

I want it all and I want it now: Russian Invasion of Ukraine and its Security Implications for Southeast Europe

Věra Stojarová, Masaryk University
stojarova@fss.muni.cz

Abstract

Serbia is one of the few European countries that did not impose sanctions on the Russian Federation following the invasion of Ukraine. The primary objective of my paper is to explore and explain this distinct position through a substantial analysis of the roots and logic underpinning Serbia's foreign policy. By adopting a critical social constructivist approach, this study seeks to understand the way in which national identity shapes Serbia's unique foreign policy decisions - not only in relation to Russia and Ukraine but also in terms of its broader international orientation. The basic claim of the article is that Serbia's international positioning should be assessed through two key factors: first, the notion of 'Serbian exceptionalism,' rooted in the country's self-perception of its unique historical and geopolitical role; and second, its attempt to emulate Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance during the Cold War, aiming to preserve strategic autonomy amidst global power dynamics.

Keywords: Russian Federation, influence operations, hybrid war, Balkans, Serbia, proxy actor

In 2007, Thomas Graham, Special Assistant to the US president and Senior Director for Russian Affairs, remarked that "It is not Russia's strength that generates and feeds the fear of it; it is the weakness of the West and its lack of confidence"¹. We could only wonder what Thomas Graham's remarks would be nineteen years later. Already in 2022, Andrei Tsygankov observed that Russia is sufficiently big and powerful to limit the West's ability to influence its developments². The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a departure from the predominant post-Cold War trend, favouring the demilitarisation of security and shifting towards renewed focus on military and traditional security dimensions. These two events mark a turning point in recent international relations history. The Russian military attack on Ukraine triggered

¹ Graham, Thomas. 2007. *Dialektika sily i slabosti*. *Vedomosti*. 29 June 2007.

² Tsygankov, Andrei Pavlovich. 2012 *Russia's foreign policy. Change and continuity in national identity*. Rowman & Littlefield: London, 233.

significant changes in the field of defence and security across Europe, and the world seems to underscore the growing emphasis on strengthening defence capabilities and expanding military power. Both events have profound implications and far-reaching consequences that extend beyond national borders, affecting global stability, the broader geopolitical environment, international law, international relations, global politics, and economics.

The countries of Southeastern Europe present a battleground for various powers and their interests. For over two decades, countries in this region have been working to develop the necessary capacities for EU and NATO membership, facing challenges shaped by internal, regional, and external factors. This process has produced varying outcomes across the region, resulting in different levels and forms of institutional integration within the EU and NATO. At the same time, others are interested in having their piece of the pie. The Russian Federation, China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia consider the Balkans as their natural sphere of interest or a gateway to Europe³. All of these actors enhance their influence operations in the region to gain the hearts and minds of the local population. The Russian invasion of Ukraine strengthened these efforts, which had a profound implication on the regional stability and dynamics. This special issue aims to highlight the key aspects of the triggered changes in relation to the primary theoretical concepts. The special issue comprises five texts; one article is a comparative analysis, while the rest naturally focus on the leading regional player with the closest relations with Russia – Serbia.

The article by Ružica Jakešević⁴ discusses the security implications of the Russian invasion for small states in Southeastern Europe, based on an analysis of three key elements: national security strategies, discussions surrounding compulsory military service, and trends within defence budgets. Regarding national security strategies, the author concludes that the states analysed at the normative level only partially adapted to the changed security environment. Only three states, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, adopted a new security strategy after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In the countries that have not revised their security strategies (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia), there are currently no formal discussions about the need to change the security strategies of their respective countries. The adoption of new national security strategies by Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia after Russia's invasion of Ukraine reflects a response to shifting geopolitical dynamics. However, the invasion was not the sole trigger. For Kosovo, adopting its first strategy affirms its strategic orientation toward full international recognition amid regional instability and global competition. As a small state under NATO and U.S. protection, Kosovo continues to rely on a sheltering/balancing approach. Albania and North Macedonia, as NATO members, updated their strategies to reinforce collective defence commitments and adapt to evolving security contexts. For North Macedonia, the update addressed the obsolescence of its previous strategy, while Albania followed its regular revision cycle. Both countries also aimed to align more closely with the EU, having signed the Security and Defence Partnership with the Union in late 2024. Meanwhile, countries without new strategies—Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina—differ in their international positions and strategic clarity. Croatia is fully integrated into Western structures; Montenegro's internal divisions affect its policy consistency; Serbia maintains a multi-vector foreign policy under military neutrality; and Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks the

