

WESTERN BALKANS AND UKRAINIAN CRISIS 2014-2024

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Abstract: The paper explores the changes that have occurred in the foreign, security, and defense policies and capabilities of Croatia and Serbia, as the two most important states for the Western Balkans stability in the context of the ten-year Ukrainian crisis and changing international relations and order toward the more conflictual one. These changes were significantly expressed at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, with Crimea joining the Russian Federation, strengthened in 2022 with the Russian military intervention, and still ongoing with the greater polarization between the EU and NATO on the one side, Russia on the other, and with the significant role of rising powers like China and India on the third. The authors claim that the Ukrainian crisis reflected the global trends on the regional level thus bringing more polarization, prospect for conflictual relations, and militarisation instead of immersion of the whole region into the Western structures on the geopolitical grounds. The analysis of the policies and comparison of the cases of Croatia and Serbia are conducted according to three variables: 1. narratives on the Crimean crisis in 2014 and Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2022, 2. measures taken regarding Russia and Ukraine, 3. changes of their capabilities. The authors conclude that with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the potential for new crises in the Balkans rises. Countries' narratives, especially that of Croatia which constantly victimizes itself, create new mistrust and distance between the two countries and peoples, Croatian EU membership which is constantly highlighted against the Serbian lack of harmonization with the EU foreign and security policy further distances Serbia from the EU, and improvements in defense capabilities, conducted on the various grounds and with opposing actors triggers the arms race, thus complicating the mutual relations of the Western

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Balkan countries and slowing down the prospects for European integration instead of fostering them on geopolitical grounds.

Keywords: Western Balkans, EU, Serbia, Croatia, foreign and security policies, Ukrainian crisis.

Introduction

The Ukrainian crisis is considered to be one of the “watershed” moments in international politics, especially with the 2022 Russian military invasion in Eastern Ukraine it is perceived as a turning point in human history after which international relations will no longer be the same (Kostić Šulejić, 2023, p. 83). This “turn in history” brought many challenges and changes in Europe, affecting various fields of human life and state policies, and changing the established patterns of international relations. This paper focuses on the consequences that the ten-year crisis in Ukraine has had on the security situation in the Western Balkans and the prospects for the encirclement of the whole of this region into the European Union. This primarily refers to the attempts to involve Serbia and Serbian people, since the Ukrainian crisis primarily affected the relationship between the NATO member countries from the region and Serbia and the Republic of Srpska as military-neutral and more Russia-oriented republics. “Circling the square” instead of “squaring the circle” became the right description of the European Union and the West endeavors to incorporate Serbs into the Western line of thinking and acting but with less success.

Because of the security dynamics in the region primary relationship that affects its stability and prospects for EU integration is the relationship between Croatia, as a NATO and EU member, and Serbia, as a military-neutral and EU candidate country. Additionally, the relationship between Serbia and Croatia is crucial for the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), since both Serbs and Croats have strong links with these two countries which are at the same time guarantors of Bosnian stability and integrity. All three countries, together with Montenegro, are also locked into the sub-regional arms control agreement, and their capabilities are measured in comparison to one another and having in mind the set limits. These are the reasons why are we in this paper concerned primarily with the effects that the Ukrainian crisis produced on the foreign and security policies of these two countries. Other countries of the Western Balkans region that are at the same time NATO members – Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro – as well as the Kosovo entity have the same stand regarding the Ukrainian crisis as Croatia, with the full alignment of their policies with the EU and NATO,

while Bosnia and Herzegovina is torn apart among the Croat and Serbian position. Thus, the analysis of the positions and changes in Serbia and Croatia gives an excellent explanation of the security situation in the region, its stability, and prospects for encirclement into the Western structures.

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**“Dropping the gloves, fighting with bare hands”
- true faces of West and Russia and consequences
for the Western Balkans**

The Warsaw Pact, due to the numerous contradictions on which it rested, existed on increasingly narrow bases of power during the last decades of the Cold War. Moscow permanently lost its economic, ideological, and moral appeal, with military power standing out as almost the only effective tool for projecting power (Гедис, 2003, п 406). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact deprived Russia of the aforementioned instrument of power, making it vulnerable to the challenges that followed. The post-Cold War period is characterized by the Alliance's efforts to take advantage of a favorable geopolitical moment and fill the “security vacuum” in Central and Eastern Europe created for them by the sudden collapse of a strategic rival. They will be generated by geo-strategically motivated moves by the Alliance aimed at its expansion, following the ideas of offensive realism (Благојевић, 2021, pp. 329–344). NATO's “open door” policy, based on Article 10 of the Washington

Agreement, is considered one of the basic instruments of expanding Atlanticism and US influence (Благојевић, Стојковић, 2023, pp. 38-39).

