

The Impact of the Ukraine War on the Western Balkans: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war in the region have provoked deep-reaching and enduring global repercussions. From the very beginning it was clear that this was not going to be a "local" conflict between two states but would spill over to encompass several actors and regions. Moreover, there was a justified concern that while the Western Balkans are not frontline states in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, they would acutely feel the reverberations and risk becoming a "proxy hybrid battlefield" in the antagonism between Russia and the West; this, in turn, could lead to further fragmentation and deterioration of regional cooperation and stability. The Western Balkans, still balancing between their desire to join the European Union, their frustration at the drawn-out accession process, and the ever-increasing presence of third actors in the region vying for their attention - such as Russia, China, and Turkey - have been called upon to declare their allegiance in this conflict. Not surprisingly, their responses have been consistent with their hitherto stand and could be indicative of future geopolitical actions and alignments. On an economic level, the war in Ukraine has significantly impacted the economies of the Western Balkans, exacerbating existing challenges and introducing new pressures. Key effects include declining GDP, inflation and rising costs, energy dependence and supply challenges, and increasing balance of payment deficits. This paper will address the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkan region by analysing its repercussions on three core parameters: impact on domestic economies; impact on the Western Balkans' relations with the European Union and potentially their EU accession prospects; and the evolving role of third actors in the region, including the possibility of a more active Russian role in the Balkans. In light of President Trump's unprecedented stand vis-à-vis Europe and the future of the Western Alliance, the future is even more uncertain for the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Russian policy, EU enlargement, Ukraine war

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