

RELATIONS OF POST-COMMUNIST MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES WITH UKRAINE IN THE CONDITIONS OF EUROPEANIZATION

Olga Brusylowska

Introduction

The early 2000s brought the prospect of the EU's largest-ever enlargement and prompted authors to focus on Europeanization issues. Eastern enlargement raised many new questions and challenges for Europeanization researchers. For instance, it was necessary to determine how the processes of post-communist transformation and Europeanization were interconnected and which significant new political and socio-economic factors were present in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Given the considerable differences between post-communist countries and the older EU members, research shifted its focus from the effects of EU-level decisions on setting agendas in member states to the impact these decisions had on motivating membership-linked reforms in former socialist bloc countries. Thus, the focus turns to the mechanisms by which the EU motivates potential members to meet its requirements and the obstacles that arise in the path of these countries' integration.

The study of Europeanization in the post-communist world developed within the theoretical framework where the primary theoretical contradiction remained the divergence between rational and sociological institutionalism in explaining the effects of Europeanization. However, the similarity between the Europeanization of old EU members and the Europeanization of post-communist countries ends there. The main difference between Western and Eastern European countries was more than just their distinct histories or levels of socio-economic development. From the perspective of explaining EU influence, the central factor was that CEE countries were still candidates for membership.

In contrast, Western European countries had already become full EU members by the time political scientists studied them. Thus, enlargement marked a

new stage in Europeanization studies – examining the Europeanization of candidate countries. Among works on this topic, two chronologically linked types of research stand out: The Europeanization of candidate countries and the Europeanization of these same countries immediately after joining the EU. Although the second type we could technically classify as the Europeanization of member states, it is essentially a continuation of the studies on candidate Europeanization, as its primary focus remains on the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* norms in new member states and the implementation of previously adopted norms immediately after accession.

The Europeanization of candidate countries for EU membership significantly differs from the Europeanization of the EU's older members. Key distinguishing factors for CEE states admitted in 2004 include the following: 1) For the first time in EU enlargement history, candidate countries were at various stages of developing a market economy and liberal democracy at the time of applying for membership; 2) CEE countries were unable to implement and, mainly, ensure compliance with *acquis communautaire* provisions in practice, leading the EU to monitor candidates' progress continuously; 3) Candidate requirements were not confined to traditional boundaries (such as implementing the *acquis communautaire*) but encompassed a range of political and economic demands beyond the EU's jurisdiction over full members; 4) Compliance with EU requirements by candidates from the former Eastern Bloc facilitated the post-communist transformation of these countries. As a result, the entire process was quite painful, and the cost of adapting to European norms was such that only the prospect of full membership could justify it.

In addition to the factors above relevant to CEE countries, some factors distinguish the process of Europeanization for any candidate from that of a member of the EU. Firstly, since a candidate does not have formal obligations to the EU, the latter must manage without resorting to sanctions and operate according to the principle of "carrot without stick," using tools of normative pressure, positive initiatives, and persuasion of political elites – tools that

constructivists highly valued. Secondly, because the candidate country does not participate in developing the norms and rules it must adopt, the process of accepting these norms represents, unlike for full members, purely their imposition by the EU without any feedback (Subotic, 2010, p. 6).

Thus, studying the Europeanization of candidate countries is one of the newest directions in European studies. They possess several characteristic features that allow us to distinguish them from studies on the Europeanization of EU member states. Most works that have identified the Europeanization of candidate countries as a separate research direction appeared after 2004, and almost all of them have focused on the problems of Europeanization in CEE countries (Börzel, & Van Hüllen, 2011; Schimmelfennig, 2009; Sedelmeier, 2011).

The eastward expansion and the inclusion of CEE countries into the EU prompted scholars to highlight the Europeanization of candidate countries as a separate research direction. However, this focus on Eastern Europe has called into question the universality of the theoretical and practical conclusions researchers drew regarding the mechanisms and effects of Europeanization in non-EU member states. Although researchers have turned their attention to intermediate factors that influence the effectiveness of Europeanization mechanisms, identifying two main groups among them – external and internal – the variation of these factors within a single region has proven insufficient to generalize the conclusions drawn from their analysis. Thus, the primary (and, overall, rationalistic) internal factors identified include the cost of adapting norms for a specific state, resistance from conservative governmental institutions, and political elites.