Over time, reform efforts led to positive effects, which provided space for a more confident position of Moscow towards the West in protecting national interests, primarily those related to stopping NATO's eastward expansion. The key event was the Munich Security Conference in 2007 when Russian President Vladimir Putin requested equal status in all future negotiations and announced that his country would play an important role in structuring the future global multipolar order. He criticized, as an open provocation, NATO's entry into Russia's borders, despite previously given guarantees that it would not expand across and beyond the eastern borders of a united Germany. At the same time, he proposed the establishment of a new global security architecture, expressing Russia's readiness to, "in interaction with responsible and independent partners, join efforts in building a just and democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few but for all" (Putin's Speech, 2007). However, the logic of exclusiveness is something inherent in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, which prohibited Russia from preserving its positions in Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet States in economic, trade, and defense fields (Kostić, 2021, p. 504). Feeling excluded from the dominant flows of security integration in Europe, in 2009 Moscow launched an unsuccessful initiative for an agreement on a new European security architecture in which everyone would participate (Ејдус, 2012, p. 258). In almost the same context and manner, these propositions were repeated in the new Russian proposals in December 2021, but with the same negative outcome and reception by the Western allies (Костић Шулејић, 2022, стр. 63-73).

The NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008 was significant in many ways for Ukraine and the future of relations with Russia. The Alliance rejected Kyiv's request to, together with Georgia, obtain consent for the implementation of the Membership Action Plan (MAP). On that occasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin told his American colleague George W. Bush that Ukraine is a "non-existent state". Even though the USA was in favor of the Membership Action Plan, France and especially Germany were against provoking Moscow by bringing Ukraine closer to NATO, especially since Russia's military intervention in Georgia was a clear demonstration of force directed towards Ukraine and the West (Blagojević, 2016, pp. 247-248). The constant ignoring and marginalization of Russian strategic interests contributed to the strengthening of animosity between Russia and the West, which was also manifested in the continued expansion of NATO.

The geopolitical importance of Ukraine for Russia is enormous, but it is also significant for the geostrategic interests of the West. It is the largest country in Europe, with a significantly large Russian population, with access to the Black Sea. Ukraine was also one of the first countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States to form independent armed forces and applied for future NATO membership and the Partnership for Peace program in 1994. As Brzezinski points out, Ukraine was the focal point of Russia's imperialist ambitions in Europe, so the importance of that country is naturally recognized both in Moscow and Washington. Moreover, the loss of Ukraine for Russia would also mean the loss of access to Europe and important ports on the Black Sea, while also forcing the country to reorient its foreign policy to Central Asia or the Caucasus instead of Europe (Blagojevic, Pejic, 2019, pp. 305-328). At the end of the last century, he recognized the potential of French-German-Polish-Ukrainian political cooperation supported by the United States, assessing that it could contribute to increasing the geostrategic weight of Europe (Brzezinski, 2001, pp. 82-115). Ukraine is certainly paying a heavy and bloody price in this armed conflict for the policy of NATO expansion and Russia's determination to oppose such developments (Благојевић, Стојковић, 2023, pp. 36-38).

The outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, the so-called 'appearance of people', and the violent change of power in Kyiv started in 2014. The Russian population, with the tacit support of Russia to say the least, organized a referendum on independence from Ukraine and on joining Russia. Although the referendum results are still not internationally recognized, this did not prevent Moscow from declaring the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. It seems to be an indisputable fact that the European Union developed economically and politically to a large extent thanks to its smaller allocations for defense and security because it was the United States and NATO that constantly provided it with security guarantees. Furthermore, for more than half a century, the European Union was not in a position and did not have enough political will either, to independently consider its overall strategic position and actions on the international stage. The Minsk Agreements, it has turned out, were the maximum the European Union's "independent" engagement could produce about the crisis in Ukraine. Russian Federation launched a military intervention in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 that directly threatens peace in Europe (Blagojević, Karavidić, 2022, pp. 81-82).

It seems that the Russian side in the war in Ukraine is focused primarily on deterring NATO, and only secondarily on coercion towards Kiev. One

can hardly expect an effective victory in a war when it is a secondary strategic goal (Blagojevic, 2019, pp. 280-281). In such circumstances in the global strategic environment, it is difficult to expect that there will be no negative effects on the political and security situation in the Western Balkan region, which was already burdened by various problems arising from the “wars for the Yugoslav heritage”.

Croatian narratives, measures and capabilities

Croatia and Ukraine have a very strong relations since their independence in the 1990s. Ukraine, which proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union on 24 August 1991, recognized Croatia on 11 December 1991, two months after the end of the moratorium on the Croatian declaration of independence from the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), and was the first UN member state to diplomatically do that. Croatia was also the first country to recognize the independence of Ukraine on 5 December 1991 (Demeshchuk, 2019, p. 33). The close ties between the two countries continued in the new era and in the last ten years Croatia first tried to reconcile the Russian and Ukrainian positions and kept the lines of communication open with Russia, but after 24 February 2024, it aligned itself fully with the EU restrictive measures and policy regarding Russia and tried to offer some good services and examples of its own war experience to Ukraine.

