

# Russia's Increasing Exploitation of Fragile Peace: from northern Kosovo region to global issues

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# RUSSIA'S INCREASING EXPLOITATION OF FRAGILE PEACE: FROM NORTHERN KOSOVO TO GLOBAL ISSUES

## INTRODUCTION

The Russian war of aggression on Ukraine fundamentally changed international peace and security standards as of 24 February 2022. More specifically, it attacked the geopolitical map of Eastern Europe and, as a consequence, brought about the disruption of the fragile peace currently hovering over the Western Balkans.

This Policy Analysis will delve into how Russian disruptive actions, namely disinformation campaigns, have triggered escalated regional tensions between Kosovo and Serbia in Northern Kosovo that erupted this summer yet continue until today. Northern Kosovo appears as a critical target of the wider 'soft aggression' the Kremlin is executing in complementarity to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and one carrying the high probability of EU and/or NATO reaction should the situation escalate in the Schengen or Alliance vicinity. We situate such disruptive actions within the scope of Russia's crisis-export strategy as an integral part of their foreign policy direction and aims, especially in neighboring regions. Thereafter, the final section explores the broader perspective of the Russian crisis-export policy, putting forth examples of global issues Russia has had a fundamental hand in unsettling, with consequences for the Western Balkans and wider European stability and security.

### I. NORTHERN KOSOVO AS RUSSIA'S PRINCIPLE VICTIM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia have faced severe political strains since the 1990s, sharpened by Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovar independence and, as if a cloud over this conflict, Russian interference as an ally to Serbian hostility. Within this regional conflict, the Northern part of Kosovo is certainly the most disruptive. North Kosovo is composed of four municipalities composed of ethnic Kosovo Serbs majority - North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan and Zubin Potok - which seek to function independently from Kosovar institutions. In fact, the 2013 Brussels Agreement, facilitated by the EU and signed by both governments, eradicated parallel power structures and rendered Northern Kosovo under the jurisdiction of the Government of the Republic of Kosovo. However, this region remains under de facto Serbian rule as the conflict between the two neighboring states remains unsolved. It is a local region where EU diplomatic efforts have not delivered long-lasting effects, and have taken up a more reactive nature.

Indeed, the situation in the North remains by far the most polarizing within the ongoing negotiations and EU-facilitated Dialogue on the Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Looking at Kosovo's domestic politics, the hot topic of the moment being pushed for resolution by the international community is the establishment of an Association of Serb Municipalities. This means the creation of a Serb structure operating within the Republic of Kosovo, aligned and backed by Belgrade. Yet most Kosovars argue it infringes state sovereignty and the constitution, and has moreover already proved unsuccessful in the Western Balkans, namely in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While this Association was agreed by both sides in the Brussels Agreement of 2013, Kosovar senior officials contest the validity of this particular clause, signed by former President Thaci, now imprisoned in The Hague.

Northern Kosovo lingers as the hub for Kosovo-Serbia confrontation, and the most concrete manifestation of the geopolitical rivalry. A recent flare-up happened over the summer, and the context of its rise and resolution is very telling to the wider impact and many layers of

the conflict – linkages to Russia, vulnerability to disinformation, and a concrete example of Russia’s broader crisis-export policy.

On 31 July 2022, Kosovar authorities announced they would confiscate license plates and identity cards from local Serbs<sup>1</sup>. This was linked to 1 August 2022 being the expiration date of the eleven-year validity period agreed by the Government of Kosovo and North Kosovo’s Serb minority in 2011 for neutral documents and car licenses. After 1 August 2022, Serbian documents would become invalid. In reaction, local Serbs started to set up roadblocks and barricades, and the Serbian Army was put on high alert by President Vucic – the seriousness of the situation escalated very quickly. On the multilateral side, NATO KFOR also reacted very quickly in sending troops to patrol the streets across the Northern region, and the EU and the United States stepped up diplomatic outreach in an attempt to deescalate tensions. Negotiations were successful in Kosovar authorities agreeing to postpone the ban on Serbian documents. Nevertheless, the decision does not conclusively appease demands but rather let such resentment linger - locals were not impressed. One Albanian-Kosovar was quoted as stating “If you ask me if we can live together, we can’t. And Serbs don’t want to, either”<sup>2</sup>. Such a sentiment is clearly shared by senior officials, such as Former Kosovo president Atifete Jahjaga, who confessed that “We have had enough of the short-term solutions, enough of the bandages”<sup>3</sup>. After the summer and general appeasement had passed, the Kosovar government re-announced that, “from November around 10,000 Kosovan Serbs with license plates issued by Serbia must replace them with plates from the Republic of Kosovo”<sup>4</sup>. As an act of protest, Kosovar Serb in the northern part of Kosovo decided to resign from public sector roles (i.e., Assembly, Government, Serb municipalities). Worryingly, the situation lingers on, with parties growing weary of band-aid solutions, and protest reactions being taken up in want of definitive solutions but which, in a not-so-constructive manner, build up tensions rather than compromise.

