



## RUSSIA'S INVASION IN UKRAINE AND POLARIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

Maria Koinova  
*University of Warwick*

Policy Brief presented at the

BEAR-PONARS Eurasia Conference  
“Between the EU and Russia: Domains of Diversity and Contestation”

April 29-30, 2022,  
Washington, DC

Russia's invasion of Ukraine since 24 February 2022 is swiftly changing global politics. It has already brought a stalled transatlantic relationship to a new unity, and prompted European leaders to coordinate their political and military response condemning Russia's policies, and to protect millions of refugees. As of April, the UN estimated that 5.1 million Ukrainians have fled to neighbouring countries, and another 6.5 million have become internally displaced (BBC 2022a). Poland received more than 2,8 million refugees, with directly neighbouring Hungary, Romania, Slovakia receiving another 1.7 million, and hundreds of thousands fleeing first to countries of Eastern Europe, Moldova, and Belarus as non-EU neighbours, and to Bulgaria and Czech Republic in the EU.

The European Commission activated a Temporary Protection Directive giving Ukrainian refugees in the EU- mostly women, children, and elderly - permission to stay at least for a year, and to access labour market, education, and health services. Ukrainians, also by way of their country's earlier EU associate membership status, have gained visa-free travel and therefore faced no border entry restrictions as refugees from other parts of the world continue to face. Yet the war is raging with no clear end in sight, prompting us to think about humanitarian and political repercussions more widely, and for Eastern Europe specifically. This part of Europe has been at the forefront of accepting refugees in this massive refugee wave, as did Greece, Italy, and Spain during the 2015 wave from the Mediterranean. This note focuses on the political polarization in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and concludes with some thoughts related to the refugee response.

### ***Political Polarization***

We have witnessed international solidarity with Ukraine of unprecedented proportions, large-scale economic sanctions imposed on Russia, and humanitarian aid for Ukrainians in the first place. Notable among political endeavours was a trip by train to the war zone by Eastern European leaders to meet with Ukraine's President Zelensky (Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and his deputy Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala and Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Jansa) (Gijs 15/03/22), acting as representatives of the European Council.

Moreover, Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have started providing military aid to Ukraine. Poland's President Andrzej Duda argued on Twitter that Ukraine needs three things: "Weapons, weapons and more weapons" (Republicworld 4/4/22). Reasons for military support range from having historical experiences with fighting Russia's imperialist ambitions, to solidarity within the EU and NATO, and realizations that if the war is not fought now in Ukraine, it would move to the EU, and to Eastern Europe particularly.

However, such are not the calculations among other political leaders in Eastern Europe. Putin's authoritarianism ties with Victor Orban in Hungary and historical influence in the Balkans have reaped strong opposition to providing such military aid, and on occasions also direct or tacit support for Russia's President Putin. Hungary condemned the invasion and has taken numerous refugees. Yet, Orban won general elections on 3 April, while the war has been raging, which means that there was a good support from different constituencies for him, based on his campaign and incumbent policies. Moreover, in his election victory statement Orban openly criticized Ukraine's President Zelenskyy (BBC 2022b), and, according to the Kremlin, he received Putin's congratulations in a telegram app post. Orban has strictly prohibited the transfer of arms through Hungary, and his country became the only one in the EU willing to pay for Russian gas with roubles (Vaski, 7/4/22).

The situation in Bulgaria is less opposing the directions of the EU but polarized internally about its own relationship to Russia, and the provision of weaponry to Ukraine beyond protective equipment. A government led by the so-called "Harvard boys" and Prime Minister Kiril Petkov took power in December 2021 after series of elections that failed to form a viable government in that year. Petkov has been having a difficult time at the outset of his mandate to balance between coalition partners, despite his liberal and pro-Western orientation. On the one hand comes the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which has maintained friendly relations with Kremlin since the Cold War. BSP created obstacles for the adoption of sanctions against Russia, which took place nevertheless. Regarding the country's "involvement in the conflict" in Ukraine, BSP

has been threatening to leave the coalition if any steps are further taken to send weapons (Shalamanov 14/4/22). The situation is further complicated by the stance of Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev, elected on the BSP ticket. On the other hand, comes the liberal Democratic Bulgaria Party, advocating for sending of weapons and against a "policy that marginalizes Bulgaria and causes the country to be defined by cowardice" (Todorov, 2022). This coalition partner has also been rethinking its place in the current government. Although in March Petkov fired the Defense Minister over his Facebook statements calling events in Ukraine "anything but a war" and fired a military general because of his spying for Russia, to date the situation remains polarized. Bulgaria hosts NATO forces but refuses to send weapons to Ukraine.

Russia's long-term influence is clearly visible also in Serbia. Although Serbia has been on the path to EU integration, it has maintained friendly relations with Russia, not least because of a common stance on the status of Kosovo. While historical discourses in other Eastern European countries associate violence and imperialism with Russia, in Serbia the most potent memory is associated with NATO's 1999 bombardments during the Kosovo war, and Russia's support for Serbia. As Brkic observes, Serbian society is deeply divided. Unequivocal condemnation of Russia, available elsewhere in Europe, is not available here. Since there are many more people supportive of Putin, also media do not shy away from catering to the public, pouring "oil into fire" and pumping up "the pro-Putin hysteria" (3/3/2022).