Narratives – Ukrainian crisis as an excuse for a constant further victimization of Croatia

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and especially the way it was done, the greatest Croatian fear was that something similar might happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Northern Kosovo. Wójtowicz (2020, p. 24) considered a visit of the Croatian President to Russia in October 2017 as one of the measures taken to reconcile the Croatian and Russian interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as to discuss the prospects of cooperation in the field of energy.

This fear continued to grow for the previous ten years and was especially strengthened after 24 February 2022 and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The fear of Serbian resurrection and assertiveness called for more Croatian attention on the situation in Bosnia, especially regarding the Republic of Srpska, but also the position of the Croats in the BH Federation. From the beginning, Croatia participated in the formulation and adopted

the EU decisions regarding Ukraine and Russian intervention. Croatia condemned “aggression on Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by the military of the Russian Federation” as well as authorization that the Council of the Russian Federation gave to the Russian president for the use of armed forces in the territory of Ukraine (MVEP, 2014a). These Russian activities were considered to violate international law and treaties. Before 2014, the officially proclaimed policy of Croatia regarding Ukraine was that Ukraine should not be an area of conflict but the potential strengthening of cooperation between the EU and Russia and “overlapping” of their free-trade areas (MVEP, 2014b). Similarly, Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aleksey Y. Meshkov attended the 9. Croatia Forum in Dubrovnik and stated that nobody should ask or pressure countries from the region to choose between the EU and Russia or to adopt sanctions against Russia, that the membership in the EU should not create a new line of division in Europe, but that the Balkan area should be the one of cooperation between the EU and Russia (MVEP, 2014c). As noted before this concept of an “area of cooperation between the EU and Russia” failed in Ukraine and it will most probably fail in the Balkans as well, hopefully without war. In August 2014 Croatia opted to find new ways of communication with Russia since the existing ones, together with sanctions, did not lead to the de-escalation in Ukraine, but even worse confrontation (and later on even further military operation) (MVEP, 2014d). Croatia considered the elections in the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk Republics in November 2014 illegal (MVEP, 2014e). At the end of 2014, Croatia qualified the situation in Ukraine as a “war of low intensity” and even as a conflict between the West and Russia, concluded that Minsk agreements were not functioning or being implemented, thus calling for engagement in their upgrading or finding some other solution for achieving truce in Ukraine (MVEP, 2014f).

In the period 2015-2020, the creation of the Islamic state and Russian inclusion in the Syrian civil war, together with the Minsk 1 and 2 agreements for Ukraine, the Iranian nuclear deal, the situation in Libya, and the great migration crisis from the MENA region in 2015 and 2016, Ebola and later on Coronavirus crisis caused a situation over Crimea to slide down from the top of the international, and particularly important, the EU agenda. Croatia was concerned with the energy issues, but the stability of BH as well and tried to keep the communications line with Russia open (MVEP, 2015). What was not immediately recognized, however, was that the existing model of cooperation under the constant enlargement of NATO was no longer acceptable for Russia, and was not perceived as being in mutual interest, but highly exclusive. In September 2016, Croatian Minister of

Foreign Affairs Miro Kovač and his Russian counterpart Lavrov agreed to strengthen economic relations between the two countries (MVEP, 2016). In November 2016, Croatian Prime Minister Plenković visited Kyiv where he said that the Croatian experience of reintegration of Eastern Slavonia, Baranya, and Western Sylvania would be a very appropriate and useful experience for Ukraine. Russia immediately condemned this statement and blamed Croatia for the expulsion of the Serbian civilian population in Operation “Storm” (Demeshchuk, 2019, p. 35). These parallels might have triggered the Russian thinking of an actual military operation later on in Eastern Ukraine.

In that period, after the Minsk 2 agreement, Ukraine was interested in the a) Croatian experience regarding the reintegration of former Serbian entities into the Croatian state, b) sharing the experience in medical and psychological treatment of Ukrainian soldiers, c) humanitarian demining, d) prosecution of war crimes e) postwar reconstruction and f) experience in EU integration process. Coordination of activities between Croatia and Ukraine has been done through the Working group of the Government of the Republic of Croatia and Ukraine established in 2016. After the meeting with Sergey Lavrov in Moscow in May 2017, Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs Stier announced the beginning of a “new phase in dialogue between Croatia and Russia” (MVEP, 2017). During 2017 and 2018, both states perceived their relations as good with the prospects for their improvement.

