CONFLICTS IN THE POST-SOVIET AREA AND IMPLICATIONS ON THE SECURITY OF EUROPE AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Mehmedin Tahirović[1]

Abstract: *By undertaking large-scale military actions against neighboring Ukraine in February 2022, Russia clearly shows that it does not want NATO in its immediate neighborhood and that it intends to regain its role in international relations from the time of the functioning of the USSR in the international community, clearly showing that it does not accept the dominant position of the US in the international community. Considering that before the aggression Ukraine expressed clear ambitions to become a member of NATO and the EU, as well as the fact that Russia is a territorial part of the European state and that its economy was significantly related to the EU states, then it is crystal clear that this aggression is directly related to the EU security. In addition to the former USSR countries in the Baltics: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which became NATO members in 2004, Finland, which was a neutral country for a long time, also became a NATO member on the anniversary of the founding of this organization on April 4, 2023 and formal membership of Sweden is expected soon, which greatly changes the security architecture of Europe. The countries of the Western Balkans, which are historically and culturally linked to Russia and at the same time have opted for the Western European integration, have been brought into a security gap. The future course of events will undoubtedly have consequences on their safety. Montenegro, as the smallest country in the Western Balkans and a member of NATO, with already achieved results in the process of the European integration after 2020, is a politically and ethnically divided country and, with a high rate of organized crime and corruption, has been put in a situation where its state survival is also threatened.*

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[1] Mehmedin Tahirović, PhD, University Donja Gorica (UDG), Podgorica, Montenegro.

Introduction

After the dissolution of the USSR, in which Russia had a central role or 60% of the potential, there followed a period of realizing that in the 40-year period of the Cold War, the West won. In the initial period, Russia accepted reality (at least it seemed so) and started the process of developing the Western model of democracy together with other members of the USSR that declared their independence and became the UN members. The Baltic States Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became members of NATO and the EU in 2004. Until the election of Vladimir Putin as the President of Russia in 2000, Russia had a very developed cooperation with NATO. However, the so-called Putin's doctrine was amended in the same year and adapted to new geostrategic circumstances. Right from the beginning, Putin has shown what he would like, first with the military occupation of Chechnya in the spring of 2001, and then with its complete pacification, up to 2009. The second case was the engagement of the Russian Armed Forces in Georgia, which was, first of all, a response to the decision at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008 on the establishment of the NATO-Georgia Commission, as a higher level of cooperation and Georgia's clear commitment to become a member of this Alliance. Then Russia annexed Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as parts of the territory of Georgia and recognized them as independent states. Putin's key goal was to appoint presidents loyal to him, like Kadyrov in Chechnya, to be the heads of the states of the former USSR.

Putin actually started the aggression against Ukraine by annexing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and immediately after that, in the same year, by sending his troops to the eastern part of Ukraine, the Donbass (Donetsk and Luhansk). Although he claimed in front of the entire international public that he would not do it, on February 24, 2022, the Russian Armed Forces with 100,000 soldiers carried out aggression in almost the entire territory of Ukraine.

With all his moves on the national and international scene, Putin has persistently shown that he does not agree with the current prestigious role of the US, NATO and the EU in the international community and that his ambitions are to restore Russian power and influence in the international surroundings from the USSR period and impose a new "sphere of influence" in the international community, where Russia would have a rather more favourable status.

Conflicts in the post-Soviet area

The foundations of the establishment of the Russian state

The Russian state was autocratic for about a thousand years. It was ruled by a hereditary monarch, whose power was not limited by any constitution. Only in the first decade of the 20th century did the Russian emperor agree with the constitution that provided for an elected parliament. However, the emperor quickly dissolved the

parliament and arbitrarily changed the constitution. In addition to autocracy, the historical legacy of the Russian statehood is characterized by absolutism, patrimonialism and Orthodox Christianity (Almond, et al. 2009: 386). Absolutism meant that the emperor sought to have absolute power over the subordinates in his empire. Patrimonialism refers to the idea that a ruler treats his empire as property rather than society with its legitimate rights and interests. Finally, the Tsarist regime identified itself with the Russian Orthodox Church. The continuity of the behaviour of the Russian Church has lasted to the present day, which can be seen in the example and conditions of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church had betrayed the fathers of the Orthodox Church by supporting the attack on Ukraine. Russian Patriarch Kirill supported Moscow's action and mentioned that the Russian Orthodox Church should help the Russian Armed Forces more, so he called on all church parishes to "mobilize their parishioners" (CDM, 2023). Even Pope Francis warned the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, not to be "a Putin's assistant". In his harshest rhetoric to date, the Pope criticized Patriarch Kirill for publicly supporting the reasons given by Russia for attacking Ukraine (Danas, 2022).

