

Christophe Solioz

# An Uncharted Transition

The Balkans in the Post-Wall Era



Nomos

## **Southeast European Integration Perspectives**

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Published with the support of the Republic and Canton of Geneva.

**The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek** lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN 978-3-7560-0644-1 (Print)  
978-3-7489-4274-0 (ePDF)

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-7560-0644-1 (Print)  
978-3-7489-4274-0 (ePDF)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Solioz, Christophe  
An Uncharted Transition  
The Balkans in the Post-Wall Era  
Christophe Solioz  
255 pp.

Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-7560-0644-1 (Print)  
978-3-7489-4274-0 (ePDF)



Onlineversion  
Nomos eLibrary

1st Edition 2024

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To the depths of the Unknown to find something *new*!  
“The Voyage”, *The Flowers of Evil*

Charles Baudelaire

Owing to the morbid estrangement which the nationality-craze has induced and still induces among the nations of Europe, owing also to the short-sighted and hasty-handed politicians, who with the help of this craze, are at present in power, and do not suspect to what extent the disintegrating policy they pursue must necessarily be only an interlude policy – owing to all this, and much else that is altogether unmentionable at present, the most unmistakable signs that Europe wishes to be one, are now overlooked, or arbitrarily and falsely misinterpreted.

*Beyond Good and Evil*

Friedrich Nietzsche



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## List of abbreviations and acronyms

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| BiEPAG  | Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group            |
| BRAC    | Building Resources Across Communities              |
| BRIC    | Brazil, Russia, India, China                       |
| BRICS   | Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa         |
| BRICSAM | Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Mexico |
| BTI     | Bertelsmann Transformation Index                   |
| CAP     | Center for Applied Policy Research                 |
| CCS     | Carbon capture and sequestration                   |
| CEE     | Central and Eastern Europe                         |
| CEFTA   | Central European Free Trade Agreement              |
| CEPS    | Centre for European Policy Studies                 |
| CFSP    | Common Foreign and Security Policy                 |
| CIS     | Commonwealth of Independent States                 |
| CoE     | Council of Europe                                  |
| COMECON | Council for Mutual Economic Assistance             |
| CSCE    | Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe   |
| CSR     | Czechoslovak Republic                              |
| DCFTA   | Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area             |
| DI      | Differentiated integration                         |
| EaP     | Eastern Partnership                                |
| ECB     | European Central Bank                              |
| ECE     | East-Central Europe                                |
| ECFR    | European Council on Foreign Relations              |
| ECT     | Energy Charter Treaty                              |
| EEA     | European Economic Area                             |
| EEAS    | European External Action Service                   |
| EFTA    | European Free Trade Association                    |
| EIU     | Economist Intelligence Unit                        |
| EMU     | Economic and Monetary Union                        |

*List of abbreviations and acronyms*

|      |  |
|------|--|
| ENA  | École Nationale d'Administration                             |
| END  | European Nuclear Disarmament                                 |
| ENP  | European Neighbourhood Policy                                |
| EPSR | European Pillar of Social Rights                             |
| ESDE | Annual Report on Employment and Social Development in Europe |
| ESF  | European Social Fund   |
| ESS  | European Social Survey                                       |
| EU   | European Union   |
| FDI  | Foreign direct investment                                    |
| FRG  | Federal Republic of Germany (former West Germany)            |
| GDP  | Gross domestic product                                       |
| GDR  | German Democratic Republic                                   |
| hCa  | Helsinki Citizens' Assembly                                  |
| IMF  | International Monetary Fund                                  |
| IPA  | Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance                      |
| NAM  | Non-Aligned Movement   |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization                           |
| NGO  | Non-governmental organization                                |
| NMS  | New member states  |
| NWO  | New World Order  |
| NRA  | New Regionalism Approach                                     |
| OAS  | Organization of American States                              |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development       |
| OSCE | Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe          |
| OWO  | Old World Order  |
| PPP  | Purchasing power parity                                      |
| R2P  | Responsibility to Protect                                    |
| RCC  | Regional Cooperation Council                                 |
| RCI  | Regional Competitiveness Index                               |
| RI   | Rationalist institutionalist (perspective)                   |
| SAP  | Stabilization and Association Process                        |
| SEE  | South-East Europe/European                                   |