The factors above are comprehensive and specific for each country and area. However, it has become apparent that for countries from regions with starting conditions different from those of CEE, one needs more than the general factors to explain the degree of effectiveness of Europeanization.

This is true for the post-communist countries of the Mediterranean. This region's historical and cultural-civilizational development characteristics significantly differentiate it from Western and Eastern Europe. In addition to these

characteristics, it is also important to note the heterogeneity of this region in terms of relations with the EU. Slovenia, the most prosperous country regarding Euro-integration in post-Yugoslav space, joined the EU in 2004 along with the CEE states. Croatia joined only in 2013, and Albania is still an official candidate with uncertain accession timelines.

Despite the region's peculiarities, the EU employed the same tools as the CEE countries. Europeanization, based on a strategy of incentivizing the target government with rewards from the EU, which has as its fundamental incentive the prospect of membership, proved itself well during the 2004 expansion. In this way, the central tenets of the rationalist approach were empirically demonstrated. However, contrary to researchers' expectations, the entire process of Europeanization in the post-communist Mediterranean countries turned out to be less predictable than that of CEE.

Many scholars have focused on the peculiarities of Europeanization in the post-communist Mediterranean countries. The authors of these works note that the combination of factors distinguishing the Western Balkans from other regions has resulted in the EU's Europeanization mechanism – reward-based stimulation for meeting requirements – functioning inadequately in the Western Balkan countries. Gergana Noutcheva describes any foreign policy action, in terms of its consequences, as “the definition of the difference between one's value system, which includes its costs and benefits, and the potential outcomes of this action for the recipient side” (Noutcheva, 2009, p. 1067). From this perspective, while the EU's value system has remained unchanged compared to the period of eastward expansion, the recipient actors of its foreign policy actions significantly differ in many respects from the CEE countries but look very similar to Ukraine.

This means, firstly, from the standpoint of the rationalist approach, that national elites influenced the rational calculations by additional factors not present in other regions. Secondly, within the constructivist framework, these states also have distinct priorities that question the attractiveness of liberal-democratic

European ideas for public opinion in these countries. According to most authors, the EU has proven unable to adapt its foreign policy tools to the new environment.

Researchers typically identify another group of countries where the EU has a minor influence due to a lack of effective instruments and the absence of a guaranteed prospect of membership. This group includes all of the EU's neighbours, but the most interest lies in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. The number of studies dedicated to the Europeanization of the EaP countries is small, as it is challenging to discuss Europeanization as such in this context (Boonstra, & Shapovalova, 2010; Lavenex, & Schimmelfennig, 2009; Schimmelfennig, & Sedelmeier, 2005).

The lack of external incentives and a whole series of external and internal factors prevent the EU from influencing the formation of institutions and political practices in these countries even to the extent it can do so in the Balkans. The most significant incentive the EU can offer the post-Soviet republics is a vague and undefined prospect of association, not membership. Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson highlight three main factors that define the ineffectiveness of the EaP: the existence of semi-authoritarian solid regimes that prefer to maintain the status quo, thereby securing their positions; the multipolarity of the political arena in the region, which forces the EU not only to stimulate countries to change by offering certain benefits but also to compete with other players, such as Russia and Turkey; and the insufficient commitment of the EU itself to developing relations with its eastern neighbours, which can be attributed to the region's capacity in terms of resource and effort expenditure and the EU's focus on more pressing external and internal issues over the last decade (Popescu, & Wilson, 2011, p. 6).

The situation with the Europeanization of post-communist Mediterranean countries could have been more straightforward and obvious. The previously developed models proved inadequate in explaining the lack of expected results. As a result, there were numerous attempts to refine these models, considering the region's unique characteristics. However, while scholars succeeded in this, politicians still needed to. The same arguments apply to other countries,

specifically those involved in the European Neighbourhood Policy, where the influence and motivation of the EU and local political elites to move towards each other remain low. Overall, the theory of Europeanization remains a young and dynamically developing field of research. Unfortunately, the results of these studies very rarely influence the formation of actual EU policy in specific regions and countries. The EU often finds itself unable to change its policies or quickly adapt to new political environments and emerging factors. The examples of the least successful post-communist Mediterranean countries and Ukraine illustrated it.