³ Stojarová, Věra, and Nemanja Džuverović. (eds). 2023. *Peace and security in the Western Balkans. A local perspective*. London: Routledge, 281.

⁴ Jakešević, Ružica. 202. Renewed geopolitical tensions and security policy implications for small states in Southeast Europe. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(2), 55-76.

internal coherence to produce a unified strategic document, despite a clearer orientation toward EU integration than NATO.

The compulsory military service was suspended in all the analysed countries. Although Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are NATO members and, as such, are covered by the security guarantees of collective defence within the Alliance, discussions about reintroducing compulsory military service have emerged in the region. The most intense debates occur in Croatia and Serbia, and to some extent in Montenegro. Occasionally, the topic is discussed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while it is entirely absent in Albania. Financial and political factors are typically cited as the primary limiting factors for reintroducing compulsory military service. Serbia has already announced its will to return to mandatory military service, and one of the possible dates mentioned was September 2025. Nevertheless, the law on its reintroduction has not yet been passed, so the reintroduction will not be possible before 2026. Analysts reveal that recruits born in 2006 might be the first to enter the army barracks.

Although Croatia and Serbia have experienced periods of improved political relations, these relations have steadily deteriorated over the past decade. Divergent international alignments alongside unresolved issues stemming from the recent past continue to foster mutual distrust. Military modernisation and the defence budget in both countries have become highly politicised issues, often publicly justified by referencing actions of the other party and the perceived need to maintain the regional balance of power. In absolute terms, the defence budgets of Serbia and Croatia significantly exceed those of other countries in the region under analysis. While defence spending has increased across all countries, the most marked increases are seen in Serbia, as well as in NATO members Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro – all of which have surpassed the 2% of GDP defence spending threshold and plan to increase it even further in the near future. The author asserts that the trend toward increased military spending and modernisation is driven by two parallel, interrelated dynamics. On the one hand, global geopolitical tensions – exacerbated by great power rivalry and the Russian invasion – have weakened multilateral institutions upon which smaller states, including those in the Western Balkans, traditionally rely for security. On the other hand, regional dynamics marked by persistent distrust, shifting political interests, unresolved state-building processes, and incomplete democratisation and integration further fuel security concerns. These conditions create a potential for a regional security dilemma, while simultaneously opening space for proactive engagement by external actors. Renewed efforts to advance EU and NATO integration for non-member states in the region could serve as a stabilising force and help mitigate the influence of external actors—particularly Russia, whose actions often undermine peace-building efforts, notably in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ružica Jakešević concludes that most countries in the region follow one of two security strategies typical of small states. The first group – comprising Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Croatia, and Montenegro – pursues balancing or sheltering strategies, as reflected in their NATO membership or aspirations. Serbia, by contrast, adopts a hedging strategy, which is evident in its foreign policy and strategic documents. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains difficult to categorise due to internal political fragmentation, weak institutions, and ongoing crises, which leave it exposed to external influences and vulnerable to shifts in global tensions.