Absolutism, patrimonialism and Orthodoxy are recurring elements in Russian political culture. At some points, the rulers of this state tried to modernize its economy and society following the example of the Western countries. Modernizing rulers, such as Peter the Great (1682-1725) and Catherine the Great (1762-1786), had a strong influence on Russian society and brought it closer to the Western European models. The development of Russian military and economic potential was also necessary due to the constant expansion of Russia through the conquest and annexation of neighbouring territories and the eternal need to defend its borders. At the end of the 17th century, Russia was the territorially largest country in the world. Nevertheless, in the greatest part of its history, the Russian Empire extended beyond the borders of its real power (Vukadinović, 2008: 18-22).

The establishment and dissolution of the USSR

The Soviet Union consisted of the Soviet Federative Socialist Republics (SFSR) and the Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR), as well as autonomous and other areas within them, so a total of 15 republics and 36 autonomous areas. The State Proclamation (1922) united the Russian SFSR, the Belarusian SSR, the Ukrainian SSR and the Transcaucasian SFSR. The first Constitution was adopted on January 31, 1924. Then Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (1924), Tajikistan (1929), Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (1936), Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Moldova (1940) became separate Soviet Socialist Republics.

The Soviet Union was the greatest country in the world: in 1924, it had about 21.7 million km², and in 1946 about 22.4 million km². After World War II, the Soviet land borders in Europe were 4,216 km long, and in Asia 14,724 km long. The number of inhabitants grew from 147 million (1926) to 170.5 million (1939), 208.8 million (1959),

262.4 million (1979), and 286.7 million (1989). According to the national share (1989), the majority was Russians (145.2 million), followed by Ukrainians (44.2 million), Uzbeks (16.7 million), Belarusians (10 million), Kazakhs (8.1 million), Azerbaijanis (6.8 million), Tatars (6.6 million), Armenians (4.6 million) and other nations. Before the dissolution of the USSR (1991), the greatest part of its territory (76%) and population (about 60%) was included in the Russian SFSR (Mearsheimer, 2009: 253).

Figure 1 – *USSR by administrative regions, 1989*
Source: https://www.mapsland.com/europe/ussr

The limited democratization of the USSR began in the second half of the 1980s, under the leadership of M.S. Gorbachev through Perestroika programme. Relations with the US and Western European countries improved to a certain extent, there was the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan (1988–1989) and Central Europe (1990–1991), and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact (1991). Due to the weakening of the central Soviet power, internal conflicts broke out (Armenian-Azerbaijani, from 1988) and republican demands for independence occurred (from 1990).

Since the mid-1980s, reforms in the Soviet Union were not carried out with the intention of leading to such rapid and uncontrolled events as the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, the collapse of communism, economic "shock therapy", nor the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR itself. Still, that is exactly what happened. The central place in these events is the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the unification of Germany (Brzezinski, 2004: 18).

Gorbachev's intention was to implement gradual reforms over a period of 25 to 30 years. However, in these efforts, Gorbachev found himself torn between democrats – nationalists, who wanted quick reforms and a complete break with communism and the Centre, and conservatives, whose intention was to preserve *the status quo*. The relationship between Gorbachev and Yeltsin, as well as Yeltsin's relationship to the Communist Party, greatly contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and this course of events, and the Russian model of the "Declaration of sovereignty", adopted on June 12, 1990, served as an additional incentive for the other Soviet Republics that had not adopted them until then. This led to a chain reaction of other constituents of the USSR, so, in a period of 33 months, 41 former units of the USSR declared themselves sovereign states (Kaufman, 2010: 144).

Within the following few days, Gorbachev handed over the presidential prerogatives to Yeltsin and left the function of the President of the USSR, which then ceased to exist. It can be definitively concluded that this outcome ended the Cold War and that the West emerged victorious from it (Kostić, 2019: 508).