At the same time, one should accept that, despite all the shortcomings of Europeanization, it remains, if not the only, the most acceptable platform for dialogue between Ukraine and the Mediterranean post-communist countries. This chapter will show this using the example of cooperation between Mediterranean countries (Albania, Croatia, and Slovenia) and Ukraine in the face of full-scale Russian aggression.

Official Contacts of Ukraine with Post-Communist Mediterranean Countries

Immediately after the beginning of the Russian invasion, on February 24, 2022, Albanian President Ilir Meta condemned Russia's actions, stating that Albania stands with Ukraine. On February 25, Albania closed its airspace to all Russian air operators or any aircraft registered in Russia. The authorities also decided to ban individuals on the EU list from travelling to Albania. They considered cancelling the policy of simplified movement for diplomats, other Russian officials, and business representatives. On February 27, Albania imposed restrictions on 654 individuals and legal entities concerning the freezing of assets associated with the President of Russia, the Russian Foreign Minister, and other Russian officials. Also, Albania halted the sale, supply, transfer, or export of certain goods and technologies for oil refining, aviation, and space industries, as well as other technologies, to Russia. On February 28, Albania, in collaboration with the

US, prepared a sanctions package aimed at Russia (The President of the Republic of Albania, 2022).

On the evening of March 6, 2022, Russians targeted and shelled the Honorary Consulate of Albania in Kharkiv. One missile hit the consulate and the office of Consul Shahin Omarov. The next day, the Russian ambassador to Albania was summoned for a discussion and handed a protest note (Russian strike in Ukraine, 2022). The Russian Foreign Ministry provided an official response, stating that they did not do the shelling of the consulate, as they do not conduct any military operations, especially in civilian areas. In response, the Republic of Albania declared Russia a hostile state. Soon after, the Russians fired at the private house of Consul Omarov, which was far from the front-line, with rocket launchers.

In addition to clearly expressing their position through actions and collecting humanitarian aid at demonstrations, Albania announced the possibility for anyone interested to join the foreign legion of Ukraine's territorial defence. Volunteers who decide to join the foreign legion of Ukraine's territorial defence can participate in defending Ukraine's territorial integrity, performing various functions, from defending checkpoints to providing medical services and humanitarian aid.

At the time of the invasion, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated that “this is the largest military campaign on European soil since World War II and the most serious blow to the security of all Europe,” adding that “with a brutal and massive attack, Russia also trampled on the UN Charter and the Charter of European Security” (Kolarski, 2022). Plenković asserted that Croatia would betray all its principles if it did not stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Ukrainian people. “We experienced war. We know what our suffering was like” (Kolarski, 2022). Soon after, Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman declared that Russia's war crimes in Ukraine must be investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice (Kolarski, 2022).

At the first parliamentary summit of the International Crimea Platform in 2022, Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Albania Lindita Nikolla stated:

“The Ukrainian war is our war. We see the synergistic actions of different aggressive authoritarian countries. Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine and cyber-attacks against free states are not just assaults on sovereignty; they threaten democracy and civilization in Europe and the entire planet” (Албанія підтримує Україну, 2022).

On April 20, 2023, the Albanian Embassy in the Russian Federation announced the cancellation of the visa-free regime for Russian citizens. That same year, Albania expressed its readiness to join the G7 declaration on security guarantees for Ukraine until it accedes to NATO (Брусилівська, & Майстренко, 2023).

In February 2024, Albanian Foreign Minister Igli Hasani described the visit of the Ukrainian leader to Tirana as a critical moment for strengthening bilateral ties. On February 28, 2024, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy aimed to secure Balkan support for his vision of peace in Ukraine and promoted the idea of joint arms production at the Southeast European countries’ summit. “There are about 500 defence enterprises operating in Ukraine, and each contributes to strength, but this is not enough to defeat Putin. We see problems with the supply of ammunition, which affects the situation on the battlefield” (Ukraine – South East Europe, 2024).