What perhaps is the most worrying was how abruptly tensions rose with the strategic devious help of Russian interference by means of disinformation. After all, it is the Kremlin’s strategic interest to fuel more conflicts in the EU’s neighborhood as distraction, and to ignite territorial struggles in Eastern Europe.

## II. DISSINFORMATION AS KEY DISRUPTIVE INSTRUMENT

In today’s competitive information environment, it has become increasingly challenging to establish international cooperation on human rights within rules-based order or multilateral efforts. Disinformation undermines rule of law efforts in a given country or region, or even thematic. In this case, the **Kremlin has long been conducting a daring disinformation and misinformation campaigns** against Western-led efforts. Most notably, in the Western Balkans. The reason being that the Western Balkans remain, de facto, unaligned and in the process of what experts’ label as a ‘power vacuum’, since the EU and the US are engaged, yet: (i) Kosovo remain an open question, (ii) Serbia resists as a proxy-ally state of Russia, and (iii) EU

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, “Why ethnic tensions are flaring again in northern Kosovo”, 1 September 2022, online via <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-ethnic-tensions-are-flaring-again-northern-kosovo-2022-09-01/>.

<sup>2</sup> Financial Times, “EU-brokered deal leaves Kosovo and Serbia mired in antagonism”, 5 September 2022, online via <https://www.ft.com/content/55fe0b7f-3b89-4b73-82aa-7d2c503c366c>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Euractiv, “Serbs in northern Kosovo quit state jobs in protest over licence plate row”, 6 November 2022, online via <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbs-in-northern-kosovo-quit-state-jobs-in-protest-over-licence-plate-row/>.

membership remains down the line and far too marred with local frustration to ensure unequivocal future alignment

Communicating correct governmental or international community policies abiding by the rules-based order is facing a **highly competitive information environment**. National or multilateral actions seeking human rights and democracy are increasingly challenged by misinformation, disinformation, and sophisticated influence operations. History and the current situation has proven that Russia's clear preferred way of disrupting sociopolitical stability between Kosovo and Serbia is disinformation. In fact, the European Union has recognized the challenge that disinformation poses since 2015, and expanded its scope of actions with its Action Plan against Disinformation in 2018, which clearly underlines the hybrid threat dimension of disinformation.

This Policy Note particularly delves into the most recent example of Russia's war on information, on the above-mentioned license plates issue, in July/August 2022. Euroactiv details the process: "At critical moments, through tightly controlled communication channels, Russia broadcasted fake news, such as the one that a Serb was wounded at the blockade near Jarinje, that the Serbian Army was moving its units and planes along the border with Kosovo, that an attack by Pristina forces on Serbs was expected. (...) The messages were broadcasted through a large number of websites, accounts on social networks, and private channels, with hundreds of thousands of followers, who until now were known for their strongly pro-Russian views, and many of them belong to extremist organizations in Russia and Serbia"<sup>5</sup>.