The post-Soviet period

The turmoil of the conservative and liberal-democratic currents in Russian politics will have a great impact on the attitudes, fears and development of foreign policies of the countries of the European post-Soviet area. Each time conservatism increased in Russia, it would serve as a reason for new fears of these countries of possible re-Sovietization of the region, Russian imperialist ambitions and threats to their territorial integrity and sovereignty. An additional motive for Russian distance from the West was Russian expressed intention, since the first Foreign Policy Concept from 1993, to preserve the role of a great power in international relations, which has a special responsibility and a leading role in preserving security in the CIS area, i.e. its "near abroad", especially in terms of resolving conflicts in this area and monitoring the respect of human and minority rights of the Russian people who continued to live in these republics. This course of events indicates a mutual cause-and-effect relationship between the NATO expansion process and the expression of Russian intention to preserve the position, interests and population in this region (Tatalović, et al. 2008).

As a transitional phase towards the complete placing of Soviet nuclear weapons under Russian command, and in accordance with the Protocol on Unified Command from Alma Ata, the joint military command of the CIS was established, which functioned until mid-1993, and it was then officially disbanded. Therefore, the US, Russia and Great Britain, together with the four post-Soviet nuclear states, signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances to Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine in 1994, so that they could join the Non-Proliferation Treaty and give up nuclear weapons. The document gave guarantees that the US, Russia and Great Britain will respect their independence, sovereignty and the existing borders, that they will refrain from the threat or use of force against their territorial integrity or political independence and that none of their weapons will be used against these

countries, except in the case of self-defence or otherwise, in accordance with the UN Charter, that they will refrain from economic coercion in order to subordinate these countries to their interests, that they will seek immediate UN action to provide them with assistance if they are threatened or the victim of the aggression in which nuclear weapons are used, that they will not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear power, except in the case of an attack on itself or its allies when the very state acts in alliance with a nuclear state (Almond, et al. 2009: 423).

NATO relations with Russia, Ukraine and Georgia

In addition to the evident and mutual disagreements, it should be emphasized that before coming to power of the President of Russia Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, the cooperation between Russia and NATO had an upward trajectory and a very wide range of joint activities. Russia joined the Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, and already in 1996, Russian soldiers were engaged in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with NATO soldiers, in IFOR operation, under NATO auspices in the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the stabilization of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The following great step towards establishing closer cooperation between NATO and Russia was made in Paris on May 27, 1997, when NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security was signed. The Founding Act reflected the change in the security environment in Europe and represented the commitment of NATO and Russia to jointly build lasting peace in the Euro-Atlantic region. In accordance with the agreement on the principles of the NATO-Russia strategic partnership and the definition of fields for further development of political and military cooperation, a new forum, NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council, was established.

However, the different positions of NATO and Russia on how to resolve the crisis in Kosovo and Metohija in 1999 and Moscow's opposition to the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, led to Russian withdrawal from the work of the Permanent Joint Council, thus causing the work of this body to freeze. Only later, as a result of the Russian military intervention in Georgia, in August 2008, there was a great halt in military cooperation between Russia and NATO. Just when it was believed that relations were somewhat smoothed over, a new crisis arose between NATO and Russia, as, in mid-2014, Russia violently annexed Crimea and annexed it to Russia. The conflict continued with the direct interference of Russia, which, according to the same Crimean principle, tried to destabilize Ukraine, by encouraging and providing military assistance to the Russian population that rebelled in the east of Ukraine, which is why the relations between NATO and Russia were frozen and completely suspended.

As in the case of Russia, cooperation between NATO and Ukraine began in 1991, when Ukraine joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, immediately after gaining independence, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is the first of the states from the Commonwealth of Independent States – CIS, which joined the Partnership for Peace programme in 1994.

Ukraine opened its diplomatic mission to NATO in 1997, whose military part began operating in 1998. On the other hand, NATO opened its Information and Documentation Centre in Kiev in May 1997, whose role is to inform Ukrainian public about its activities, encourage debate on the Euro-Atlantic integration and promote comprehensive cooperation with Ukraine. Moreover, in April 1999, the NATO Liaison Office was established in Kiev, whose purpose is to provide assistance in the security sector reform, the participation of Ukrainian forces in joint training, exercises and peacekeeping missions, as well as to facilitate contacts with Ukrainian officials.