The following analysis by Filip Balunović⁵ focuses on Serbia's foreign policy in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Serbia is one of the few European countries that did not impose sanctions on the Russian Federation after February 2022, and the author starts with a simple set of questions. Does that imply that Serbia supports aggression? Does it mean that Serbia's EU orientation is insincere? Does it indicate that Serbia is receiving benefits from Russia in return for its stance? While attempting to answer those questions, the article seeks to assess Serbia's unique foreign policy through the notion of Serbian exceptionalism (the self-perception of Serbia as having a unique historical and geopolitical role) and adherence to the non-aligned stance that Yugoslavia had maintained during the Cold War. The author begins with the fundamental principles of Serbia's foreign policy – the EU accession and military neutrality. The refusal to join NATO is based on the trauma of the 1999 NATO intervention in Serbia, which indeed brought the country closer to Russia. The article asserts that it is the notion of Serbian exceptionalism, which seeks special recognition from both the East and the West, that led Serbia to the decision to comply with most UN resolutions while simultaneously refusing to impose sanctions on Russia.

Serbia is the only former Yugoslavian country that retains the Yugoslavian foreign policy legacy; the rest of the countries have either joined NATO or aspire to join NATO, unlike Serbia, which bases its foreign policy on four pillars: maintaining close ties with the EU, the USA, Russia, and China. This policy aims to balance relations with the major global powers while pursuing its national interests, including EU membership. The author underlines in this regard the inherent contradictions of the Serbian national identity – the leadership perpetuates the anti-western sentiment, while at the same time keeps closer ties with the European leaders. As Balunović emphasises, “this sentiment has been a hallmark of Serbian politics for decades, with few exceptions”. Russia, on the other hand, is conspicuously kept in the background and serves as “a comforting presence, a symbolic anchor that provides warmth when the ‘cold winds’ of Western criticism blow too hard”. The cultural narrative is reflected in the colloquial term “Mother Russia” and “much like a maternal figure, Russia is imagined as simultaneously nurturing and forgiving – a steadfast presence that allows Serbia to navigate its vacillations between East and West”. Like mothers, Russia will always be here to encourage, protect, and keep an eye on its children, providing maternal warmth when being criticised by the West for its actions. This balancing and declarative stance of “not yielding to any foreign interests paradoxically leads to the state of “yielding to all interests”, being vulnerable and open to exploitation from all sides. Balunović concludes, that the result is that Serbia has not been acknowledged by global powers in a way that could yield the strategic benefits associated with neutrality and on the contrary, it has become a dependent European periphery - “had Serbia developed its neutrality with greater strategic focus, Belgrade might have been seen as a suitable meeting point for negotiations towards a ceasefire or peace agreement in Ukraine”.⁶ Serbian neutrality and its sense of exceptionalism appear primarily symbolic and juvenile, despite being portrayed differently in Serbian public discourse. The author emphasises that such a stance has not gained international recognition and serves only as a tool for facilitating external influence and legitimisation of the ruling party and its foreign policy, enabling the party to profit from Serbia's political and economic

⁵ Balunović, Filip. 2025. How Serbia's national identity shapes its international positioning amidst the war in Ukraine: Hollow neutrality as a poor imitation of Yugoslavia's Non-Alignment. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 13(1), 77-93.

⁶ Balunović, *How Serbia's national identity shapes its international positioning*, 86.

subordination to Russia. The emulation of Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance from the Cold War era is thus being labelled as unsuccessful.

The following article by Marko Miljković⁷ focuses on the future of Serbia's nuclear energy, drawing on historical examples of Yugoslav atomic cooperation with the Soviet Union and offering possible scenarios for Serbia in this regard. The experience of collaboration between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia offers contradictory conclusions. During the 1940s, the Yugoslav political leadership understood the Soviet intentions to integrate Yugoslavia into the Soviet sphere of interest and successfully managed to undermine those. A decade later, the Yugoslav leadership fell for cooperation with the Soviets and succumbed to the Soviet influence for almost a full decade. During the early 1960s, this strategy was revised, and Yugoslavia dropped from this unhealthy, all-encompassing cooperation with the Soviet Union. Eventually, the only nuclear power plant was built in Krško, in Slovenia, by the U.S. Westinghouse.