Croatian National Security Strategy from 2017 does not contain any reference to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, but several times mentions possibilities that Croatia might be a subject of “hybrid activities” (SNS RH, 2017). Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović was considered to have a good relationship with Vladimir Putin, but, later on, she accused the Russian regime of meddling in the Croatian presidential elections when she lost to Zoran Milanović, who became the new president in 2020. She considered the issue of the LNG terminal in Croatia as a reason for “Russian hybrid actions during the election campaign, which contributed to the 2020 election results” (N1, 2023).

The action plan of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs for the period 2021-2024 recognizes that the world has changed, become multipolar, and less predictable (Provedbeni program MVEP, 2021, p. 10). This document, adopted before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, even stipulates the strengthening of partnership with Russia and China and the position inside the EU to better use the membership in this organization and the EU regulation for the achievement of Croatian national interests (Provedbeni

program MVEP, 2021, p. 11, 13). In December 2020, after sixteen years, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov visited Croatia and both states concluded that they should keep the communication channels open, while Croatian Minister for Foreign and European Affairs Grlić Radman visited Russia in January 2022, where he recognized the significant importance of Russia for Europe and especially BH, in preserving its Dayton agreement and equality of all three constitutive peoples. Russian intervention in Ukraine in February 2022 brought a more decisive Croatian posture toward Russia and the Croatian officials qualified the intervention as “non-justifiable aggression” calling Russia to withdraw from “occupied territories” (MVEP, 2024). Croatian Parliament also adopted a Declaration on Ukraine and called this intervention a violation of international law, an attack on the whole of Europe, exclusive fault of the Russian regime, and expressed the right of every state to its foreign policy choices (Declaration on Ukraine, 2022).

During the ten years of Ukrainian crisis, several points specifically marked Croatian policy. Firstly, Croatia played a significant role in the NATO policy toward Russia of keeping the door open for conversation with this important country, and especially the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarović was successful in this role. Secondly, Croatia has constantly expressed recognition of Russia as a great power and that Croatia should not treat Russia as Serbia, since Russia is a “dangerous”, “dark” country and “a world nuclear superpower” and Serbs as „gunners“. He also talked about the Ukrainian war as the result of the constant NATO provocation of Russia (HRT, 2023). In the Croatian political spectrum, this position was only held by unparliamentarily Croatian Party of Rights 1861 (Petsinis, 2023, p. 82). Thirdly, the crisis over Crimea, and especially the 2022 invasion gave a framework and opportunity to Croatia to constantly put forward its wartime experience and experience as a “victim of a great Serbian aggression” which makes Croatia specifically sensible for the Ukrainian situation and can offer to Ukraine its experience of reintegration of separated territories to the existing state and other wartime experiences. Just to further support Kosovo’s independence, the new Croatian president Milanović stated that in the same manner as Kosovo was taken from Serbia, Crimea will never again be part of Ukraine, thus limiting the concept of reintegration (HRT, 2023). Fourth, the Ukrainian crisis gave to Croats more opportunities to express their identity as a Western nation and to ask Serbia to determine to which civilizational and identity group it belonged. Croatian membership in the EU and NATO is perceived as strengthening Croatian sovereignty and global influence (Program Vlade RH, 2020, p. 55). In the regional

framework cooperation with Visegrad Four Countries and the Three Seas Initiative provides an additional framework for the formulation and coordination of foreign policy goals and measures and contributes to the desired “restoration” of the Central European national identity of Croatia, due to the past historical and cultural bonds (Knezović and Klepo, 2017, p. 15). However, the 2017 NSS mentions national or Croatian identity much more than the previous one.

*Measures and capabilities:
Helping Ukraine, replacing Russia, being Western*

Croatia is aiding Ukraine with various kinds of political, humanitarian, technical, financial, and military means. Its position regarding capabilities may likely be influenced by the recent Russian re-armament of Serbia, but it is also “a policy of choice and compliance with the goals of NATO, and not of the utmost need for defense” (Kurecic 2017, p. 74). Croatia adopted all restrictive measures and resolutions that called for the Russian withdrawal and responsibility regarding the war crimes that were agreed upon in the framework of the EU and NATO. At the beginning of the crisis, in 2014, the EU prepared a three-phased approach to the new situation. The first phase involved a termination of the treaty on the new visa regime with Russia. The second phase consisted of the prohibition of travel to the EU and freezing of assets of those involved in the destabilization in Eastern Ukraine, and the third, which was later agreed and implemented, especially in 2022, involved various economic and financial restrictive measures. As Kostić’s model of exclusiveness suggested (2021), the enlargement of the EU and NATO to the East involved the gradual replacement of all Russian strongholds – the dependency on Russian energy sources and military assets and capabilities.

Regarding restrictive measures, Croatia immediately forbade entry into the country for persons from Crimea and the Russian Federation, froze their assets, took measures against disinformation, and adopted measures that limited cooperation and trade with Russia, access of Russian financial institutions to the EU capital market, arms trade with Russia and export of dual-use items for the military purposes.