In May 2002, the President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, announced Ukraine's intention to become a member of NATO. Shortly afterwards, in November 2002, in Prague, at the meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan was adopted, which clearly expresses Ukrainian strategic goals and priorities on the way to full integration into the Euro-Atlantic security structure and provides a framework for future cooperation. After the famous Orange Revolution (winter 2004-2005), NATO and Ukraine launched an intensified dialogue, at the meeting of the Commission in Vilnius (Lithuania) on April 21, 2005, as an additional contribution to Ukrainian aspirations to become a member of the Alliance. In addition to participating in IFOR/SFOR operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine contributed during the deployment of KFOR troops in Kosovo and Metohija, by engaging a helicopter squadron and continued to participate in this operation, within the joint Polish-Ukrainian battalion. Already in the fall of 2007, Ukraine included a corvette in "an active effort", and in the summer of 2008, another frigate. During the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the heads of states and governments of the Alliance members agreed on Ukrainian future membership in NATO. In order to take practical steps to join NATO, in December 2014 the Ukrainian Parliament passed the resolution on the termination of Ukrainian military neutrality status.

Despite the clearly expressed commitment of Ukrainian officials to the integration of the state into NATO, this issue still remains a great challenge for the political forces in Ukraine, and also for the divided Ukrainian public as a whole. The outcome of hostilities in the territory of Ukraine after the Russian aggression on February 24, 2022 will largely depend on public support for further rapprochement with NATO (Tahirović, Petrič, 2015: 85-90).

Relations between Georgia and NATO officially began in 1994, when this country joined NATO Partnership for Peace programme. Russia has opposed these close ties, including those expressed at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, where NATO members promised that Georgia would eventually join the organization. Complications in the relationship between NATO and Georgia include the presence of the Russian Armed Forces in Georgian territory following the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008, in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where the majority of Russians live. After those events, on September 15, 2008, the Commission for NATO and Georgia was established on April 4, 2009, and the heads of NATO states issued a joint statement, pledging to maximize their assistance, advice and support to Georgian and Ukrainian reform efforts.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The process of the collapse of the geopolitical borders of the former Soviet area, as well as the relatively weak performance of the Commonwealth of Independent States – CIS, forced the Russian Federation to focus on defining the form of its regional dominance, in order to preserve the dependence of the former Soviet Republics on Russia. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) seemed, at that moment, to be the best way represented by the security alliance of several post-Soviet states, established on October 7, 2002, on the initiative of Russia, with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that became its members. The provision of military and other security assistance between the signatories of the agreement was established, and interstate cooperation, joint military exercises, intervention and peacekeeping forces, military infrastructure, etc. were organized. The Organization was formed as a result of the previous Agreement on Collective Security, concluded in May 1992 in Tashkent, between Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (the so-called Tashkent Pact). The Organization is an expression of Russian efforts to maintain military-political influence in as large a part of the post-Soviet area as possible, which in Central Asia is burdened with a series of political, ethnic and other problems, as well as the consequences of the military operation of the US and its allies in Afghanistan since October 2001 (it finished at the end of August 2021). The activities of the organization are disrupted by occasional disagreements between individual members. Its intervention forces (about 2,000 soldiers, mostly from Russia) participated in the suppression of unrest in Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2022, immediately before the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Kilibarda, 2012).

Due to political, economic and some other interests, and probably due to the diminishing importance of the CIS, in 2001, the Russian Federation, together with China, which is the initiator of the initiative, founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which, in addition to economic and cultural cooperation, was supposed to develop cooperation in the security field, primarily in the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism. Although the representatives of the SCO states assure that the Organization has no ambitions to grow into a military bloc, some sources of such development can be seen (joint military exercises). It can be said that the SCO is a regional security mechanism that serves as the counterweight to the United States. With this Organization, the member states would like to prevent the intervention of the only superpower in areas that are of strategic importance for them (Tatalović, et al. 2008:174).

The main reasons for the conflicts in the post-Soviet area

In terms of security and defence integration, the issue of European post-Soviet Republics, as part of the broader theme of organizing the European security architecture, represents an essential source of instability in the modern world order, i.e.

the increasingly harsh relations between Russia, the US and EU. Some even consider it the line of the new division of Europe and the centre of the new Cold War. This area has retained enormous importance for the security and identity of Russia. It was formed as a "special area" of Russia, unlike e.g. the Baltic countries, especially if one takes into account the history of the establishment of Russia itself and the number of Russians who remained living in this area, and it also gained increasing importance for the accomplishment of the vision of world order of the US and EU.