*List of abbreviations and acronyms*

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| SEER  | South-East Europe Review – Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe |
| SI    | Sociological institutionalism  |
| UfM   | Union for the Mediterranean  |
| ULC   | Unit labour costs  |
| UN    | United Nations   |
| UNECE | UN Economic Commission for Europe  |
| VoC   | Varieties of capitalism  |
| WEF   | World Economic Forum   |
| wiiw  | Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies                                |
| WP    | Warsaw Pact  |
| WTO   | World Trade Organization   |
| WWII  | World War II   |



## Domino

Among the many methods which he may use – always depending, of course, on the problem in hand – one method seems to me worth mentioning. It is a variant of the (at present unfashionable) historical method. It consists, simply, in trying to find out what other people have thought and said about the problem in hand: why they had to face it: how they formulated it: how they tried to solve it. This seems to me important because it is part of the general method of rational discussion. If we ignore what other people are thinking, or have thought in the past, then rational discussion must come to an end, though each of us may go on happily talking to himself.

*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Karl Popper

End 2020. *First*, I acknowledged a turning point: with the ending of the post-Wall period, an Age of Transition began – an era marked by uncertainty, indeterminacy, instability, movement, mutations, alterations and ruptures prefigured by the fate of “transitional societies”.<sup>1</sup>

*Second*, I underscored the logic of “staying with the trouble” – the “Balkan Malaise”, hard populism, coronavirus, the war in Ukraine – characterizing the “being-with”, the “common” in the twenty-first century.

*Third*, I emphasized as a major geopolitical shift the current rolling recomposition of Central Europe. More than in the late 1980s, we are now witnessing a formidable acceleration of history: Central Europe is back.

*Fourth*, I considered the Western Balkans *and* Central Europe in an integrated approach inspired by the conviction that political analysis and criticism request a global interpretation of the historical situation.

*Fifth*, I answered Milan Kundera’s question, “is Central Europe Europe’s central question?”: Europe’s centre of gravity is shifting eastwards, to the centre.

And *sixth*, I pledged on the path of Michel Serres for an extended view of the notion of history: “At stake is the Earth in its totality, and humanity, collectively. Global history enters nature; global nature enters history: this is something utterly new in philosophy”<sup>2</sup> – and so, not only in philosophy.

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1 See Christophe Solioz, respectively: “Towards a Century of Transition”, *openDemocracy*, London, October 26, 2020; and “Deconsolidation and De-democratisation: Current Western Balkans Experience of Transition”, *SEER – Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, 23 (2020) 2, pp. 187–207.

2 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), p. 4.

What could be viewed only a few years ago as mere speculation has, since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, become obvious and now demands the deepest possible rethinking.

In January 2022, on the verge of the war in Ukraine, Larry Diamond pinpointed: “We have reentered a period of epochal confrontation between two divergent forms of rule – one based on power, the other on legitimacy” and further stressed:

The dictatorships in Russia and China could destroy world peace before they destroy themselves. [...] If they do not embrace political reform – a prospect that fills them with dread, given the fate of Gorbachev – they will have to rely increasingly on the exercise of raw power at home and abroad to preserve their rule.<sup>3</sup>

Only one month later, these arguments became plain and were to gain a dramatic consistency.

### *The centre of Europe moves eastwards*

Since February 24, 2022, the formula coined by Raymond Aron in 1948 “peace is impossible, war is improbable” is henceforth obsolete.<sup>4</sup> The war in Ukraine entails the abrupt, bewildering end of the post-Wall period. The post-1989 tectonic plates are shifting.