In 1989, Yugoslavia issued a moratorium on the construction of nuclear power plants. Serbia lifted the moratorium in November 2024, paving the way for reformulating its nuclear energy policy and aligning it with Serbia's efforts to align with the European Green Deal plan on its path towards EU membership. However, lacking the expertise and capacities in the nuclear field, Serbia must choose a foreign partner, and the choice will have serious political consequences. One of the logical and potential choices for Serbia in atomic cooperation could be France, in view of Serbia's EU integration process and France's experience in nuclear technology. Considering Russia's significant experience in nuclear energy and the relations between Russia and Serbia, cooperation seems very expected. Miljković argues that the collaboration with Russia remains likely, "potentially deepening Serbia's political and energy dependence on Russia and undermining its sovereignty"⁸ with an impact on the regional and European security. Serbia has signed agreements with Rosatom, which are very general and all-encompassing, providing opportunities for Russia to participate in the process of construction of power plants. The Agreement was signed by the time the Minister without Portfolio in the Serbian Government, Nenad Popović, who is serving in the current government again as the Minister without Portfolio. The author emphasises that Popović has close connections with Kremlin senior leaders and is the main promoter of Russian interests in Serbia. Therefore, despite the ongoing cooperation with France in the nuclear field, the Serbian political leadership leaves the door open to collaboration with Russia. Miljković emphasises the need to carefully consider nuclear energy partnerships, balancing national interests with geopolitical realities and warning of the increased Russian influence in the region, which has severe implications not only for Serbia but for European security.

The next article by Radina Vučetić⁹ presents fascinating research on political graffiti in Serbia, exploring how it has evolved into a visible expression of state domestic and foreign policy. The author underlines the fact that the political graffiti and murals in Serbia memorialise conflicts and serve as tools of visual manipulation to affirm political views and mobilise support for political goals. Serbian graffiti is filled with references to Kosovo, war criminals, and other nationalist symbols, and not surprisingly, they also take a stance

⁷ Miljković, Marko. 2025. The future of Serbia's nuclear energy: Dependence, sovereignty, and geopolitical implications. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(2), 94-117.

⁸ Miljković, *The future of Serbia's nuclear energy*, 94.

⁹ Vučetić, Radina. 2025. Another brick in the (Russian) wall: Graffiti propaganda in Serbia. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(2), 118-148.

towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Radina Vučetić demonstrates how pro-Russian graffiti has become deeply entwined with Serbian foreign policy and its international positioning. With the consolidation of Putin and Vučić's power, graffiti turned into the propaganda of both the Serbian and Russian governments. After the invasion, the spread of the graffiti noticeably slowed down and shifted from an extremely pro-Russian stance to a relative restraint in copying Serbia's foreign policy. The emergence and disappearance of pro-Russian graffiti in Belgrade follow the international positioning of the country and highlight how Serbia navigates its relationship with Russia, while simultaneously pursuing closer ties to the EU and the West.

Vučetić reminds us that Belgrade graffiti is not hastily scrawled in the night, but rather large murals requiring time and effort, indicating that they were created with tacit approval of the authorities. They emphasise Serbian-Russian friendship, Russian heroes, side with Russia in the war in Ukraine, and highlight the role of Russia as the protector of Kosovo. The graffiti perfectly serves the interests of both Serbia and Russia. The murals accommodate the interests of the nationalist and pro-Russian voters, who are mainly supporters of the SNS party. At the same time, it demonstrates to the EU the pro-Russian public sentiment in Serbia, which enables it to manoeuvre Serbian foreign policy between the West and the East, pursuing Serbia's EU integration while maintaining strong ties with Russia. Vučetić concludes with the recommendation to keep an eye on the Belgrade walls, which give us clear signals about the wind of change in Serbian foreign policy.

The article by Bart Brettschneider and Věra Stojarová¹⁰ analyses Delije's online communication on Telegram, focusing on the characteristics and narratives typically associated with pro-Russian proxy groups. The Delije's posts frequently included narratives that portray Ukraine as an extension of NATO while talking about the suffering of the Russian brotherly nation in Donbass. West and Ukraine are portrayed as those responsible for the war in Ukraine, the inhumane actors, while Russia is the victim. The notion of historical and moral alignment between Serbia and Russia is widespread. The study shows that there is no clear delineation between far-right politics and fandom and that the Serbian ultras play a role in contemporary hybrid warfare.