Since 2006, the US strategy has treated this area as an area of its vital national interest, which is why it will build relations with Russia in relation to the extent to which Russia enables/prevents the establishment and functioning of effective democratic and open regimes and freedom in the countries of this region. In this way, the US attitude towards this area is characterized by a constant tension between pragmatism and principledness; pragmatism because the US is aware that the success of democracy and the preservation of freedom and territorial integrity of these countries will depend on the situation in Russia, thus being necessary to maintain a dialogue on this area with it, and principledness because these countries have been given guarantees that Russia will not have the right to veto their sovereign foreign policy decisions, nor will they agree with Russia on their fate. This is particularly important after the growing suspicion of the US that Russia started to implement a revanchist policy, especially after Putin's statement in 2005 "that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century", the policy of restoring the Russian empire through the establishment of state and oligarchic economies in post-Soviet countries, "governed democracies" that protect the state apparatus, and not the freedom of citizens, and to regroup these countries through organizations led by Russia (Kostić, 2019).

What makes the post-Soviet space unique is the role of Russia, which, even after the collapse of its former empire, the USSR, remained the dominant actor in the region, and which has the opportunity to act decisively in both aspects essential for the definition of frozen conflicts - both legal and factual. Legally - because it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, which can challenge the statehood of any territory, and factually - because it is a great power and regional hegemon, and can, with the exclusion of the influence of rival great powers, with the means at its disposal, including military, create a favourable factual situation for itself as the outcome of any regional conflict.

With these aspirations, Russia has ventured into aggression unprecedented in modern European history after the end of the Cold War. In the military and political sense, the attack is a continuation of Putin's policy of destabilizing the Russia-EU/NATO space, which is reflected in the creation of frozen conflicts using a combined method of political, military and hybrid actions. By attacking and waging war, all international law, humanitarian and other rules, which regulate the behaviour of sovereign and independent states in international relations, were mercilessly, brutally and intentionally trampled and violated by one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. The attack is, therefore, a precedent that should be interrupted, stopped, international mediation and negotiations should be carried out, a peace

agreement concluded and, accordingly, those responsible for war crimes should be sanctioned. Events from the recent past, after the collapse of the former SFRY, can be the starting point for sanctioning war crimes, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) based in the Hague (IFIMES, 2022).

The implications of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the stability of Europe and the Western Balkans

The Russian aggression against Ukraine resulted in a tectonic disruption of the international order. The US, Russia and China are today at the greatest distance since the end of the Cold War. Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, it can mean a turning point when it comes to the world security infrastructure, given the fact that this conflict has opened up questions about national sovereignty, democracy vs. autocracy, human rights and the global world order, with evident implications for the world economy in the conditions of increasingly unstable global markets. Skyrocketing commodity prices are the most immediate economic consequence of the aggression against Ukraine, and the war threatens supplies of main goods from Russia and Ukraine, including food, energy and fertilizers. Interrupting and stopping grain delivery through the Black Sea ports could have catastrophic consequences for food security in poor countries. At the same time, the direct consequence of the Russian aggression against Ukraine is the greatest emigrant and refugee crisis in Europe after World War II.

Putin's expectation that the high degree of dependence of the greatest European countries, such as Germany, France and Italy, on Russian energy sources, would lead to discord between the EU members, and then with the US, did not come true. In contrast, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has united the EU and NATO more than ever since World War II. By the time this paper was written, all European countries, except Serbia, had introduced the 11th package of economic and various other sanctions and measures against Russia. Ukraine has received the status of a candidate for the EU membership, and its military has been provided with enormous assistance in weapons and equipment for successfully conducting war with Russia. In the period so far, the US has helped Ukraine in the total amount of over 70 billion dollars, and the EU with 68 billion euros. The UN General Assembly adopted two resolutions condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine by a huge majority.

On the contrary, Russia seeks to improve its alliance with China, India, South Africa, Brazil, Turkey, Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Iran, as well as Serbia, trying to establish a new alliance that would represent adequate parity and a new balance of power in international relations.