For some brief context: Ukraine underwent several partitions, was then drawn into the Soviet empire, gained independence in 1991 as the Soviet empire dissolved and has since then been balancing between nationalism and transnationalism and striving possibly for “Europeanization” – a prospect marked as a promise temporarily beyond reach. Using the differences discussed in this volume between the interconnected notions of “transition”, “post-communism”, “transformation”, “democratization” and “Europeanization” – all apologetic constructs of Western normality – Ukraine should be seen as a country in the midstream of transition and post-communism.<sup>5</sup> On its path to Europe, where does Ukraine stand from an institutional viewpoint at the time of writing?

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3 Larry Diamond, “Democracy’s Arc: From Resurgent to Imperiled”, *Journal of Democracy*, 33 (2022) 1, p. 176.

4 See Raymond Aron, “Les alternances de la paix belliqueuse”, *Le Figaro*, February 26, 1948; published later as “Paix improbable, guerre impossible”, in Raymond Aron, *Le grand schisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 13–31.

5 For an overview, see Timm Beichelt, “Dimensions of Europeanisation”, in François Bafail and Timm Beichelt, *L’européanisation d’Ouest en Est* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2008),

Let's briefly overview Ukraine's pre-war relationship with the European Union. Ukraine and the Union signed in 1994 a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement that focused on the importance of democratic values, respect for human rights and the principles of a market economy. Ten years later, Ukraine – understood as part of “Wider Europe” (see Chapter 7) – was integrated in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004. This new policy framework did not offer any perspective on accession, but it represented nevertheless an opportunity for Ukraine to become closer to the EU, to have a growing chance to be accepted one day as a potential candidate country and to benefit from the ENP's annual action programmes. In 2009, Ukraine was part of the EU's Eastern Partnership – the specific Eastern dimension to the ENP – aimed to “strengthen and deepen” relations between the EU and “partner countries”. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was signed in 2014 and entered into force in 2017. Its key objective is to accelerate the deepening of political and economic relations between Ukraine and the EU, as well as Ukraine's gradual integration in the EU Internal Market, including by setting up a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).

With the 2022 war, Ukraine knocked on the door of the main Atlantic and European institutions with initially mixed results. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) stated at its Vilnius Summit (July 2023) that Kyiv will receive an invitation to join “when allies agree and conditions are met”. However, on the EU side membership was not in sight, despite the country's candidate status since June 23, 2022, until the Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine (and Moldova) as part of its 2023 Enlargement Package announcement on 8 November 2023.<sup>6</sup> The Union did, however, announce that it stood by Ukraine, supported its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, that it would provide strong political, economic, military, financial and humanitarian support, and... “encourages Ukraine to continue on this path and to fulfil the conditions specified in the Commission's opinion on its

---

pp. 31–53; and François Bafoil, “Variété des processus d'eupéanisation en Europe centrale et orientale”, in Bafoil and Beichelt, *L'eupéanisation d'Ouest en Est*, pp. 76–80. For a critical approach, see Attila Ágh, *Awaking Europe in the Triple Global Crisis. The Birth Pangs of the Emerging Europe* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021), p. 117.

6 Ukraine presented its application for membership of the European Union on February 28, 2022, five days after Russia launched its full-scale unprovoked and unjustified aggression.

membership application in order to advance towards future EU membership”.<sup>7</sup>

The Union thus continues to insist on the adaptation of the candidate country to its norms as an objective in itself and as a means of reaching certain policy goals. Accordingly, the 2023 adopted Enlargement Package insists: “Accession is and will remain a merit-based process, fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each country” and further pinpoints: “the Commission recommends that Council adopts the negotiating frameworks once Ukraine and Moldova have adopted certain key measures”.<sup>8</sup> As for Central European countries, Ukraine’s journey toward transformation and integration will also be driven by uncertainty, even more so because of the war.<sup>9</sup>

