

How the EU can counteract Russian influence in the Balkans

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised fears about the destabilisation of the Balkans. Margit Wunsch Gaarmann argues the EU should strengthen its support for states in the region to help counteract Russian influence.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has strengthened the resolve of Europeans to defend democracy and Europe's security architecture. Simultaneously, many politicians and academics have turned their sights to the Balkans, fearful of what Russian influence is capable of in a region racked by political instability, economic problems, and a brain drain. The situation is made all the more concerning due to continued ethnic tensions that still remain unresolved some three decades after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The likelihood of a Russian invasion of the Western Balkans Six – Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – is low, particularly as Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are already NATO members. Yet Russia could easily continue to destabilise the region and thereby sabotage the six countries' likelihood of becoming members of the European Union, which they have been aspiring to since 2005.

Questions have already been raised about how Bosnia-Herzegovina can become a member of the EU when Milorad Dodik is [pursuing Russian-backed secessionist aspirations for Republika Srpska](#) (the majority Serb entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina). Meanwhile Kosovo's aspirations for EU membership remain blocked by the refusal of several countries – including Russia and Serbia – to recognise its independence. Serbia, which has already qualified as a candidate for EU membership, continues to strike a delicate balance between its alignment with EU foreign policy and its cultural and historical links with its 'Slavic brother' Russia.

This tension was visible during a press conference by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on 11 March, during which Vučić refused to mention the Russian invasion, instead alluding vaguely to "[what's happening in Ukraine](#)". Domestically, he has backing for pursuing closer relations with Russia, as demonstrated by [a recent poll from the European Council on Foreign Relations](#) which found that 54 per cent of Serbian citizens view Russia as an ally, 95 per cent view Russia as a necessary partner, and only 11 per cent view the EU as an ally.

What can the EU do?

While Russia's war against Ukraine has been unfolding, European politicians have [repeatedly emphasised](#) that they see the region's future within the EU, stating that a "merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is [still] in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest." The Czech EU-Presidency, due to start in July 2022, will likely prioritise the issue of EU-enlargement in Southeast Europe.

However, actions must follow these words. Rather than *decreasing* the primary tool of enlargement policy (the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance), as was decided for the 2021-2027 budget cycle, the money available to the region should instead be increased if the EU is to show a true commitment to enlargement. As Dušan Reljić [explains](#), "in per capita terms, the Western Balkans will be given just 500 euros over 2021-2027", which certainly does not mirror true engagement with the region.

Moreover, the EU needs to find a sustainable solution to the ongoing brain drain from the region, which has left many countries in the Balkans demographically depleted and lacking economic potential. According to World Bank estimates, around [4.6 million people](#) have left the six Western Balkan countries between 1990 and 2019, which amounts to 25% of the population. As is often the case, the individuals leaving are highly educated, liberal-minded, young people who could be a driving force for bringing their home countries closer to a European future. Instead, as [Allison Carragher](#) argues, the ongoing brain drain (which benefits mainly Germany and Italy), is effectively working against these countries' prospects of joining the EU.

Lastly, the EU must take a more principled, commanding stance against Russia, which will continuously undermine European policies in the Balkans and take advantage of any political weakness. This also applies to the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina (OHR), which Russia is openly attempting to dismantle. This office was created by the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, the peace agreement that ended the war in Bosnia. Since then, the OHR has aimed to implement the civilian aspects of the peace agreement and support the establishment of democratic structures.

The former High Representative, Valentin Inzko, left his 12-year tenure in 2021. Before leaving, he implemented legal changes that banned the denial of genocide, causing the secessionist crisis Bosnia now faces as many Bosnian Serbs still do not acknowledge the genocide that occurred in Srebrenica in 1995. Inzko's decision, which legally lay within the so-called 'Bonn powers' of his office, did little to facilitate interethnic reconciliation and the strengthening of democratic structures. Moreover, it produced a backlash from Russia, which has since attempted to dismantle the office. Although the OHR will ultimately have to be closed before Bosnia-Herzegovina can join the EU, the manner in which this is done will be crucial. The EU will have to exercise tight control over the process to avoid reigniting ethnic conflict in Bosnia.

A time for action

Even the most optimistic observer in the West would be forced to concede that Russia has the capacity to fuel conflict and significantly destabilise the Balkans – a region with heightened significance for Europe's security architecture. By stoking territorial disputes, supporting secessionist politicians, and undermining democratic institutions, the region could potentially be brought into a state of chaos without the Kremlin deploying a single Russian tank.

It is therefore vital that the EU follows Winston Churchill's famous commitment to "never let a good crisis go to waste". It should use its newfound assertiveness in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to formulate a clear strategy for the Balkans. Offering the six Western Balkan states a viable path to EU membership, after 18 years of stalling, would go some way toward counteracting Russian attempts to undermine the progress that has been made in the region over the last three decades.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