Messages sent out also spread the false narrative that "conflict between Serbs and Albanians had already broken out, that because of this, Serbian security forces had already entered or were about to enter Kosovo, that Belgrade's action was justified and that Russia would help Serbia if it ended up in a conflict with the KFOR mission, which is under the command of NATO"<sup>6</sup>. The apparent aim of such strictly-targeted yet immense misinformation efforts was to flare up violence between the countries, and potentially triggering NATO involvement. Furthermore, the intent is to negatively sway public opinion on the matter of Kosovo statehood, as well as the role the EU and more broadly Western-aligned presence in the region. By questioning the added value of Western-aligned strategies and support, public opinion would naturally gravitate towards Russian-aligned support as the other viable option, already well-positioned (i.e., economic ties, trade and political allies) in the region. Sources report that "that over the course of three months, of 458 news stories published in Serbia that mentioned, 17.2 per cent of them were disinformation shared by Russia Today, Sputnik Serbia, and other websites such as Russia Insider"<sup>7</sup>. The Kremlin campaign targeting Northern Kosovo was so successful that the Serbian Ministry of Defense came out in the summer to refute the territory-entrance information being spread to prevent further escalation of violence in the North, keeping in mind the interests of the Serbs based locally in Northern Kosovo. However, such a rumor denial was matched with the same Ministry's statement that it was in fact the

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<sup>5</sup> Euroactiv, "Russia is seeking new wars and Kosovo could be the next one", 5 August 2022, online via <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/opinion/russia-is-seeking-new-wars-and-kosovo-could-be-the-next-one/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, "Licence to operate: How the EU can counter Russia and ease tensions between Kosovo and Serbia", 17 November 2022, online via <https://ecfr.eu/article/licence-to-operate-how-the-eu-can-counter-russia-and-ease-tensions-between-kosovo-and-serbia/>.

Kosovar government<sup>8</sup>. From Russia's perspective, should another conflict erupt in the EU's closer neighborhood, their financial, civilian and military resources would quickly be mobilized there, and Ukraine would leave, or have to share, the spotlight. The risk of heightened crisis in the Northern Kosovo region is increasing – colloquially speaking, this hotspot is becoming warmer and warmer. The final purpose is clear: to hinder the validity of Kosovo's statehood and, interconnected, to fuel ethnic tensions between Kosovar Serbs and Kosovar Albanians by portraying the Serb community in Kosovo as victims of both a discriminatory central government and the majority ethnicity. Linked to this, having ally Russia portray the Kosovar state and Kosovar Albanians as the enemies suits Serbia's own rhetoric of arguing that whatever they do in Kosovar territory is to protect Kosovar Serbs and their interests.

Similarly, Russia's vilification of the Republic of Kosovo against the minority Serb community therein very much supports Serbia's push for the establishment of an Association of Serb Municipalities, as does triggering violent flare-ups between the two ethnic groups in the Northern part of Kosovo. According to Serbia and its powerful ally to the East, since the Kosovar state supposedly neglects ethnic Serbs there is a real need to set up more autonomous Serb-serving institutions within the Republic of Kosovo. However, the risk this move could present for the Republic of Kosovo's statehood is not going unnoticed, and is arguably well within the wider disruptive strategy at play in the region. Disinformation is indeed the key disruptive instrument employed by Russia, and definitely a useful accomplice to Vucic's strategic interests towards the approximately 40,000 ethnic Serbs living in Northern Kosovo his government seeks strong ties with (including funding support).

All in all, it is clear the Kremlin is trying to use this region to encourage war-inciting rhetoric, which serves their wider global disruption purposes. Ways forward are unpredictable and as politically-motivated as politically-sensitive. On the other side of this ideal way forward is the possibility of escalation and difficulty to diffuse tensions in Northern Kosovo, much to the content of Kremlin disruptive aims. We delve into the latter possibility in the next section.

### **III. POSSIBLE PLANS OF REACTION IN CASE OF CRISIS ESCALATION IN NORTHERN PART OF KOSOVO**

Kosovo-Serbia relations have been a challenge and priority in the international political agenda since the Kosovo war in 1999, with a spike again in 2008 when Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia and was recognized by the majority of UN member countries, including the United States and a big bulk of EU Member States. Since 2008, many international, regional, national and local efforts have been dedicated to normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia. However, regrettably, relations remain tense and conflict flare-ups happen regularly. In 2018, for instance, Kosovo import tariffs were imposed on Serbian goods as retaliation for its role in impeding its Interpol accession, which resulted in a trade blockade and stalled dialogue. And just recently the issue of IDs and license plates. Insofar, all outbreaks have been managed by diplomatic means and in creating more space for dialogue. Nonetheless, the Russian aggression on Ukraine was a turning point for the stakes attached to stability in the Western Balkans, and it is wise to assess plans of action to consider resorting to should the situation escalate beyond neighborly resolution. Possible plans of action to consider are: involvement of NATO, engagement of the EU, and strategic communication strategies.