The authors introduce a concept of a semi-proxy group: an actor whose primary identity lies elsewhere, in this case, in football fandom, but which nonetheless reinforces Russian narratives, thus reinforcing the Russian influence in the region, juxtaposing it with proxy groups, whose primary concern is to disseminate Russian influence in a coordinated way. Delije reproduces the Kremlin-style frames and systematically reinforces Russian narratives, though without the recruitment and coordination typical of proxy groups. Authors conclude that the role of Delije in this regard remains limited.

The last article by Ninković Slavnić, Ilić, Ispanović and Kleut¹¹ focuses on public attitudes in Serbia toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The authors remind us that the public opinion in Serbia sharply differs from the broader European trend, with a majority of the population siding with Russia. Their research shows that trust in government-aligned pro-Russian media and support for the ruling party are the strongest predictors of siding with

¹⁰ Brettschneider, Bart, and Věra Stojarová. 2025. Between red and white or red, blue and white? Assessing Delije's role as a Russian proxy on Telegram. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(2), 149-168.

¹¹ Ninković Slavnić, Danka / Ilić, Vujo / Ispanović, Igor, and Jelena Kleut. 2025. *Serbian audiences' news consumption and choosing sides in the Russia-Ukraine war*. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 12(2), 169-188.

Russia. The same cohort of people, those with anti-Western sentiments, who trust in pro-Russian media and the incumbents, are more satisfied with the news coverage of the war.

The authors underline the existence of highly polarised and asymmetrically structured media and political environments, where the selective media trust has an impact on geopolitical perceptions of the local population, contributing to our understanding of how media systems influence public opinion in illiberal regimes. The most influential anti-government, liberal and pro-EU televisions have limited access to offline audiences, and so the chance of siding with Russia among traditional media audiences is higher than among online media users.

All articles remind us of the importance of Russia in Serbian public discourse. The manifestations of Serbian-Russian friendship have been omnipresent in the public space during the last decade, starting with the billboards of NIS and Gazprom, intertwining Serbian and Russian flags or the pro-Russian graffiti nourishing the myth that Russia has always been a close friend to Serbia, despite the eras of significant distances between the two countries in the last century. The founding stone for the friendship was Russia's refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence, and thus Serbia became dependent on Russia regarding Kosovo's status. At the same time, Serbia pursued its foreign policy towards integration into the EU. The Russian invasion of Ukraine began to complicate matters, but Serbia was able to sit simultaneously on two chairs, satisfying both the pro-Russian public sentiment and, at the same time, pursuing its foreign policy goals.

The Special Issue leads us to a concept of *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World), in which various global regions are linked to Russia in fluid and often ambiguous ways. This conceptual flexibility underpins *Russkiy Mir*'s function as an instrument of Russian soft power. It amalgamates language, culture, historical memory, and Orthodox Christianity into a civilisational identity that transcends Russia's territorial boundaries. Through the promotion of this narrative, the Kremlin claims a prerogative to protect and guide not only ethnic Russians abroad but also broader communities united by a shared Orthodox Slavic heritage and historical consciousness. Rather than aligning with liberal international norms, this strategy positions Russia as a sovereign civilisational entity deliberately opposed to Western modernity. Moreover, this civilisational narrative is intimately tied to religious nationalism, wherein Orthodox Christianity is inseparable from ethnic identity and statehood. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays a pivotal role in this ideological fusion. Patriarch Kirill has portrayed Moscow as the spiritual centre of a transnational 'Holy Russia,' encompassing the Eastern Slavic world and the global Orthodox community. This sacralisation of politics presents Russia – and 'fraternal' nations such as Serbia – as defenders of true Christianity in an existential struggle against Western materialism.