Past transition, transformation and Europeanization processes provide a framework and a horizon of expectation ascertaining the path that Ukraine will have to travel. In the case of Ukraine, as in Central Europe, adapting to the Union – meaning essentially taking into account EU conditionality – is not a mere act of administrative compliance. In a highly conflictual context, Europeanization receives a multifold meaning and includes various responses such as inertia, retrenchment, absorption, transformation and co-transformation.<sup>10</sup> As in the case of the former Yugoslav republics, Ukraine is experiencing a “transformation process” framed by war that will be enacted properly only once the war is over. At stake: a comprehensive transformation process – in which the domestic system is in a continual

---

7 From the conclusions of the special meeting of the European Council on February 9, 2023, § 6.

8 Communication from the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, November 8, 2023. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08_en). [last accessed November 13, 2023].

9 On the uncertainty of the transformation process, see François Bafail, “Variété des processus d’eupéanisation en Europe centrale et orientale”, p. 68.

10 On the various definitions of Europeanization, see Sabine Saurugger, *Théories et concepts de l’intégration européenne* (Paris: Sciences Po, second updated edition 2020), p. 252. Of course, over the years and in context-specific ways, the meaning of “Europeanization” has changed several times: see Kevin Featherstone and Claudio M. Radaelli (Eds), *The Politics of Europeanization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). On the various outcomes of Europeanization (inertia, retrenchment, absorption and transformation) in Central and Eastern Europe, see Alfio Cerami, “Europeanisation and social policy in Central and Eastern Europe”, in Bafail and Beichelt, *L’eupéanisation d’Ouest en Est*, pp. 156–157.

process of transformation via a variety of domestic, regional and international processes – including the additional transition from war to peace. As further discussed in this volume, the “transformation process” underlines that “Europe” has not only political and administrative dimensions, it also involves social practices and social capital, as well as influences from preceding enlargement and Europeanization processes.

To make the issue more complex, Europe is often “reduced” to the EU and, accordingly, Europeanization is often conceived as and confused with EU-ization whereas they should be conceived as distinct – but interwoven – processes. The narrow focus neglects a broader view that must include major actors as the Council of Europe (CoE), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and NATO. To give just one example concerning “minority protection” in Europe – by the way, an essential issue for Ukraine – the European Union has produced no binding instruments on this excepting Directive 2000/43/EC implementing equal treatment irrespective of racial or ethnic origin. Therefore, EU accession partnership and/or the Commission’s annual reports systematically refer to the CoE convention as well as to the recommendations produced by the OSCE.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the transformation process has to be viewed not as a linear adaptation process but as an interweaving one with reciprocal effects of “moving targets”, moreover involving a broad range of actors – at state level but also at the often-neglected regional level.<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to imagine at present that Ukraine is able to cope with such a process.

To sum-up, *first*, as was also the case with the enlargement and Europeanization processes of Central European countries, Ukraine signals the “return of the state” and the relevance of “national sovereignty” – albeit in a much more dramatic way. Here it matters to emphasize, contrary to common claims, that the Europeanization and integration processes systematically strengthened the national sovereignties of the forthcoming

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11 See Bernd Rechel, “What Has Limited the EU’s Impact on Minority Rights in Accession Countries?”, *East European Politics and Societies*, 22 (2008) 1, pp. 171–191.

12 The notion of “moving targets” channels the idea that neither the EU nor the member states are static, so Europeanization is a matter of reciprocity between moving features. To put it bluntly: the EU of the Treaty of Maastricht (1993) is not the EU of the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). See Simon Bulmer and Claudio Radaelli, “The Europeanisation of National Policy?”, *Queen’s Papers on Europeanisation* (2004) Queens University Belfast, 1.