Russia's war in Ukraine elicits further support from some on the left and the far-right in the Balkans. In North Macedonia, the Left, a parliamentary represented party, has aligned itself openly with Russia, although the parliament condemned the invasion, garnering wide support across other parties. North Macedonia provided humanitarian aid and decided as a NATO member to donate military equipment without sending troops (Marusic, 2022). Yet pro- Putin sentiments exist specifically on social media among the Macedonian community, in support of Putin's "strong leadership," while Albanians take a completely opposing stance (Samaradjiev 24/03/2022). On the far-right, pro-Russia rallies have taken place in Serbia, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, and Montenegro, backed by groups flirting with neo-Nazism or “known to engage in genocide denial and glorifying convicted war criminals” (Marusic 2022).

### ***Conclusions***

Wars usually have the capacity to entice people to “rally around the flag” and thereby to unify opposing factions. The war in Ukraine is no exception. It has already unified Ukraine’s own government, opposition, domestic society, and even long-distance diasporas, many of whom took off from their comfortable places in Western countries to go back and fight in Ukraine. The war has also united many earlier disunited groups in Europe, as it is considered a fight for Europe and the liberal values Europe stands for. This memo comes to show that even at times when the effects of “rallying around the flag” are so strong, Russia’s war still has supporters in Europe. These are either among recently built relationships of authoritarian convenience (as with Orban in Hungary) or along historical and more contemporary lines, where certain groups on the left and the far-right, especially in the Balkans, have been having ties with Russia, ideationally, through pipeline politics, corruption, or through fascination with its outdated revisionist agenda.

This memo also seeks to warn that the united voices across Europe in support of Ukrainian refugees may wane, as emotional fatigue sets in, and societies face the economic consequences of hosting refugees. There is a common discourse today that the European response to the Ukrainian crisis has an inherent racism, as Europe has never been so open to refugees, and let many of them drown on broken dinghies in the Mediterranean. While this criticism certainly holds some truth, and merits reflection and amendment of asylum and migration policies, one needs to only look back seven years ago and see how much empathy there was in Europe also for the Syrian refugees. This was especially visible at the outset of the refugee wave in Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, as they had gone through a war in the 1990s. Hence, even though in this war Ukrainians may want to return after a year, or are expected to do so, realistically speaking, many of them are here to stay, as did those from the Middle East and Africa. This is not least because of the large destruction of housing and infrastructure in Ukraine. Therefore now, when the “rally around the flag” effects are still strong, Europe needs to put

together mechanisms for a quick integration for those who want into the host societies, and strengthen legal and policy frameworks that tackle discrimination, exploitation and precarity, and thereby support refugees and their proper treatment in the long run.

**Disclaimer:** The European Commission's support in producing this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

## *References*

- BBC. 2022a. "How Many Ukrainians Have Fled Their Homes and Where Have They Gone?" 22/04. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472>
- BBC. 2022b. "Hungary Election: PM Viktor Orban Criticises Ukraine's Zelensky As He Wins Vote," 4/4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60977917>
- Brkic, Bojan. 2022. "Russia's War in Ukraine Leaves Serbia Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place," Euronews, 03/03. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/03/03/russia-s-war-in-ukraine-leaves-serbia-stuck-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place>
- Gijs, Camille. 2022. "Leaders of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia to visit Kyiv on Tuesday" Politico, 15/03. <https://www.politico.eu/article/leader-poland-czech-republic-slovenia-visit-kyiv/>
- Kaul, Apoorva. 2022. "Russia-Ukraine War,". Republicworld.com 4/4. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/polands-duda-asserts-ukraine-needs-three-things-weapons-weapons-and-more-weapons-articleshow.html>
- Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. 2022. "North Macedonia's Left Condemned for Aligning with Russia on Ukraine" Balkan Insight, 18/03. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/18/north-macedonias-left-condemned-for-aligning-with-russia-on-ukraine/>
- Samardjiev, Alexandar. 2022. "North Macedonia, War in Ukraine and Authoritarianism," OBCT, 24/03. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/North-Macedonia/North-Macedonia-war-in-Ukraine-and-authoritarianism-216966>
- Shalamanov, Velizar 2022. "Bulgaria Between the Fight Against Corruption and The Support for Ukraine" Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 14/04. <https://www.freiheit.org/bulgaria-between-fight-against-corruption-and-support-ukraine>
- Todorov, Svetoslav. 2022. "Ukraine Minister's Visit to Bulgaria Reignites Debate on Military Aid," Balkan Insight, 21/04. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/21/ukraine-ministers-visit-to-bulgaria-reignites-debate-on-military-aid/>
- Vaski, Tamas. 2022. "PM Orban: Hungary Willing to Pay for Russian Gas Shipments in Rubles." Hungary Today, 7/04. <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungary-russian-gas-shipments/>