Bearing in mind that Russia is the territorially greatest country in the world, with still very large and underutilized natural resources, whether it can get out of this very complicated situation without major consequences, or whether it has introduced itself and the rest of the world into "Russian roulette" with an uncertain outcome – remains to be seen in the upcoming period.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine and changes in NATO

The Summit in Madrid, on July 1, 2022, was an opportunity for NATO, after a long period of trying to articulate itself after the end of the Cold War, especially since September 11, 2001, to return to the basics and focus on its main purpose: the collective defence of the Euro-Atlantic area. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a growing awareness of the importance of NATO membership, and concerns about its expediency and obsolescence (labelled "brain death" by French President Macron in 2021) were replaced by increased enthusiasm for strengthening the Alliance.

The strengthening of NATO, in several directions, represents one of the most significant international reactions to the Ukrainian crisis. The new strategic concept, the first one since 2010, focuses on Russia as the main security threat, while including cyber activities that could potentially trigger the Alliance's collective defence clause. The new concept also changes the attitude towards China, which in the previous period was called a partner, and now it is considered a challenge to the global order based on rules.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, which in the face of the Russian threat decided to give up their traditional neutrality and join it, will increase the credibility of the Alliance, and also expand the land area of operations of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) by over 866,000 square kilometres and change the European security architecture. As close NATO partners for two decades, with frequent experience of joint military exercises, the Finnish and Swedish Armed Forces are NATO compatible and interoperable. The new border will enable the establishment of a new ring of defence for the whole Western Europe because air defence capabilities and early warning detection will be based closer to the Alliance's border.

The concept emphasizes that the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region have strategic importance for the Alliance, which will continue to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the interested countries in these regions and strengthen efforts to improve their ability to respond to various challenges and threats they face and increase their resistance to malicious third-party influences. The very important announcements, which are contained in the Strategic Concept, will certainly be very challenging for the NATO member states and carry the risk of losing credibility if they are not adequately supported (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022).

The effects of the Russian aggression on the EU

Until the war in Ukraine, Russia was the main source of energy for the rest of Europe and the world's greatest exporter of natural gas, the second largest exporter of crude oil and the third largest exporter of coal. Three quarters of its gas and almost half of its crude oil went to Europe. Russian threats and blackmail by reducing or suspending the supply of energy resources to the EU member states resulted in the European Commission's announcement of the total renunciation of Russian fossil fuels

by 2030, as well as plans to drastically reduce the use of Russian gas and increase gas storage capacities. The war in Ukraine was considered by many as a chance for the EU - not only to free itself from the dependence on Russian energy resources, but also to meet the goals related to climate protection by building renewable energy sources and increasing energy efficiency. In any case, policymakers will be faced with very difficult political choices, with great costs and the necessity of overcoming serious dilemmas (Thompson, et al. 2021:115).

In response to the Russian invasion, Kiev submitted a formal application for the EU membership, to which the European Commission responded by recommending that Ukraine be granted a candidate status, together with the Republic of Moldova, which twenty-seven EU leaders unanimously approved in June 2022. Along with all other clear effects, this decision is also an unequivocal sign that the response to the Russian aggression is considered the joint responsibility of all EU members.

Probably motivated by the accelerated granting of a candidacy status for Ukraine and Moldova, which are, above all, motivated by political and security factors, the heads of the governments of the EU member states, at the Summit held on December 15, 2022, confirmed the recommendation of the European Commission and granted Bosnia and Herzegovina a candidate status for the European Union. When it comes to Kosovo, the European Parliament adopted a decision on visa liberalisation on April 18, 2023, which ended all relevant decision-making procedures.

Russia, the EU and the Western Balkans

The tightening of relations between Russia and the West in the context of the war in Ukraine could also reflect on the Western Balkan region, which represents the traditional neuralgic point of the European security. An important segment of the strategy of regaining the influence that was lost after the Cold War is pro-Russian forces in the former Yugoslav Republics, whose role is often neglected by the international community. Therefore, the best way to understand the role that Russia plays in its immediate neighbourhood and in the area of the Western Balkans, and also for the projection of its power in general is the thesis that Russia views its neighbours either as enemies or vassals – it controls vassals, and intimidates enemies politically and militarily.