EU members.<sup>13</sup> Needless to mention that the current President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelenskyy, is well aware of this. *Second*, at methodological level, in Ukraine as with Central Europe's transition process analysed in this volume, updated "path dependency" imposes itself as the most appropriate and heuristic approach. *Third*, Ukraine has throughout its history always had a pivotal role between Europe and Eurasia, between the "West" and the "East".<sup>14</sup> Milan Kundera's famous idea of a "kidnapped West" formulated back in 1983 brings Central Europe back on the map and takes on particular resonance today in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine: a country – from an historical viewpoint at least the western part of Ukraine – that shares the fate of Central Europe as coined by Kundera: "Culturally in the West, politically in the East and geographically in the center."<sup>15</sup>

The fate of Ukraine has to be viewed in two regional frameworks. *First*, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the post-Soviet space. Felix Jaitner, Tina Olteanu and Tobias Spöri comprehend the Ukraine conflict as a result of post-Soviet crises development, highlighting:

With regard to the concept of intersecting crises, Ukraine is a prototype of post-Soviet crisis-prone development. The dissolution of the Soviet Union leads to a contested nation-building process, which especially evolves around the politicisation of language and contested memories regarding the Soviet Union. During the transformation process, the country suffered from steep economic decline. In contrast to Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan or Russia, the Ukrainian state did not manage to regain autonomy from the Oligarchs. Despite formal democratic procedures, the changing governments rather reinforced forms of corruption, authoritarian governance and did not take sufficient steps to fight increasing social inequality. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine may have developed into a conflict with international involvement. However, we argue that it is rooted in the manifold domestic crisis-phenomena stemming from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transformation process. Peace in Ukraine and the prevention of conflicts in the post-Soviet space

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13 See François Bafail, "Variété des processus d'eupéanisation en Europe centrale et orientale," p. 81.

14 See Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Karl Schlögel, *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018); Alexandra Goujon, *L'Ukraine, de l'indépendance à la guerre* (Paris: Le cavalier bleu, 2021); and Michel Foucher, *Ukraine une guerre coloniale en Europe* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2022).

15 Milan Kundera, *Un Occident kidnappé, ou la tragédie de l'Europe Centrale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021). Quoted following the English translation published as "The Tragedy of Central Europe", *New York Review of Books*, 31 (1984) 7, p. 33.

are only possible if the region's multiple crisis-phenomena are acknowledged and tackled seriously.<sup>16</sup>

*Second*, the recomposition of Central Europe. As Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz acknowledged on August 29, 2022 in a speech delivered at Charles University in Prague: "the center of Europe is moving eastwards."<sup>17</sup> It is worth mentioning here that this idea had been formulated in mid-1980 by Karl Schlögel in an essay appropriately called *The Middle Lies in the East*.<sup>18</sup> The author reassesses modern German history as part of the history of Central and Eastern Europe – at stake is thus not only Central Europe but also Germany.<sup>19</sup> Additionally to the – often conflictual and – specific "community of destiny", the eastward shift of Europe's centre of gravity needs to be duly acknowledged, as Rupnik pinpoints:

As the war redefines political borders and identities, we are being reminded that Lviv used to be Lvov before the second world war and Lemberg before the first world war, and part of Ukraine used to be in central Europe as Kundera understood it. Today, not just Lviv but the whole of Ukraine is leaning westwards, and its nearest west is central Europe. The irony of history is that by including Ukraine, central Europe – once Kundera's "kidnapped west" – is reinventing itself by expanding eastwards.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, geostrategic relevance and power are rapidly seeping from the "old Europe" in favour of countries now bearing the brunt of President Vladimir Putin's aggression.<sup>21</sup>