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<sup>8</sup> Andolu Agency, "Serbia denies reports of border conflicts between Serbian Army, Kosovar police", 31 July 2022, online via <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/serbia-denies-reports-of-border-conflicts-between-serbian-army-kosovar-police/2650122>.

First regarding NATO involvement, NATO has been drawn in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict since 1999, and remain engaged by means of their NATO Kosovo Force mission, present in the country to this day. It has long dedicated a civilian and military asset to supporting Kosovo's sovereignty and domestic stability. Amidst the recent license plates violent outburst, **NATO stated that it was ready to act in short notice** if things escalate – not only because its mandate is maintained peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic region, but also because it is heavily invested in supporting and protecting Kosovo's integrity vis-à-vis more powerful actors. NATO Brigadier General Luca Piperni flagged that "we are ready to be in the middle between the protesters and the security organizations. We have sufficient forces to deal with the situation"<sup>9</sup>. With regional stability in the Western Balkans and particularly between Kosovo and Serbia as fragile and vulnerable to external threats, Russia's war on Ukraine has generated fear in Kosovo above all else in light of its lesser power. Fear concerns the heightened threat of Russia, or Serbia as its proxy ally state in the region, continuing to contest territorial integrity of sovereign states. Will the Russian invasion of Ukraine become a wider, global conflict? No one knows, unfortunately. While Serbian President Vucic argue this conflict will bring about a new world war – saying "I expect further complicating relations between the West and Russia, but also between the West and China"<sup>10</sup> - mobilized international efforts at this stage remain focused on securing Ukraine's territorial integrity and countering Russian influence on the Western Balkan power vacuum.

Another possible course of action should the situation deteriorate is to have **the EU step up diplomatic outreach**. Creating more dialogue avenues is a way to solve problems, find agreements on sensitive issues, and monitor compliance with such agreements. Bigger outreach can also facilitate identifying areas of common interests, bilaterally and to the wider region. While the EU-facilitated Dialogue on the Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and the appointed EU Special Envoy, have not brewed the final results aiming at durable peace or normalized relations, efforts should not be halted but rather increased. The EU should continue to create more space for diplomacy, and engage in quiet efforts, as well as more public efforts, to bring the countries closer together and build confidence between the parties. For example, the EU could also consider engagement at a multi-country level with the two neighbors, such as explore opportunities for cooperation on concrete projects on issues of common interest, to promote regional cooperation initiatives that also protect EU interests. Another example for promoting regional cooperation is to foster regional economic development, such as expanding inter-regional trade and value chains, infrastructure investment, and connectivity, for instance. At the end of the day, as the war continues into a tough winter in Ukraine and across EU member States generally, a violent flare-up in tensions in the Western Balkans, especially concerning Kosovo-Serbia and the EU's insofar unsuccessful mediation of the conflict, is the last thing a weakened Brussels needs.

Finally, onto **strategic communication** as another possible course of action. Global actors could be proactively engaged to address this hybrid threat clouding peaceful discussions between Kosovo and Serbia. The EU's Stratcom Task Forces within the EEAS could be engaged to **tackle disinformation** from foreign state and non-state actors, namely given the East Stratcom Task Force's specific mandate to address Russia's disinformation. Their strategy includes "targeted communication campaigns, pooling communication resources, support for

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<sup>9</sup> Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, "'NATO 'Ready To Act' In Kosovo If Tensions With Serbia Escalate'", 20 September 2022, online via <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-ready-to-act-kosovo-tensions-escalate/32043025.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Anadolu Agency, "'Serbian president warns of looming threat of global conflict like WWII'", 20 September 2022, online via <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/serbian-president-warns-of-looming-threat-of-global-conflict-like-wwii/2690322#>.



independent media, and analyzing, detecting and exposing disinformation from foreign actors. In this context, Stratcom's capacity to analyse local information environments is indispensable for fine-tuning our policy and communication approaches and actions"<sup>11</sup>. Further on tackling disinformation, an author from the European Council on Foreign Relations argues that "the EU should equally fight disinformation throughout the region by pressing Serbia to align with Europe on sanctions against Russia and to revoke Russian state-sponsored media channels' licenses to operate. Finally, the EU should not underestimate Russia's interest in such a crisis which serves its narrative about the EU failing in matters of peace and security in its continent"<sup>12</sup>. This would indeed be a strategic communication move mixed with political strategies – indeed both components may need to be interlinked for successful results.