Croatia is one of the NATO countries that provided medical treatment and rehabilitation to the wounded Ukrainian soldiers and already in November 2014 eight of them were in Croatia (MVEP, 2014g). Croatian volunteers also participated in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, especially the regiment “Azov” (Demeshchuk, 2019, p. 36). At first, in November 2014,

Croatia, together with other EU countries, abstained from voting for the Russia-sponsored resolution to the UN dubbed Combating Glorification of Nazism, Neo-Nazism and Other Practices that Contribute to Fueling Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, but later on the EU countries has voted against this resolution initiated by Russia and its partners countries every year.

After the Russian invasion in 2022, the Croatian government expressed its position in five points: 1. the strongest condemnation of unprovoked Russian aggression, 2. call on Russia to immediately stop the military attack, 3. full solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, 4. supporting the EU package of sanctions, and 5. readiness to provide humanitarian and technical assistance to Ukraine and the possibility of accepting Ukrainian refugees (MVEP, 2022). Croatian harbors Rijeka and Split served for the transit of Ukrainian grain. Overall Croatian assistance to Ukraine by 2023 was 225.34 million of euros and 25.000 Ukrainians received a status of refuge in Croatia (MVEP, 2023a). Croatia also donated one million euros to UNICEF for the urgent restoration of Ukrainian energy infrastructure for schools and hospitals. In October 2023, Croatia organized an International Conference on Humanitarian Demining (MVEP, 2023b). Croatia also helped Ukraine with 500.000 euros through NATO's Comprehensive Aid Package for Ukraine (Vijesti 2023). In 2022, the Croatian Parliament also adopted a resolution on condemnation of Russian aggression and support for Ukraine. In June 2023, the Government of Croatia recognized *Holodomor*, a great hunger in Ukraine caused by the communist government in 1932 and 1933, as genocide over the MVEPUkrainian people and the Croatian Parliament adopted a declaration on the recognition (HRT, 2023). The Croatian Government wanted to join those EU member states that would provide on-site training for Ukrainian soldiers, but President Milanović vetoed such a proposal (Raos, 2023, p. 6).

In the field of energy, Croatia is diversifying sources and has built an LNG terminal on Krk that was officially opened in February 2021. Regarding military means, the difference between Croatian President Milanović and the Plenković Government also appeared. While Milanović objected to sending military aid to Ukraine, the Government still decided to send military help. However, Croatia is following suit in this matter of other Eastern European Countries by providing Ukraine with old Soviet-era weapons and equipment, such as 14 used Mi 8/17 transport helicopters and around 15 130 mm towed field gun M-46 (Balkanska bezbednosna mreža, 2024, p. 6).

These donations to Ukraine, are immediately followed by the purchase of new Western weapons and capabilities. However, even before the Ukrainian crisis Croatia, as part of NATO and EU, Croatia had to strengthen its interoperability with allies and reach 2% of GDP for defense, of which at least 20% for the new weapons and equipment, which are the conditions that Croatia has fulfilled (MVEP 2022). Donated helicopters Mi8/17, and those that remained in the Croatian Army will be replaced by the new US UH-60M Black Hawks. One of the biggest changes in capabilities came with the replacement of Croatian MiGs with 12 French Rafales in the period 2022-2025. The purchase of Rafales was a complicated decision since the discrepancy between the government and a president appeared again – while Milanović opted for the US fighters, Plenković supported the acquisition of Rafales. Before this, Croatia was unable to finish procurement of F-16 from Israel, since Israel did not get approval to sell them. Croatia also purchased Bradleys and additional Patria armored vehicles and set to receive new Howitzers and anti-armored systems (Ferenčić 2023). Croatia also acquired 89 infantry fighting vehicles Bradley from the US (Balkan Defence Monitor, 2024, p. 32).

Croatian aim is also to strengthen the Navy and construct multi-purpose offshore ships, and those that might go into the Mediterranean. Milanović insisted on the procurement of new anti-air and missile defense systems. Croatia also considered the idea of returning the compulsory military service, which is an idea again supported by Croatian Prime Minister Plenković, but not President Milanović (Predsjednik 2024). Regarding some emerging and disruptive technologies, the Croatian Ministry of Defence promoted the Israeli Orbiter 3B system in 2019 as a system that will significantly improve data-collecting and reconnaissance capacities while the Israeli Elbit Skylark 1 system has been used by the Croatian armed forces for several years by now (Jevtić and Kostić Šulejić, 2023, p. 225). Croatia also started its space program and is developing the first Croatian satellite Perun (Jevtić and Kostić Šulejić, 2023, p. 228).