The summit in the Albanian capital, Tirana, took place when US support was weak. Prime Minister Edi Rama called specific calls to stop armed support to Ukraine, supposedly only prolonging the war, “cynical and absurd”: “You cannot stop a battle by depriving the victim of weapons. Albanians support Ukraine and want it not to lose, but to win” (Albanian Prime-Minister makes statement, 2024).

The Slovenian authorities have no significant disagreements regarding the war in Ukraine. Prime Minister Janez Janša and other members of the government have been steadfast in their support of the Ukrainian state in its fight against Russia since the beginning of the Russian invasion in late February 2022. This support became especially evident on March 15, 2022, when Prime Minister Janša met with President Zelenskyy, becoming the first head of state to visit Kyiv since the start of the invasion. Approximately a year after Janša's visit, Prime Minister

Robert Golob also visited Kyiv to assure President Zelenskyy that Slovenia views Ukraine as a victim of invasion needing support and assistance (Earlier today, the prime ministers, 2022).

In the past, Slovenia maintained active economic relations with Russia but cut many ties following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Slovenia was among the countries that openly condemned the Russian attack and pledged assistance to Ukraine. After the break in relations and condemnation, Russia included Slovenia on its "unfriendly countries list," Slovenia supported the sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU (Samorukov, 2023).

On the eve of Slovenia's election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for 2024-2025, leading Slovenian politicians actively supported the Ukrainian cause, its leadership, and its integration into European organizations, particularly the European Union. Prime Minister Robert Golob repeatedly supported Ukraine's potential EU membership. So, due to the vote in June 2023, Slovenia became a member of the UN Security Council for the second time during a period of more significant uncertainty and rising global tension. In October 2023, Slovenian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Tanja Fajon, responsible for representing Slovenia in the current cycle of the UN Security Council, visited Kyiv to participate in an informal meeting of EU foreign ministers. President Zelenskyy was also present at the conference, which was the first such meeting held outside the European Union. During the meeting, Minister Fajon stated that she conveyed a clear message of support for Ukraine and its people. She emphasized that Slovenia "firmly supports the expansion of the EU not only to Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova but also to the Western Balkan countries if we want to achieve peace and stability on our continent" (Брусилловська, & Майстренко, 2023).

The meeting occurred just one day after Slovenia became an observer in the UN Security Council. Slovenia became a full member on January 1, 2024, and given its positions, the Slovenian foreign ministry seeks to provide additional assistance to Ukraine whenever possible. The ministry completely supports the EU's overall view on the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Aid and Support of Ukraine

The Albanian society was among the first to express its support, resulting in systematic peaceful demonstrations. A series of rallies supporting Ukraine took place outside the Russian embassy in Tirana. On February 25, a significant solidarity event titled “No to War” was held in the capital, continuing on February 27 and 28, with participation from both Ukrainians and Albanians (Брусилівська, 2022).

At the initiative of the Mayor of Tirana, the street with the Russian embassy was renamed Free Ukraine Street. After the renaming, it became popular among tourists in Tirana, who took photos in front of the new sign with the Russian flag in the background. Subsequently, Ukrainian flags appeared on the street, and people painted the sidewalk blue and yellow. In Slovenia, rallies in support of the Ukrainian cause and strong condemnation of Russia’s actions also frequently occur. One of the largest rallies occurred on February 24, 2024, marking the second anniversary of the war’s start.

High-level representatives’ visits to de-occupied territories drew significant international media attention (in March, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama visited Irpin and Borodyanka; in October, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković visited Bucha and Irpin; in November, Slovenian Defence Minister Marjan Šarec visited Irpin). They expressed their readiness to contribute to Ukraine's post-war reconstruction by providing equipment and funding. This moral support is crucial for Ukraine (Брусилівська, & Майстренко, 2023).

These countries created favourable conditions for Ukrainian refugees: accommodation for up to one year without the need for a permit (Albania); free housing (Montenegro); access to education, social security, and healthcare for Ukrainian women and children; and recovery for children of Ukrainian defenders (Croatia).

The most outstanding support for Ukraine came from Croatia: military-technical, financial, and humanitarian aid, including energy assistance, shelter for

over 27,000 Ukrainians, treatment for Ukrainian defenders, and recovery for children and their families.