In parallel, Russia's strategic use of hybrid warfare propagating the *Russkiy Mir* has become a defining feature of its contemporary geopolitical behaviour. Hybrid warfare refers to a fusion of military and non-military tactics that obscure the boundaries between war and peace. Mark Galeotti describes this model as an integration of political, economic, informational, and kinetic instruments – where covert operations, disinformation campaigns, and deniable military interventions (e.g., unmarked troops or proxy militias) are executed in a coordinated fashion¹². This approach thrives on ambiguity, exploiting the 'grey zone' to achieve strategic objectives without engaging in overt conventional warfare, relying on

¹² Galeotti, Mark. 2018. (Mis)Understanding Russia's two 'hybrid' wars. *Eurozine*, 29 November 2018.

proxies. Proxy warfare is defined as a form of armed conflict in which an external actor (the 'beneficiary') engages an adversary indirectly through a third-party proxy, enabling sustained violence while minimising direct exposure. While proxies are often reduced to passive instruments of their sponsors, recent scholarship emphasises their agency and the negotiated nature of such relationships.¹³ In the Russian context, proxies may include a diverse range of actors – from local politicians, religious institutions and NGOs to local insurgents and ostensibly independent private military companies (PMCs). The example of semi-proxy as introduced by Brettschneider and Stojarová could be the ultras group Delije supporting Red Star Belgrade. These entities allow the Kremlin to extend its influence while preserving plausible deniability. Researchers on Russian influence also pay attention to traditional and social media, disinformation campaigns, use of trolls and bots, cyberspace activities, the Night Wolves Military Club and private military companies like Wagner Group¹⁴.

The above-mentioned concepts are closely tied to the research of authoritarian regimes, which often speak about soft power as the ability to co-opt rather than coerce, shaping the preferences of the target audience through appeal and attraction using culture, economy, or religion. Radina Vučetić reminds us that all this could also be embedded in the political graffiti, which presents a visible expression of state domestic and foreign policy. The murals that surround us in everyday life strengthen the Russian narrative in an easy way. In the newest research, Russia is described as a 'sharp power' seeking to penetrate the political and information environments with the strategy to distract and manipulate with the ultimate aim of degrading the credibility of democratic regimes.¹⁵ The scope of sharp power influence tools is broad, very often using non-governmental entities as proxies, and we see the fruits of this effort – the democratic decline in the region.¹⁶ The war in Ukraine has revealed a pattern of continuity in Serbia's foreign policy – the country's oscillation between East and West, in particular. At the same time, it has granted the SNS-led government one more opportunity to legitimise the stabilitocratic doctrine in Serbia's persistent manoeuvring with powerful global actors¹⁷.

The articles in this Special Issue collectively tell us who is in the driver's seat. Many states in the region are hesitant to change their security strategies and wait for what comes to them, or are just being pragmatic, like Serbia. At the same time, Russia uses every channel and makes tremendous effort to win hearts and minds of the local population, starting on the political level, through the Orthodox Church, media, local proxies or even graffiti on the wall you encounter every day while walking to work. The ways to get to the locals are diverse, and there is no universal profile of the proxy actor across the region. Since it is very difficult to change the official foreign policy of the states, the effort has been moved towards the people,

¹³ Rauta, Vladimir. 2016. Proxy agents, auxiliary forces, and sovereign defection: Assessing the outcomes of using non-state actors in civil conflicts. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16(1), 91-111.

¹⁴ Kleiner, Jan / Gregor, Miloš, and Petra Mlejnková. 2024. The night wolves: Evidence of Russian sharp power and propaganda from the Victory Roads' itinerary. *Problems of Post-Communism* 71(2), 145-155; Marten, Kimberly. 2019. Russia's use of semi-state security forces: The case of the Wagner Group. *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35(3), 181-204; Molnár, Virág / Koziura, Karolina, and Franziska. König-Paratore. 2022. Russia's night wolves, migrating memory and Europe's Eastern frontier. *European Journal of Sociology* 62(1), 71-103.

¹⁵ Walker, Christopher, and Jessica Ludwig. 2017. Sharp power: Rising authoritarian influence. *National Endowment for Democracy*, 5 December 2017.