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- 16 Felix Jaitner, Tina Olteanu and Tobias Spöri, *Crises in The Post-Soviet Space. From the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the conflict in Ukraine* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 262. The concept of "intersecting crisis" refers to three contradictory processes that predominantly shape post-Soviet development: the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the closely intertwined political and economic transformation processes.
  - 17 "Germany's Scholz Backs EU Expansion to Include Western Balkans, as 'Center Of Europe Is Moving Eastwards'", *Radio Free Europe*, August 29, 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/germany-scholz-western-balkans-russia-ukraine-aid/32009033.html> [last accessed August 18, 2023].
  - 18 See Karl Schlögel, *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts: Europa im Übergang* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008). The core essay of the book was published as *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts. Die Deutschen, ihr verlorener Osten und Mitteleuropa* (Berlin: Seidler, 1986).
  - 19 See the overview of the complex relations between Germany and Central Europe in Jacques Rupnik, *The Other Europe*, pp. 63–90.
  - 20 Jacques Rupnik, "War, identity, irony: how Russian aggression put Central Europe back on the map", *The Guardian*, August 25, 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2023/aug/25/war-russian-aggression-central-europe-milan-kundera-east-west> [last accessed August 25, 2023].
  - 21 See "Ukraine War Accelerates Shift of Power in Europe to the East", *The New York Times*, January 26, 2023. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/26/world/europe/eu-nato-power-ukraine-war.html> [last accessed August 21, 2023]; and "The

Indisputably, beyond the myth of Central Europe (see Chapter 5), Central Europe matters again. The famous text written by Czesław Miłosz, the Polish poet, diplomat and Nobel Prize laureate, in the January 1988 issue of the samizdat journal *Tygodnik Mazowsze* deserves to be remembered as it receives a new meaning:

The idea of a federation of countries from the Baltic to the Adriatic existed before the Second World War .... This idea is still alive and has been revived in the notions of Central Europe. I do not know if it is enough that this idea exists at the spiritual level. On the other hand, the enormous intellectual potential that is flourishing within Poland and perhaps in *the whole of Central Europe must be transformed one day into a political force.*<sup>22</sup>

Rupnik made the argument more explicit: after the Central Europe of nostalgia for a historical and cultural identity, after the utopia of neutralism formulated by the dissidents and the pacifists, the time is ripe for a truly political conception of Central Europe.<sup>23</sup>

We should nevertheless recall the focus of the pacifists in the 1980s – essentially the German greens and European Nuclear Disarmament (END) – on two areas where the spillover into politics was obvious and is always up to date: first, the growing concern over the environment; and second the parallel search for alternatives to the Yalta-ordained partition of Europe focusing notably on human rights – the latter voiced in the 1970s within the Helsinki framework of East-West détente. For obvious reasons, the third focus on disarmament as well as the neutralist drift of the German left is today an outdated topic. Let us insist that the “greening” of Central Europe was one of the major developments of the 1980s and is still a major challenge in the 2020s as the region has moved far too slowly in restructuring its economy for an era in which decarbonization and climate resilience are essential.<sup>24</sup>

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war in Ukraine has made eastern Europe stronger,” *The Economist*, February 27, 2023. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/02/27/the-war-in-ukraine-has-made-eastern-europe-stronger> [last accessed August 21, 2023].

22 As quoted by Jacques Rupnik, *The Other Europe. The Rise and Fall of Communism in East-central Europe* (New York: Pantheon, revised edition, 1989), p. 4 – author’s own emphasis.

23 See Jacques Rupnik, *L’Autre Europe. Crise et fin du communisme* (Paris: Odile Jacob, new and augmented edition, 1993), p. 89.

24 See Anna-Katharina Wöbse and Patrick Kupper, *Greening Europe: Environmental Protection in the Long Twentieth Century – A Handbook* (Oldenburg: De Gruyter, 2022).

A new approach remapping Europe – thus not only the Union – matters inasmuch as the fate of Central Europe is not anymore only determined by the two dominant regional powers, Russia and Germany. That was the framework of the 1910s, when Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Robert William Seton-Watson formulated the project of a “New Europe” meant as an alternative to a German-dominated Central Europe.<sup>25</sup> Today, a much more complex scaffold is marked by the de-sovietization of the “western periphery” of the Soviet empire, the transformation of multinational states into nation states, the unification of Germany, the enlargement of the Union, the devastating consequences of neoliberal policies, the omnipresence of illiberal forces and, nowadays, the Ukraine war. Central Europe must thus overcome its ambiguities and find a new role combining the old and the new which characterizes the recomposition of political cultures in Central Europe.