Also, on strategic communication to counter pro-Kremlin disinformation, public statements are another foreign and security instrument. We saw it used by the Serbian authorities to refute claims of territorial invasion, and we also see it used regularly by the EU as a communication tool to explain existing policy positions, or sometimes new policy elements or political orientation on a given issue in light of developments. When possible and relevant, joint statements showcasing an aligned position may be used to increase influence and strength behind the position – such as a joint statement between EU Delegations in the region, or, at a domestic basis, between different national actors. On a practical level of field international actors' support operations or missions, efforts should also take into consideration the risks of disinformation attempts, and ways of countering these.

#### **IV. BROADER PERSPECTIVE OF RUSSIA'S CRISIS-EXPORT POLICY**

The Russian state, at the hands of President Vladimir Putin, has indeed long been involving in reigniting or boosting geopolitical conflicts in their neighborhood. The Kosovo-Serbia animosity is but one example. However, the Kremlin has also invested a lot of efforts into general hate and polarization campaigns which erode harmonious, democratic and/or liberal societies. This is widely known as Russia's crisis-export policy, which denotes destabilization efforts as a foreign policy tool for the country, as well as a distracting element.

Let us look into current global challenges and how Russia had a hand to play in them. 2022 in geopolitics starting in late February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. The ongoing war of aggression has led to an energy crisis in Europe, unprecedented rise of inflation and a food crisis.

First, the unstable global energy supply. The European Union largely depends on Russian gas for energy supply purposes – Russia is Europe's largest gas supplier, encompassing 40% of the EU's gas and 27% of its imported oil<sup>13</sup>. As such, all sanctions being adopted against Russia in an attempt to curtail its economic power behind the military hard power invading Ukraine, has direct dire consequences to European households. Figures show that "European electricity and natural gas prices are now close to 10 times their historical average in the decade leading up to 2020. (..) Europe's energy costs approximately 2% of GDP

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<sup>11</sup> European External Action Service, "COUNTERING DISINFORMATION - Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force", consulted on 5 October 2022, online via [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en).

<sup>12</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, "Licence to operate: How the EU can counter Russia and ease tensions between Kosovo and Serbia", 17 November 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Deutsche Welle, "EU unveils plan to reduce reliance on Russia". 18 May 2022, online via <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-unveils-300-billion-plan-to-reduce-its-energy-dependency-on-russia/a-61838801>.

in normal times, but it has soared to an estimated 12% on the back of surging prices”<sup>14</sup>. Brussels was suddenly faced with “a double urgency to transform Europe's energy system: **ending the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels**, which are used as an economic and political weapon and cost European taxpayers nearly €100 billion per year, and **tackling the climate crisis**”<sup>15</sup>. The new priority became the need to diversify energy imports away from fossil fuels and accelerate the clean energy transition as a win-win. The EU launched REPowerEU, a €300 billion action plan for this end<sup>16</sup>, to prevent a massive recession from coming into play in the near future. Notwithstanding, what is likely to happen is that Europe will lose (at least some of its) economic competitiveness on account of the slow economic growth it is experiencing. What's more, the energy crisis and linked economic troubles Europe is facing due to human rights-sanctions adopted against Russia has wider implications. Foreign Policy alerts that “Already, demand for fossil fuels is driving up prices around the world—especially in Asia, as Europeans outbid other customers for fuel from non-Russian sources. The consequences will be especially hard on low-income energy importers in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America”<sup>17</sup>. The downside of living in a globalized world, after all.