All these countries expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and voted for Russia's exclusion from the UN Human Rights Council. On June 28, 2023, the Croatian Parliament officially recognized the Holodomor of 1932-1933 as genocide of the Ukrainian people (The Effect of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans, 2022).

All countries provide humanitarian aid and financial and technical assistance for demining territories, rehabilitating military personnel, and implementing reforms according to NATO standards. Croatian experts advise the Department for Investigating War Crimes of the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office and assist through mobile judicial groups. There were also agreements on the rehabilitation of Ukrainian military personnel. Zagreb is considering two more options for aiding Ukraine: training Ukrainian military personnel on Croatian territory and sending Croatian instructors to a third country (Szczebra, 2022).

In the early days of the war, Croatia sent emergency humanitarian and technical aid worth €7.3 million (including donations of a wide range of equipment and materials – from medicines to fire-fighting equipment to mine detectors). It accepted over 20,000 refugees, providing them with education, access to the labour market, and social security services. On February 28, Croatia decided to send military equipment and weapons worth €16.5 million to Ukraine and close its airspace to Russian airlines (Брусилівська, 2022).

In 2022, Ukraine and Croatia agreed to use Croatian ports on the Danube and the Adriatic Sea to transport Ukrainian grain. Several thousand tons of grains have already been exported from Croatian ports, mainly to Italy and some to North Africa. Croatia is ready to receive about 40% of the grain that cannot be exported from Ukraine, mainly for transit to African markets (Vale, 2022).

As part of the Peace Formula, Croatia offered assistance in food security (safety corridors), energy security, implementation of the UN Charter, restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and global order (peaceful reintegration, post-conflict

transition, care for veterans, a model for finding missing persons), and establishing justice (ensuring accountability for war crimes) (Wolczuk, 2022).

In 2023, Croatia provided Ukraine with military equipment, including all 14 of its Mi-8 helicopters and humanitarian aid. According to official data, military aid constitutes the most significant part of Croatia's overall assistance to Ukraine. Specifically, the government approved aid to Ukraine totalling €160 million from the state budget, with 76.87% of this sum being military aid. Media reports revealed that in the first round alone, Croatia sent to Ukraine automatic rifles with enough ammunition to equip four infantry brigades. In mid-August 2023, Ukrainian media published photos of 8,000 Croatian guns successfully used in battles against the Russian army. In 2023, a significant conference on humanitarian demining in Ukraine was held in Zagreb, attended by over 30 countries and international organizations. The event raised half a billion euros for the demining process in Ukraine. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in collaboration with the Ukrainian Ministry of Energy and the largest gas production company in Ukraine, "Ukrasvydobuvannya", recently completed an assessment of explosive ordnance risk over 17 square kilometres in the Kharkiv region, which Russia had previously occupied. This initiative, financially supported by the Croatian government, is crucial for resuming gas exploration in the region. Additionally, the Croatian government allocated 1 million euros to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) to assist farmers and food producers in Ukraine in resuming operations in war-affected areas. The Croatian Chamber of Commerce (HGK) organized a Croatian-Ukrainian forum dedicated to the reconstruction of Ukraine and prospects for future economic cooperation. The forum aimed to invite Ukrainian builders and ministry workers to collaborate with local experts on all reconstruction processes. Despite the war, overall economic relations are growing, with a 50 per cent increase in 2022 and a 75 per cent increase in 2023 (Брусилівська, & Майстренко, 2023).

Slovenia provides financial and military support to Ukraine and offers humanitarian aid to Ukrainian citizens. As of February 2024, over 10,000

Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Slovenia and applied for protection. Specialized refugee centres have been established, and humanitarian assistance in money and clothing has been provided. Since the war began, many Russians have migrated to European Union countries, including Slovenia. This migration was driven by dissent against state policies or avoidance of military mobilization. Many of these individuals openly opposed the Russian leadership and military aggression.