As this volume will further discuss, different concepts of Central Europe, the “East” and “West” and the “core” and “periphery” are newly surfacing. Thus, while past narratives are never dead, new ones emerge and need to be addressed. To sum up with Rupnik’s words:

The rediscovery of Central Europe is more than nostalgia, more than the “invention of a tradition”, in Hobsbawm’s phrase. It is above all an attempt to rethink the predicament of the area beyond official Marxist clichés as well as nationalist stereotypes. It is an attempt to reclaim a world that is lost, a legacy that is fundamentally pluralist, the result of centuries of interaction between different cultural traditions.<sup>26</sup>

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- 25 Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), political activist and philosopher, served as the first president of Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1935. Robert William Seton-Watson, a British political activist and historian, played an active role in encouraging the breakup of Austria-Hungary and the emergence of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia during and after the First World War. See Hugh Seton-Watson and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe. R.W. Seton-Watson and the last years of Austria-Hungary* (London: Methuen, 1981). “New Europe” also refers to the journal created and led by Robert William Seton-Watson: *The New Europe: a weekly review of foreign politics*. Published in London (1916–1920), the *Review* was a platform articulating the cultural right to independent existence of the constituent nations of the Habsburg Empire which notably influenced UK foreign policy after WWI.
- 26 Rupnik, *The Other Europe*, p. 41. Rupnik refers here to Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

*First steps in an Age of Transition*

Ukraine at war has “unexpectedly” thrown Europe into a new era that requires entirely new, albeit still unformulated, thinking about what I call in this volume an “Age of Transition” – see Chapter 9. While some might think we are back to a world order based on spheres of influence, I argue instead that we are facing a totally new situation.<sup>27</sup> At the time of writing, Putin has unexpectedly achieved Russian isolation, driven Ukrainian identity, rearmed Germany, united the EU, revitalized EU-US relations, rejuvenated NATO, paved the way for Finland and Sweden U-turns on NATO<sup>28</sup> and accelerated the green transition. There is no doubt that European economies will significantly change as a result of this, as will our understanding of freedom, democracy and security – the open question is to what extent.

In a world increasingly moving away from democracy and the liberal order, Russia is cold-bloodedly tripping down the road from “sovereign democracy” to authoritarianism and a totalitarian police state.<sup>29</sup> As for Ukraine, its “denazification” is code for Putin’s real aim: antidemocratic regime change.<sup>30</sup> Following a strategy attempting to divide the EU by isolating and bribing “greedy states”, the Russian president has chosen the all-or-nothing strategy of outright war in its various post-modern forms: warfare in Ukraine; cyberwar; hydrocarbon war; and economic war in Europe and the United States. Putin demonstrates that he intends to achieve his objectives, to bring back “White Russia” by any means necessary. As Rupnik pinpoints:

Russia’s war against Ukraine is about postimperial unfinished business and spheres of influence. It is also about real and imagined cultural and political boundaries in Europe, including that old chestnut about what constitutes central and eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup>

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27 Of course, viewed from Central Europe, the past is never dead. Thus, the legacy of conflictual relations with Russia and the Soviet Union matters and should be taken into account beyond the stereotypes. See a critical appraisal in Jacques Rupnik, *The Other Europe*, pp. 43–62.

28 Finland became a NATO member on April 4, 2023. At the time of writing, the parliaments in Turkey and Hungary have yet to ratify Sweden’s bid but are scheduled to do so in autumn 2023. It must be remembered that both countries have been official partners of NATO since 1994.

29 The concept “sovereign democracy” was coined by Vladislav Surkov in 2006 and dominated the political discourse in Russia in 2006–08.

