its path to European integration. For example, Russian propaganda outlet Sputnik still operates in Serbia, while it is banned in the EU. Following the EU's lead by banning Sputnik would be a big step towards securing Serbia's information space.

SANCTIONS

Russia might also use the Western Balkans as a platform to evade sanctions through money laundering. According to Freedom House, Western Balkans states are not full democracies and are described as "hybrid regimes."²⁶ This lack of transparency allows Russia to create an environment for money laundering and boost corruption. Now, when Russia is sanctioned by the West, Russian companies are moving to Serbia.²⁷

The Open Balkan Initiative, established by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia in 2021, aims to promote ties between the Western Balkans by ultimately creating a single market for goods, services and capital. While the Open Balkan initiative's concept is sound, the West must ensure it does not turn into a long-term liability by pervasively facilitating the inflow of Russian and Chinese illicit financing and sanctions-evasion networks.²⁸ A similar initiative has recently been suggested by French President Macron. Namely, in May 2022 he announced the creation of a "European political community" to help countries join the EU. Given that Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro are skeptical about the Open Balkan initiative, this EU "political community" initiative may become an alternative route.

President Biden has said that corruption threatens American national security and democracy. He also signed an executive order in 2021 that targets individuals who "threaten the peace, security, stability, or territorial

integrity of any area or state in the Western Balkans"²⁹". This is a step in the right direction. The US already sanctioned individuals who destabilize the Western Balkans, including Milorad Dodik as well as his associated media platform (Alternativna Televizija d.o.o. Banja Luka) in response to his secessionist activities that threaten the stability of the Balkans and Europe. The UK also announced its first sanctions on Bosnia and Herzegovina³⁰. In particular, they sanctioned Milorad Dodik and Zeljka Cvijanovic for undermining "the legitimacy and functionality...and peace" of Bosnia and Herzegovina.³¹ However, for sanctions to fully work, the EU must also join these efforts and sanction individuals that threaten the stability of Europe via the Balkans. The EU should also advocate for sanctioning media platforms that promote disinformation and assist Russia's information warfare efforts.

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ABOUT THE BRIEF:

These Policy Briefs are a part of the bigger project funded by the Balkan Trust for Democracy (GMF) and USAID aimed at providing laser-sharp insights into the political and social trends in the region, strengthening dialogue and presenting concrete policy recommendations regarding pressing international and security issues in the Western Balkans.

This specific Policy Brief aims to provide an overview and insight into the lessons learned for the West in regard to Ukraine. The West bears its part of the responsibilities for these developments. Russia broke its commitments under the Budapest Memorandum in 2014 by the annexation of Crimea and perpetuated aggression in eastern Ukraine, while the international response at the time was weak, allowing Russia to thrive on its "success" in Crimea and mount the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

What are the lessons learned and how can the West deter further Russian meddling in the Balkans?

It seems the West downplayed the Russian influence and its proxies in the region and failed to bring the

Western Balkans closer to the EU agenda. Could such policy cost the West in the Western Balkan region?

Is this the last wake-up call? What are policy recommendations for the Western leaders?

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