Albania has opened its dairy market to Ukraine. The Albanian Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development approved the form of an international veterinary certificate, prepared by Ukraine's State Service of Ukraine on Food Safety and Consumer Protection in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, for exporting thermally processed dairy products. Currently, it is possible to export three types of products to Albania: poultry, meat semi-finished products, and thermally processed dairy products. Albania has also transferred a batch of American-made M1224 MaxxPro armoured personnel carriers to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Ukraine has received a total of 22 MaxxPro units. This type of armoured vehicle is equipped with a mine protection system. Additionally, Albania has supplied 82-mm mortar shells. Previously, the country did not provide significant military aid to Ukraine. In 2022, it supplied ammunition for small arms and 60-mm and 82-mm calibre mines. Later, in March 2023, it sent two ambulances (Брусиловська, & Майстренко, 2023).

Three abovementioned countries provide severe financial and technical assistance for demining territories, rehabilitating military personnel, and implementing reforms according to NATO standards. Zagreb is considering two more options for aiding Ukraine: training Ukrainian military personnel on Croatian territory and sending Croatian instructors to a third country. All three countries act in full accordance with the general policy of the EU and can even be considered leaders in establishing stronger ties between Ukraine and the EU today.

Challenges from Inside and Ukraine's Reaction to Politics of Post-Communist Mediterranean Countries

However, it is not all straightforward. As in other countries, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza are somehow compared in people's minds, although from our perspective, these are entirely different issues. Nonetheless, in practice, those who oppose Israel's policies often also unfavourably view Ukraine's attempts to defend its independence. Slovenia is more resolute in opposing any war atrocities than many of its partners. Slovenia was one of the few Western countries to openly question Israel's conduct in Gaza. Slovenian officials largely supported the prominent Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek during the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2023. In his speech, Žižek emphasized the historical suffering of the Palestinians and called for dialogue. Similarly, among Slovenian scholars, there were attempts to relativize the causes of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and to restore diplomatic relations with Russia (Jovic, 2022). However, most Slovenian politicians remain steadfast in their support for Ukraine.

In 2022, Croatian lawmakers rejected a proposal to join the EU mission supporting the Ukrainian military (EUMAM Ukraine) after hours of heated debate, reflecting profound differences between the Prime Minister and the President of the country. Public statements by the current President of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, caused embarrassment in Zagreb, leading to a dispute with Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. Long before Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Milanović actively questioned the possible expansion of NATO to Ukraine and the satisfaction of Russia's security demands (Брусилівська, 2022).

Croatia, located in the Balkans, finds it difficult to formulate a policy on the war. The main reason for this is that the decision-making mechanism in Croatia is far from reaching a consensus on the war in Ukraine. Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and President Zoran Milanović have profound differences regarding the war. For Milanović, only Russia (which he never called an aggressor) can ensure the stability of Europe and the EU. Plenković has had to apologize for such descriptions from the President, who called him a "Ukrainian agent." Zagreb is considering two more options for aiding Ukraine: training Ukrainian military personnel on Croatian territory and sending Croatian instructors to a third country.

The rift between Prime Minister Plenković and President Milanović deepened after French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that the future deployment of Western troops in Ukraine could not be definitively “excluded.” Faced with the possibility of sending Croatian helicopters to Ukraine, Milanović said: “Not for free.” Moreover, Milanović stated that Croatia should not provide military aid to Ukraine and that sending Western tanks to Kyiv would only prolong the war. His reluctance to send weapons is due to his belief that the Russian aggression in Ukraine is a “Russian-American conflict.” He also stated that Crimea will never be part of Ukraine again, so it should not be mentioned. Milanović went further in his statement on August 8, 2022, claiming that Western sanctions against Russia are not working. He stated that the sanctions hurt Zagreb, not Moscow (Брусилівська, & Майстренко, 2023).

Croatia also needs help with inherent neutrality. Since Croatia has been an independent state for only 32 years (the independence referendum was in May 1991, and international recognition of independent Croatia in January 1992), foreign policy still has some issues in addressing national interests. There is a saying: “When the big ones fight, the small ones should be under the table” (hrv. *Kad se veliki tuku, malima je mjesto pod stolom*). This folk logic means that small countries (like Croatia) should remain silent in dangerous times (Брусилівська, & Майстренко, 2023).

The most recent problem is Ukrainian grain in Europe. In 2023, Plenković stated that Croatia is a “transit country” for Ukrainian agricultural products, nothing more. The country will not import Ukrainian grain. The President did not rule out a ban on such imports, following the examples of Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. |Croatia’s position and desire is that we are a transit country, not a country that receives large volumes of Ukrainian grain, which is cheaper than ours, meaning our farmers could be in trouble” (Брусилівська, & Майстренко, 2023).