The Kremlin, directly and indirectly, through its proxies in the Balkans, undermines the chances of the countries of the region for the NATO membership, while it has an ambiguous attitude towards the European Union, promoting the alliance with Russia as a political, military and economic alternative to the West. Russia, through its key exponents in the Western Balkan region and proxies for the destabilization of other states, could cause instability with greater security implications, in order to redirect the attention of the West (NATO) to this part of the European continent. In this sense, we should not ignore the assessments that after the attack on Ukraine, it can be expected that Russia will try to further destabilize the Western Balkans, having in mind that since the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis

radicalization in the area of the Western Balkan countries can also be followed, especially bearing in mind the behaviour of Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republic of Srpska, which almost led to the point of disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the continuation of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. In order to prevent possible interethnic conflicts, on March 4, 2022, EUFOR ALTHEA sent in reinforcements of 500 soldiers as a matter of urgency. Additional soldiers have arrived from Austria, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia as the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues. The additional 500 EUFOR soldiers have been deployed to parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina where excesses have been recorded in the past period, especially in returnee settlements, as stated by the head of the European Union (EU) Delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Johann Sattler. The EUFOR ALTHEA mission is the EU longest-running military operation, the only land mission, and the only one with an executive mandate to use force.

The Western Balkans is a region characterized by weak governance, fragile civil society and geopolitical disputes, as internal and regional factors that make it highly susceptible to local and external disinformation campaigns. The democratic vulnerability of the region favours the activities of Russia, which, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US, has launched an extensive disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans with the aim of disavowing the values and perception of the EU and the US and obstructing the ambitions of the countries of the region on the way to their European and transatlantic integration (Defence Strategic Communications, 2015: 10-26).

This extensive campaign includes several narratives by which the Kremlin tries to achieve its political goals in the region, which it spreads through organization and exponents who are not members of political parties. Within this network there are a great number of non-governmental organizations, associations and brotherhoods that are close to the Serbian Orthodox Church. There are also media that directly distribute disinformation and propaganda from Russian media controlled by the Kremlin (Atlantski savez Crne Gore, 2022: 39).

Immediately after Russia attacked Ukraine, the activities of the Kremlin-controlled media and their followers in Montenegro have intensified. Numerous narratives and a series of suspicious information, videos and photos that appeared in the Russian state media were also broadcast by some Montenegrin and regional media. Although almost all the Western Balkan countries have been the target of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in recent years, at local level it was hardly recognized as a security issue or issue of interest. The situation on the ground is not encouraging and it seems that the region is particularly sensitive to fake news and misinformation. In the 11th package of sanctions against Russia, the European Union included sanctions for banning the broadcasting of Russia Today in the Serbian language. Serbia, however, has not introduced a single measure against Russia since the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine, although Brussels is urging it to do so because the country is a candidate for the EU membership, so it is expected to harmonize its foreign policy with the EU policies.

Various activities of state actors, formal and informal, contribute to this situation, and their actions contribute to misinformation and the spread of nationalist policies in the Western Balkans. A very good example is "Non-Paper" by Janez Janša from April 2021, under the title "Western Balkans - a way forward" (Cirman, Vuković, 2021). This document particularly emphasizes the unresolved national issues of Serbs, Albanians and Croats. Later, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia at that time denied that he had participated in the development of this document, which became available to the entire public in Europe. It clearly specifies the new maps in the Balkans, which include the annexation of Kosovo to Albania, the Republic of Srpska to Serbia and Herceg-Bosna to Croatia. In these countries, nationalism was encouraged and motivated, and, on the other hand, among Montenegrins, Bosniaks and Macedonians, to whose detriment this project would be implemented, panic and fear of new war events like those of the 1990s spread.

In continuation of the negative campaign, the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, visited Moscow on May 22, 2023, and discussed "important geopolitical issues" with Putin. Immediately after that, on June 21, 2023, deputies in the Parliament of the Republic of Srpska voted to stop publishing the decrees and laws of the High Representative, Christian Schmidt, in the Official Gazette, which means that they will no longer be recognized as official laws in this entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Just a few days later, on June 27, 2023, the deputies of the National Assembly of the Republic of Srpska decided that they would no longer implement the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in their territory (Vijesti, 2023).

Since the declaration of independence in 2008, the political discussion and rhetoric in Kosovo has primarily focused on the issue of the EU membership. After 10 years since the signing of the Brussels Agreement, on the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, in Ohrid, on March 18, 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti reached an agreement on the Implementation annex to the Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia. Unfortunately, like all previous agreements, these last ones did not bring the expected results. Instead of agreeing on the establishment of a Community of Serb Municipalities and the implementation of other agreed principles, Serbs in Kosovo, at the beginning of 2023, left all Kosovo institutions, including the police. After that, they refused to participate in local elections, which the Kosovo authorities called for and carried out with the participation of Albanians and representatives of national minorities without Serbs. Immediately after the elections, the newly elected mayors of municipalities, mostly Albanians, took up positions in all municipalities, where Serbs are the majority and Serbian protesters responded by preventing them from entering the municipal buildings.