¹⁶ Kapidžić, Damir, and Věra Stojarová. 2021. *Illiberal politics in Southeast Europe: How ruling elites undermine democracy*. London: Routledge.

¹⁷ Petsinis, Vassilis. 2025. *Echoes of the war in Ukraine: Political ramifications in the Baltics and the Balkans*. London: Palgrave.

and pro-Russian narratives serve as an important tool in shaping public opinion. The strategy of Moscow seems to bear fruit – Russia is seen as a strategic partner by many in the targeted countries: 59% of the respondents in Serbia, 38% respondents in Montenegro and 23% respondents in North Macedonia consider Russia as a strategic partner¹⁸. Our Special Issue suggests that the Russian influence intensified on the informal level, being exercised by non-state actors, while keeping the effort on the formal, political level. Foreign policy has lost its primacy, and the Russian effort resembles a jigsaw puzzle – every single piece, from energy through media to culture, matters, making the Russian influence cross-institutional, resilient and diffused.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine completely changed the political and security setting in Europe. Southeastern Europe has not yet recovered from the Balkan wars of the 1990s; we observe frozen conflicts waiting for a spark to reignite them. Russia is aware of the fragility of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and uses Serbia and its proxies in the region to work in its favour. As Dimitar Bechev remarks, it is hard to deny that Moscow benefits from instability on Europe's periphery. Having in mind the balancing of Serbia (and Montenegro) between East and West, Russia can reward but also make life difficult for Balkan politicians¹⁹. We have observed an intensification of Russian influence operations, marked by growing sympathies for Russia and a decline in sympathies for the EU in the region²⁰. Love for a non-democratic regime also undermines the credibility of democracy, with a plausible impact on the quality of democracy in the region. Obviously, the picture is much broader and not black and white. It is not only Russia and China waiting at the doorstep, but also the EU, pushing for the Rio Tinto lithium project with a potential grave impact on the environment and losing the hearts of Serbs. Similarly, ever since the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014, European dependency on Russian coal, oil and gas has been debated and has been put under EU sanctions. At the same time, Russia's global standing in the nuclear energy sector remains strong, challenging nuclear energy diplomacy on a global level, as Marko Miljković reminds us. Nevertheless, the Russian goal appears to be clear – to undermine the stability in the region and the credibility of the West and democratic regimes. The concept of *Russkiy Mir* suggests that Russia seeks to gain influence in the region, reminiscent of Freddie Mercury's 'I Want It All and I Want It Now.' If the West does not want to lose this war, it must keep a close eye on the Russian influence operations in the region and regain the credibility and support of the local population. This Special Issue presents a timely and important contribution to our understanding of Russian influence in the Western Balkan region.

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¹⁸ Milo, Daniel. 2021. *The image of Russia in CEE and the Western Balkans. Russia: Mighty Slavic brother or hungry bear next door?*. Bratislava: GLOBSEC.

¹⁹ Bechev, Dimitar. 2017. *Rival power. Russia in Southeast Europe*. Yale University Press: New Heaven & London, 7.

²⁰ Data from Balkan Barometer Public Opinion from 2021 and 2024 show decline in support of EU membership in all the Western Balkan countries with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 42% respondents claimed EU membership is a good thing in 2021 in contrast to 2024 where we see an increase to 50% of the respondents claiming EU membership is a good thing. Regional Cooperation Council. *Balkan Barometer 2021. Public opinion* (accessed: 18 November 2025), 44; Regional Cooperation Council. *Balkan Barometer 2024. Public opinion* (accessed: 18 November 2025), 13.

Complex), which is conducted at the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University, Jostova 10, Brno.

Notes on author

Věra Stojarová works as an academic researcher and associate professor at the Department of Political Science in the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. She has been focusing on security and politics in the Western Balkans. Věra Stojarová has published many papers on security and politics in the Western Balkan region and has also cooperated with NGOs, lecturing about the security problems faced by societies in transition. <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0496-5171>.

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