Indeed, food costs are rising, and harvests are diminishing. For instance, “The war in Ukraine has spoiled the harvests and transportation routes of vast amounts of wheat and other grains. Major food importers like Egypt have reason to be nervous about the political unrest that often accompanies rising food costs”<sup>18</sup>. Putin did not hesitate to use this as yet another polarizing, hate-inducing factor against the West (traditionally understood as the United States and Europe). The Russian President argued that the global food crisis underdeveloped and developing nations are experiencing “is a direct consequence, without any exaggeration, of the predatory policies of the richest countries in the world”<sup>19</sup>. He claimed that the majority of shipments to serve exports of Ukrainian grain have gone to the United States and European countries. However, looking at figures in real, it has been the Kremlin who has destabilized the global agri-food market – “Russia is blocking the main export routes for Ukrainian grain, and is destroying the agricultural infrastructure and crops”<sup>20</sup>. The Kremlin seems to be weaponizing Ukrainian exports, in demanding that Western sanctions be reduced in order for them to help overcome the global food crisis by “increasing grain and mineral fertilizer exports”<sup>21</sup>. As such, it is easily understandable that Putin is seeking to destabilizing the global energy and food markets to put political and economic pressure on Western countries to phase out sanctions and ease up diplomatic condemnation against Russia. Russian disinformation comes into play once more in this scenario, by shedding blame on the West for actions they themselves are responsible for, and pushing for concessions in return for halting international aggression on Ukraine.

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<sup>14</sup> Foreign Policy, “Europe’s Energy Crisis Is Destroying the Multipolar World”, 26 September 2022, online via <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/26/europe-russia-ukraine-energy-crisis-global-order-china-united-states/> .

<sup>15</sup> European Commission, “REPowerEU: A plan to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and fast forward the green transition”, consulted 3 October 2022, online via [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_3131](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_3131) .

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Foreign Policy, “Europe’s Energy Crisis Is Destroying the Multipolar World”, 26 September 2022.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Anadolu Agency, “Putin faults West's 'predatory policies' for global food crisis”, 27 September 2022, online via <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/putin-faults-west-s-predatory-policies-for-global-food-crisis/2695938>.

<sup>20</sup> Centre for Eastern Studies, “Russia is intensifying the global food crisis”, 8 June 2022, online via <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-06-08/russia-intensifying-global-food-crisis> .

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Linked to the aforementioned global impact of the war, and energy and food crises, those looking at most dramatic, long-term consequences are underdeveloped countries in the Global South. They are the ones with the least purchasing power as prices rise and the war rages on. And, adding on, “emerging market economies, in particular countries in central Asia and Africa, are among the regions most dependent on Russia and Ukraine for their grain supply”<sup>22</sup>, as flagged by the European Central Bank. Furthermore, as international condemnations grow, Russia’s more reliable partners in the Global South are slowly but surely deterring - for instance, in the UN General Assembly’s most recent vote condemning “Russia’s “illegal so-called referendums” in regions within Ukraine’s internationally-recognized borders, and demands it reverses its annexation declaration”<sup>23</sup> was passed with 145 votes in favor, 35 abstentions and 5 votes against. Of those voting in favor, we see traditional allies such as Serbia, Brazil and South Africa. Yet this opposition can be costly for developing Global South countries such as Brazil and South Africa, as it is becoming increasingly difficult to “secure essential goods and materials due to trade disruptions with the warring countries”<sup>24</sup>. After all, “Brazil and South Africa’s geopolitical goals are still set on resuming growth and reversing the economic downturn from Covid-19”<sup>25</sup>. For this reason, while they partake in international condemnation, they are careful not to alienate Russia as the economic power and actor in crucial trade flows. Looking closer, we see that “both Brazil and South Africa have condemned the Russian invasion in some form. However, statements are indirect, coming from the Foreign Minister (South Africa) and the Ambassador to the UN (Brazil) rather than their president”<sup>26</sup>. They are playing the ultimate game of geopolitics to ensure survival.

The global markets have been unequivocally disrupted by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier this year. Supply chains for energy and agri-food goods and commodities have been especially targeted, with adequate (or well-priced) supply not guaranteed to all countries. With Russia as a top exporter of energy commodities and Ukraine as another top exporter, but for agricultural commodities, the war has severely impacted global trade flows. Quantitatively speaking, “Russian gas exports to the EU were also significantly reduced, standing at 35% of their previous year’s level in the last week of June 2022”<sup>27</sup>, with Russian gas being diverted to Asian routes (despite much less developed pipelines for that end).