All these events are an indicator of the purposeful implementation of a negative campaign and the creation of conditions for the formation of an atmosphere of insecurity and fear in the Western Balkans, especially in unstable areas such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Furthermore, bearing in mind fragile institutions and inadequate capacities for the protection of government infrastructure, as well as the very high influence of organized crime and corruption in the security system, Montenegro is very susceptible to various forms of cyber attacks and the influence of misinformation and negative campaigns. After cyber attacks in 2016 and 2017, during the period of finalization of NATO accession, which coincided with parliamentary elections in October 2016, organized by the Russian military intelligence service GRU (i.e. their APT28 group), Montenegro faced strong cyber attacks again in August 2022. The target of the attack was the complete information and technology infrastructure of the Government of Montenegro, which made it impossible to access official websites and e-mails, and employees in state institutions were instructed to disconnect computers from network for data protection.

The National Security Agency of Montenegro (NSA) announced that the Russian services are responsible for this cyber attack, with the assessment that it is hybrid war, and that it has been prepared for a long time and has not yet been carried out against any other country. NATO Allies were informed about the attack, and the US and France sent their teams to Montenegro, where they worked with their Montenegrin counterparts to alleviate the consequences of the most serious cyber attack on the governmental information and telecommunications infrastructure so far. At the same time, an initiative has been launched and willingness has been emphasized to support the establishment of a regional centre for cyber protection in Montenegro (Atlantski savez Crne Gore, 2022: 39).

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the historical process of the establishment and inheritance of the Russian Federation, its Eurasian territorial position, the heterogeneity of the population and the potential of natural resources, and the absolutist system of government, which has important characteristics of the historical heritage from the period of the Russian Empire and the communist USSR, it can be concluded that it is greatly different from the Western system of values and the functioning of democratic Western societies. Analysing the post-Soviet armed conflicts, one can clearly notice the Russian intention to control the democratic development and international engagement of the former Republics and autonomies that functioned within the Soviet Union. In the development of antagonism towards Western civilizational values, in which the Russian Orthodox Church also plays a significant role, Russia led by Vladimir Putin, who established an authoritarian system of government in the country, strives to restore the Russian Federation's power and position in the international community from the period of the functioning of the USSR.

In addition to energy capacities, expressed in quantities of natural gas and oil, the Russian Federation also possesses one of the greatest nuclear potentials in the world, especially when it comes to nuclear weapons with tactical warheads. Having this, it blackmailed and imposed continuous threats to its neighbours and European countries. In this way, it succeeded in dissuading the former members of the USSR from carrying out democratic reforms and joining international organizations such as NATO and the EU.

In addition, Russia is trying to establish new alliances with similar authoritarian regimes, primarily with China, India, Iran, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria, Venezuela and Syria, to create a new system of international relations, where the US and the EU will not have a leading role. Using the pan-Slavic cultural legacy and closeness to the Orthodox churches, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, it skillfully carries out continuous information propaganda and influence on the Slavic nations in the Balkans, trying to dissuade them from pro-Western orientation and win them over to the accomplishment of their foreign policy goals.

However, with the aggression against Ukraine, one of the greatest countries of the former USSR and the country with the largest granaries in Europe, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, in order to prevent this country from becoming a member of NATO and the EU, the perfidious system of Russian power has been completely exposed and the effect totally opposite to the set goals has been achieved. The European Union has united much more firmly and finally made decisions to find mechanisms against permanent dependence on Russian energy sources. All European countries (except Belarus, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) have joined in introducing a very wide range of sanctions against Russia. NATO has united more than ever in history and at the same time strengthened with two new members, Finland and Sweden, which are immediate neighbours of Russia.

How Putin will react in the conditions when he is in a very unfavourable situation, whether he will try to open a new focal point in the Western Balkans and thus cause damage to the EU and NATO, or whether it will be a new focal point in the immediate Russian environment or the Middle East, or whether he will undertake drastic measures to use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, which could lead to World War III, remains to be seen in the near future.

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