Ukraine’s foreign policy activity regarding the Western Balkans was low before 2022 and traditionally focused on neutralizing the consequences of Russian aggression and promoting Ukraine’s European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Ukraine's priorities were Slovenia and Croatia, primarily as EU member states. Albania, which demonstrated excellent transformation results, also attracted more attention from Ukraine.

In 2022, Ukraine's foreign policy activity increased in seeking assistance to counter Russian aggression and promote Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Increased inter-parliamentary contacts and high-level meetings expanded the political dialogue. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy spoke online in the parliaments of two Balkan countries: on May 3 in Albania's parliament and July 8 in Slovenia's parliament. Before the Croatian Parliament, Vice Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada Olena Kondratiuk (May 26) and Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada Ruslan Stefanchuk (October 26) spoke (Брусилівська, 2022).

In 2023, relations became less productive than the previous year. Several directions shaped Ukraine's regional policy: securing diplomatic support to counter Russian aggression, obtaining military-technical assistance to repel Russia's attack, and seeking support on the path to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The result of the first Defence Industries Forum (September 30) was signing agreements aimed at joint production, technology exchange, and supply of components for the military industry. The most active public figures were Ukraine's Ambassador to the Republic of Serbia, Volodymyr Tolkach, and Ukraine's Ambassador to the Republic of Croatia, Vasyl Kyrylych.

However, Ukraine seriously lacks diplomats trained to solve such complex problems and a national strategy for rapprochement with EU candidate countries, which could strengthen the positions of all parties. At the same time, in the post-communist world, there is a positive experience that we must study and apply: the experience of negotiations with the EU of Slovakia and the assistance that other CEE countries provided to it. The experience of Croatia, which became an EU member in 2013, and Albania, which is currently in an active phase of negotiations, is especially valued by Ukraine and may, in the future, ease our path to stability and prosperity.

Conclusion

One of the sub-regions most affected by the Russia-Ukraine war, which began on February 24, 2022, is the Western Balkans. At the same time, the war has increased the importance of Croatia, Slovenia, and Albania in European geopolitics. For instance, Croatia is one of the two Balkan countries, alongside Greece, with a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal. This situation has led to positive developments for Zagreb, particularly in ensuring Europe's energy security.

Croatia, Slovenia, and Albania openly share their experience with Ukraine, particularly in the areas of demining and prosecuting those responsible for war crimes. They also assist in the rehabilitation of wounded civilians and veterans.

However, even in Croatia, there are obstacles to more excellent support for Ukraine during the war. Croatia is a parliamentary republic, and it has informally developed a system in which the Prime Minister represents Croatia in relations with the EU. At the same time, the President handles relations with NATO. However, foreign policy is generally determined by the parliament and implemented by the government, currently led by a pro-Russian politician. Nevertheless, government officials understand the security processes in the region and do not consider the Russian aggression to be someone else's war. They are well aware that this conflict could resonate throughout the region. A Coordinating Council on Sanctions operates within the government, chaired by the State Secretary for Political Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Croatians adhere strictly to the EU's sanctions policy. They support and have supported all sanction packages and take initiatives themselves. From the eighth package, a proposal by Croatia and several other EU states removed an exception that would have allowed post-communist Mediterranean countries to continue supplying Russian oil.

Since Ukraine is interested in cooperation with all Mediterranean countries in the military, medical, pharmaceutical, and agricultural sectors, we need the increased activity of officials at all levels. These activities include official and

working visits to the abovementioned countries and the creation of a cooperation algorithm that would allow tracking: 1) how the implementation of signed agreements is progressing and 2) how appropriate analytical work is being carried out to identify obstacles and ways to overcome them. Ukraine needs to find arguments for why cooperation with us benefits Mediterranean countries, not just a gesture of charity. What worked well at the beginning of the war is not effective now, as the war has taken on a protracted nature.