Building off this reality and global dependence on Russian goods, especially gas, traditional antagonists to the Kremlin face a double-edged sword when it comes to hostilizing Russia and adopting sanctions against the country. Russia’s crisis-export policy has certainly been successful in 2022, be it in the Western Balkans and at a global level.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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<sup>22</sup> European Central Bank, “Trade flows with Russia since the start of its invasion of Ukraine”, May 2022 Issue Bulletin, online via [https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/focus/2022/html/ecb.ebbox202205\\_01~9a64e27f6f.en.html](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/focus/2022/html/ecb.ebbox202205_01~9a64e27f6f.en.html).

<sup>23</sup> United Nations News, “Ukraine: UN General Assembly demands Russia reverse course on ‘attempted illegal annexation’”, 12 October 2022, online via <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129492>.

<sup>24</sup> LSE Blogs, “How Global South coverage of the Ukraine War sheds light on diplomatic neutrality: new research”, 1 August 2022, online via <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2022/08/01/how-global-south-coverage-of-the-ukraine-war-sheds-light-on-diplomatic-neutrality-new-research/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> European Central Bank, “Trade flows with Russia since the start of its invasion of Ukraine”, May 2022 Issue Bulletin.

Northern Kosovo is the hotspot where sovereignty tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have been known to blow up over the years. It has recently come under fire within Russia's wider crisis-export policy. Russian targeted disinformation and misinformation campaigns have fueled tensions and animosity between the neighbors over the summer, in the license plate issue. Their role was clear and strategic, and the impact was only alleviated because foreign powers got involved in calls for de-escalation and diplomatic negotiation.

Russia may very well see a new political or territory conflict in the world as a good distraction, for EU concerns to fall beyond Ukraine. The relentless disinformation and misinformation campaigns Russia has been leveraging against the Western Balkans prove that the Kremlin is not keen on a cease-and-desist next step; instead, they are staying on the authoritarian lane and unafraid to further alienate European powers or the international community at large.

Moreover, similarly, Russia may very well see crises impacting global energy and food supply chains as good, as leverage to dissuade Western countries from adopting further sanctions targeting Russian exports. Since the Kremlin's war of invasion on Ukraine started in February, the European Union has adopted six different packages of sanctions against Russia, encompassing individuals, media, transport, financial sectors and trade. With negative effects spilling over to emerging markets and developing or underdeveloped countries in the Global South incapable of meeting rising prices for basic commodities, Western countries may be discouraged from further isolating the Russian market from the world. Russia has already voiced its interest in countering disrupted global supply chains originating in Russia or Ukraine, but only in exchange of lightened sanctions. For this reason, countries such as Brazil and South Africa have attempted to adopt a neutrality stance on the matter, a strategy towards self-preservation amid unpredictable global markets. Also, here Russia's foreign policy tool of strategic disinformation has come in handy, by arguing that it is actually Western countries (namely the United States and the EU) that are to blame for struggles in the global food supply in buying all the goods for themselves and leaving only over-priced goods for the less-rich countries.

Disinformation and misinformation, clearly, play – and have long played – a very important role in Russian politics. It is their way of creating leverage and evening out the playing field. If the media is distracted with other events and challenges, their invasion on Ukraine will become second-class news and, eventually, background noise. Aligned nations must keep a close look on such actions and act decisively and effectively to address them. Otherwise, next time Russia decides to interfere in Northern Kosovo, tensions may not be eased in a matter of days.

## **Policy Analysis**

Policy Analysis in general is a policy advice paper which particularly aims to influence the key means through which policy decisions are made in both local and central levels of government. The purpose of Policy Analysis is to address, more in-depth, a particular problem, to examine the arguments related to a concerned policy, and to analyze the implementation of the policy. Through Policy Analysis, Group for Legal and Political studies seeks to stimulate wider comprehensive debate on the given issue via presenting informed policy-relevant choices and recommendations to the key stakeholders and parties of interest.



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