Serbian narratives, measures and capabilities

Serbian foreign policy in the last decade is determined by the following issues: negotiations with the temporary authorities in Pristina regarding the status of Kosovo and Metohija, with the mediation of the European Union, and the effort to preserve the southern Serbian province within the constitutional order of Serbia; efforts to maintain the continuation of the

process of European integration despite the contradictory provisions of chapter 35, i.e. the mechanism for monitoring the implementation of the agreements reached within the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as an effort to increase the potential of national power, primarily economic and military, thereby creating more favorable conditions for the positive outcome of the primary national interests. The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 only further complicated, and in many ways made more difficult, the realization of Serbia's vital national interests, and the beginning of the Russian military intervention in 2022 further compromised the position of Serbia in international relations, especially its defense policy of military neutrality.

*Narrative - Effort to Present Serbia as an Independent,
Principal and Predictable State*

While Croatia extensively used Russian aggression in Ukraine to highlight its war experience and the Serbian guilt, as Croatian officials perceived it, Serbia tried to use the situation to highlight the Serbian experience of Kosovo secession, NATO aggression, and a need for equal and universal respect of international law (Dačić, 2015). When the Ukrainian ambassador at that time Oleksandar Aleksandrovič called Serbia to condemn Russia, Vučić stated to the press asking Ukrainian president Volodimir Zelensky to condemn the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 (Danas, 2022). From the beginning of the invasion, Serbia called for a peaceful solution to the conflict based on the respect of international law and not recognizing referendums on Crimea or in Donbas, thus recognizing the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Besides considering both states and nations of Ukraine and Russia as "brotherly", Serbian policy toward the war in Ukraine is more shaped by its policy of military neutrality than the EU integration. This neutrality allowed Serbia to express more freedom in its foreign policy, and the opportunity to continue cooperation with all "four pillars" of its foreign policy – Beijing, Brussels, Washington and Moscow. However, the pressures exist from all sides. As in the case of Croatia, the Serbian position is not only shaped by the issue of Kosovo but the position of Serbian people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska.

In 2015, Serbia presided over the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Its presidency was preceded by Switzerland and handed over to Germany. Therefore, at the crucial time of the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, Serbia, together with these undisputed diplomatically powerful states with significant international influence, contributed to the

efforts to ensure the conditions for the implementation of crisis management and initiate diplomatic procedures to reach an agreement on the size fire (OEBS, 2024).

At the same time, Serbia did not join the sanctions that were introduced to Russia at the time and came under the attack of Western media and diplomacy. As a rule, the international public and diplomatic representatives of the West considered that decision to confirm the thesis that Serbs are “little Russians in the Balkans”. This was especially used by the Croats, as already described, but also by the representatives of the Albanians from Kosovo and Metohija, who based their entire foreign policy on this premise, as well as their attitude towards Serbia in the negotiation process.

At the beginning of 2015, Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić emphasized at the Munich Security Conference, regarding the crisis in Ukraine, that people’s lives are the most important. “Now the most important thing is that the conflicts stop and that our Russian and Ukrainian friends don’t die anymore and he repeated that Serbia is on the way to the EU, that it doesn’t balance between Russia and the European Union, but that it has its own way” (Vučić, 2015b). These theses contain Serbia’s essential approach to the crisis in Ukraine, on which Serbia’s narrative regarding this issue is based. Without intending to deal in more detail with the value parameters of such positions, it is necessary to emphasize that from 2015 until today, Serbia stands in the same position regarding the problems in Ukraine. Furthermore, the same can be said about the challenges of Serbia’s imposing sanctions on Russia, although there is a lot of pressure from Brussels and other power centers. These characteristics, by themselves, do not have to mean anything in the value sense of strategic gains or losses, but they certainly indicate the existence of long-term decisions and independent Serbia’s foreign policy.

The Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2022 only increased Serbia’s challenges in terms of foreign policy positioning. Since the entire European Union decided on military intervention and the expansion of economic sanctions against Russia, Serbia had to wait a few days to take a position on this issue. After the session of the National Security Council of Serbia held on February 27, 2022, it was decided to once again repeat the full and principled support for respecting the principles of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and to consider the violation of the territorial integrity of any country, including Ukraine, as wrong. At the same time, referring to recent national experiences with international economic sanctions, the decision was repeated not to impose sanctions on any country, not even its

representatives or economic entities (Закључак СНБ, 2022; Благојевић, 2019, pp. 171-176).

Several political parties in Serbia did call for the immediate introduction of sanctions against Russia, and in that aspect, greater division appeared in the Serbian political spectrum than in Croatian, but without the potential to significantly disrupt the leadership of the ruling SNS party (Spasojević 2023, pp. 272, 275).