References

- Albanian Prime-Minister makes statement on assistance to Ukraine (February 28, 2024). *RBC-Ukraine*. Retrieved from <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/albanian-prime-minister-makes-statement-on-1709108086.html>
- Boonstra, J., & Shapovalova, N. (2010). The EU's Eastern Partnership: One year backwards. *FRIDE*. Working Paper 99.
- Börzel, T., & Van Hüllen, V. (2011). Good Governance and Bad Neighbours. The End of Transformative Power Europe? *EUSA Biennial International Conference*. Boston.
- Earlier today, the prime ministers of Poland, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic met with Zelenskyy in Kyiv (March 15, 2022). *Ukrainska Pravda*. Retrieved from <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/15/7331709/>
- Jovic, D. (June 21, 2022). The Western Balkans: Divided Over the War in Ukraine. *The Progressive Post*. Retrieved from <https://feps-europe.eu/the-western-balkans-divided-over-the-war-in-ukraine>
- Kolarski, L. (2022). The impact of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans. *The Policy of National Security*, 23(2), 87–107.
- Lavenex, S., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2009). EU rules beyond EU borders: theorizing external governance in European politics. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(6), 791–816.

- Noutcheva, G. (2009). Fake, Partial and Imposed Compliance: The Limits of the EU's Normative Power in the Western Balkans. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(7), 1065–1084.
- Popescu, N., & Wilson, A. (2011). Turning Presence into Power: Lessons for the Eastern Neighbourhood. *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, 31.
- Russian strike in Ukraine destroys Albanian consulate (March 8, 2022). *Євроактив*. Retrieved from https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/russian-strike-in-ukraine-destroys-albanian-consulate/
- Samorukov, M. (April 25, 2023). Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties after the Invasion of Ukraine. *Carnegie Endowment*. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89600>
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2005). *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*. Ithaca – New York: Cornell University Press.
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2009). Europeanization beyond Europe. *Living Reviews in European Governance*, 4(3).
- Sedelmeier, U. (2011). Europeanisation in new member and candidate states *Living Reviews in European Politics*, 11(1).
- Subotic, J. (2010). Explaining Difficult States: The Problems of Europeanisation in Serbia. *East European Politics and Societies*, 24(4), 595–616.
- Szczebra, M. (2022). The Western Balkans: Russia's War on Ukraine and the Region's Enduring Challenges. Draft Report. *NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Economics and Security Committee, Sub-Committee on Transition and Development*. Retrieved from <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2022-10/018%20ESCTD%2022%20E%20rev.1%20-%20WESTERN%20BALKANS%20-%20SZCZERBA%20REPORT.pdf>
- The Effect of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkans. (2022). *International Institute for Strategic Studies*. Retrieved from

<https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/the-effects-of-the-war-in-ukraine-on-the-western-balkans>

The President of the Republic of Albania. Official website. Retrieved from

<https://president.al/news/?lang=en>

Ukraine – South East Europe Summit Declaration (February 28, 2024). *President of Ukraine. Official website.* Retrieved from

<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/deklaraciya-camitu-ukrayina-pivdenno-shidna-vevropa-89397>

Vale, G. (2022). War in Ukraine, the Balkans hold their breath. Retrieved from

<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balkans/War-in-Ukraine-the-Balkans-hold-their-breath-216258>

Wolczuk, K. (March 25, 2022). The EU and Ukraine: Time for bold solidarity.

Chatham House. Retrieved from

https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/eu-and-ukraine-time-bold-solidarity?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=13102051_REP%20-%20content%20update%2029.03.2022&utm_content=CTA&dm_i=1S3M,7STLV,18R7D2,VTLUG,1

Албанія підтримує Україну, тому що Росія загрожує всьому континенту – голова парламенту (Жовтень 25, 2022). *Укрінформ.* Retrieved from

<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3600729-albania-pidtrimue-ukrainu-tomu-so-rosia-zagrozue-vsomu-kontinentu-golova-parlamentu.html>

Брусилівська, О. (2022). Зовнішня політика Російської Федерації крізь призму оновлених концепцій моці/сили. *Przeglad Wschodni*, 65.

Брусилівська, О., & Майстренко, Ю. (2023). “Західні Балкани”. В: *Українська призма: Зовнішня політика 2022*. Аналітичне дослідження. ГО «Рада зовнішньої політики «Українська призма», Фонд ім. Ф. Еберта, 191–195. Київ: Вістка.