Measures and Capabilities: No-Sanctions Policy, Military Neutrality, Deterrence

At the Ukraine-Southeast Europe Summit in Tirana, held on 28 February 2024, President Aleksandar Vučić reiterated that he will stick to the principles and principles adopted by the National Security Council of Serbia two years ago. At the same time, Serbia advocated that sanctions against Russia and its malignant influence should not be mentioned in the agreed Declaration (Вучић, 2024). Although the negative consequences of the policy of not imposing sanctions on Russia in terms of the negotiation process for joining the European Union, as well as the position of Serbia in the negotiation process with Pristina, seem to be clear, it looks as if it's still too early to assess the final consequences of such a decision.

Although Serbia is the only WB country that did not support all the EU declarations regarding Ukraine, Serbia did support UN General Assembly resolutions regarding the support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, withdrawal of Russian troops from the Ukrainian territory and recognition of the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas and Crimea, illegality of referendums in four areas and withdrawal of recognition, suspension of Russia from the UN Council for Human Rights and principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Serbia, however, did not support the resolution about the reparations to Ukraine in November 2022. Overall, because of the Ukrainian crisis Serbian alignment with the EU foreign and security policy dropped from 64% in 2021 to 45% in 2022, but because of the lesser amount of the new restrictive measures packages against Russia Serbia increased the score of its alignment to 54 percent in 2023 (Novaković and Plavšić, 2024, p. 2). Other WB countries, and especially important BH, aligned with the EU CFSP in full. In the Council of Europe, Serbia was absent from voting on resolutions regarding Ukraine and the expulsion of Russia from this organization (Council of Europe, 2024).

Since the beginning of the military intervention, Serbia has “provided all kinds of humanitarian aid to the vulnerable population of Ukraine, remaining committed to peace and consistent respect for international law,” said Ambassador of Serbia to the United Nations, Nemanja Stevanović. Serbia accepted as many people from Ukraine as needed and for two years of war provided direct financial aid of three million euros for the children of Ukraine and another 1.5 million euros for the internally displaced. At the same time, Serbia sent 14 humanitarian aid trucks for the Ukrainian people and donated two medical vehicles, as well as electrical and energy equipment (Brnabić, 2024). This, especially for a militarily neutral country, is a more than sufficient indicator of support for Ukraine, which, often carried away by the unambiguous diplomatic, economic, military, and media support of the administration in Washington, considered that this attitude of Serbia is more hostile than friendly (Blagojević, 2019, p. 1152). The statement of Ukrainian officials after the Summit in Tirana that Serbia is difficult for her to understand, but that she is not her enemy, but her partner, can be taken as proof of this claim.

In late February 2022, the Serbian Government decided to abort all activities related to planning, preparing, and conducting the exercises with foreign partners. However, in 2023, Serbia held a military exercise that was co-organized by the US European Command and Serbian Armed Forces called “the Platinum Wolf 2023” (Balkan Defence Monitor, 2023, p. 38).

The main point of view of the theoreticians is to classify neutral European states as “small states” which are often treated in the literature as “weak” or “vulnerable” in material and geo-political terms (Agius, Devine, 2019, pp. 266-267; Beyer, Hofmann, 2019, pp. 287-288). However, neutrality is contrary to the usual policy implemented by small states, as they are expected to increase security by entering into military alliances with other countries (Blagojevic, 2016, p. 241). Conversely, neutrality represents a policy in which a relatively small country chooses to rely more or less exclusively on internal/national resources and strengths rather than strong allies (Edström, Gyllensporre and Westberg, 2019, pp. 180-198; Blagojevic, 2019, pp. 280-281).

In these positions, one can find answers to questions related to the position of Serbia regarding the conflict in Ukraine, but also to the measures it takes to deter potential aggressors. We live in a time of increasing security challenges in Europe, and Serbia has decided to be militarily neutral. This inevitably leads to a strategic commitment to organize national defense independently, using the concept of total (comprehensive) defense.

Furthermore, military neutrality necessarily leads to the necessity of relying on national resources in terms of providing modern weapons and military equipment to the greatest extent possible. This in no way means that one should give up the acquisition of modern foreign weapons and equipment if there are opportunities for that or there is a lack of potential to produce it within the national framework (Благојевић, 2022, pp. 140-142).

This is especially the case with the armament of the Air Force and Air Defense. In the past decade, Serbia has bought a lot of weapons and equipment for this type of military force, while taking into account the equal representation of Western and Eastern technology, following the policy of military neutrality, which implies a certain type of balance in relations with other subjects of international relations. The fleet of the Air Force was updated and modernized with airplanes, MIG-29, and modernized Eagles, while the helicopter fleet was strengthened with Russian Mi-8, Mi-17, and Mi-35, as well as Airbus H-145. Anti-aircraft defense has been significantly strengthened by the acquisition of the Pancir S-1 system and the domestic Pasars, as well as the acquisition of the FK-3 air defense system, which is the Chinese improved version of the Russian S-300 system.

Experiences from the wars in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine indicate the increased importance of unmanned aerial vehicles in modern warfare. Three years ago, Serbia acquired armed and reconnaissance drones (CH-95, CH-92, and others) from China, Israel (Orbiter), and Germany (Orbiter) and in the meantime developed a range of domestic weapons of this type. The unmanned aerial vehicle "Pegaz" has already been included in the armament of the Serbian Armed Forces, and the introduction of the reconnaissance aircraft "Vrabac" is planned. It is announced that the Serbian defense industry will produce 5,000 "suicide drones" of the "Komarac" type by the end of 2024 (Vučić, 2024).

With the armaments and military equipment of the Army, the relationship between domestic and foreign production is much different, in favor of the domestic defense industry. Here we must emphasize that Serbia is traditionally a significant producer of personal infantry weapons and ammunition, as well as artillery tools and ammunition. These are the reasons why Ukrainian President Zelenskiy was interested in attending the Ukraine – Southeast Europe Summit in Tirana, of course, in addition to political support, because his army is in dire need of artillery ammunition. In this regard, too, Serbia adhered to the principles of neutrality and refraining from any involvement in armed conflicts. Although it was occasionally accused of selling artillery ammunition to Ukraine, Serbia responded to each

accusation by inspecting the end-user certificate, which eliminated the negative political consequences. In terms of infantry fighting vehicles and the transport of military personnel, Serbia received from Russia infantry fighting vehicles for arming one battalion, while most of the armored personnel carriers inherited from the Yugoslav People's Army were modernized in Serbian factories, with the production of new ones, such as Miloš and Lazar.

In addition to modern weapons and equipment, for successful deterrence, it is necessary to have trained and motivated personnel. Since Serbia suspended mandatory military service in 2010, a serious problem of filling the reserve force appeared. That is why, on the initiative of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, a procedure was initiated for the return of mandatory military service (Vučić, 2024). The Ukrainian crisis and the armed conflict contributed to the renewal of discussion about the return of mandatory military service in Serbia, as well as in Croatia.

Conclusion

This paper explored the changes that have occurred in the foreign, security, and defense policies and capabilities of Croatia and Serbia, as the two most important states for the Western Balkans stability in the context of the ten-year Ukrainian crisis and changing international relations and order toward the more conflictual one. These changes were significantly expressed at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, with Crimea joining the Russian Federation, strengthened in 2022 with the Russian military intervention, and still ongoing with the greater polarization between the EU and NATO on the one side, Russia on the other, and with the significant role of rising powers like China and India on the third.

The Ukrainian crisis reflected the same trends in the Western Balkans as well. It showed a great discrepancy between the NATO members on the one and military-neutral countries and entities on the other side. Analyses of the Croatian narratives showed that the Ukrainian crisis was considered to be contrary to international law and Croatia constantly called for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Ukrainian territory. It also used the parallels with its own war experience which further deepened the gap of understanding with Serbia. It might even trigger the Russian thinking of military intervention by constantly calling for the implementation of Croatian experience in the reintegration of the former Serbian-populated regions. The Ukrainian crisis has also strengthened the development of

Croatian national identity as part of wider Central European and Mediterranean identity. Regarding measures, Croatia adopted all restrictive measures brought by the EU and NATO, as well as its internal documents that condemned Russian intervention and created a greater solidarity with Ukraine. Croatian military capabilities were also strengthened, which proved the existing trend of the replacement of Soviet-era weapons and equipment with new Western ones, primarily from the US and France.

In Serbia, the Ukrainian crisis was a new opportunity to highlight the importance of principled foreign policy, the need for respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states and condemnation of military interventions such as the NATO intervention in 1999. It caused a further lack of harmonization with the EU Foreign and Security Policy and distanced Serbia even more from its neighbors. It also contributed to the strengthening of the position of military neutrality in contrast to NATO membership of all other countries in the region. Serbia did not impose sanctions on Russia, nor did it recognize the referendums held in the Donbas region and their incorporation into the Russian Federation. Serbia also adopted all the UN resolutions that called for the Russian withdrawal from this region and is sending humanitarian help to Ukraine. In the “vicious circle” of the arms race with Croatia, Serbia is strengthening its defense capabilities by procuring new weapons and systems from both China and the West, primarily the US and France. It is also strengthening its military industry and capabilities.

In the end, the continuation of the conflict in Ukraine brings more potential for new crises in the Balkans. Countries’ narratives, measures, and capabilities in the region further distance Serbia from Croatia and the EU, and improvements in defense capabilities, conducted on various grounds and with opposing actors trigger the arms race, thus complicating the mutual relations of the Western Balkan countries and slowing down the prospects for European integration instead of fostering them on geopolitical grounds.

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