30 See Robert Person and Michael McFaul, “What Putin Fears Most”, *Journal of Democracy*, 33 (2022) 2, pp. 18–27.

We have moved “unpredictably” beyond the point of no return: the security threat is real and Putin’s actions seem to have no limit. How far will he go? How long will the war last? Who will win? Will war bring Russia further toward tyranny and Ukraine closer to democracy? As much open-ended questions as war itself is open-ended.

In February and March 2014, Russia invaded and subsequently illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and invaded and occupied about half of Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region. The reaction of the West was weak: economic sanctions were first enacted, then strengthened and later on extended... with only modest results. This did not affect in the slightest the geopolitical trajectory of Russian foreign policy. Of course, the UN General Assembly insisted on territorial integrity and accordingly adopted a resolution calling upon states not to recognize the changes in the status of Crimea. NATO activated its Readiness Action Plan: air surveillance in the Baltics and along NATO’s eastern flank became more visible and the existing Response Force was enhanced, notably via the creation of a new “spearhead” force of around 5000 troops. All in all, the “international community” put itself in “stand-by” mode with minimal measures that scarcely made an impression on Putin. On March 2, 2014, *The Wall Street Journal*’s headline synthesized: “A Shaken EU Makes No Real Effort to Confront Russia Over Ukraine.” The authors of the article pinpointed:

In the long run, although the particular brand of EU foreign policy, which emphasizes human security, international law, and member-state prerogatives, might not be able to wrest Crimea forcibly from a determined Putin, it will have a stealthy impact on the evolution of politics in Ukraine and beyond.<sup>32</sup>

Change came in 2022. Contrary to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, the return of war has, since 2022, forced the US and Europe to take the threat seriously, show unanimity, enact unprecedented sanctions and to direct significant military support to Ukraine. Finally, Europe seems to be showing that it is capable of commanding the emergency register. The “robust” response of the West has been a surprise to everyone, including Putin.

Yet the question remains open as to whether this newly crafted consensus can last, notably whether the EU will be able to cope with the multiple

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31 Rupnik, “War, identity, irony”.

32 Stacy Meichtry, Harriet Torry and Stephen Fidler, “A Shaken EU Makes No Real Effort to Confront Russia Over Ukraine”, *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2014. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304360704579415462104967706> [last accessed July 31, 2023].

consequences of this U-turn for its policies of political cohesion, defence and energy autonomy. Further, we may well ask how the EU will counter the cyclical emotional economy: today's euphoria (supporting sanctions and welcoming refugees) may well become tomorrow's resentment. Furthermore, individual countries' interests and incomplete or incoherent strategies, notably in the fiscal area, might well undermine the current broader unity and policy on Russia.

After a year of war, the West is Ukraine's advocate, its refuge, its arsenal and its banker, albeit that the Ukrainian counteroffensive launched in June 2023 is slow and is suffering major damage: at the time of writing there is no dramatic breach of Russian lines and the first signs of impatience and "donor fatigue" are appearing in the West<sup>33</sup>. Also worryingly, it is highly uncertain that NATO will be able to create a rapid reaction force of at least 300,000 well-trained troops – as of summer 2023, only some 30,000 soldiers were pre-positioned on the eastern flank. While a significant upgrade is needed, the question remains open: "whether European allies are more serious now, in regard to the investments needed to develop more capable and integrated land forces, than they were after Ukraine was first invaded in 2014."<sup>34</sup> To state the obvious, it is high time for a significant reshape of Europe's security architecture and an envisioning of different ways of strengthening the defence of the entire Baltic and Nordic region, Central Europe and the Western Balkans.

Russia's war in Ukraine has of course had noteworthy effects on political affairs in the Balkan region that must be carefully scrutinized.<sup>35</sup> In 2022, on the one hand, Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina were granted the status of EU candidate countries; while, on the other, the membership negotiation process began with Albania and North Macedonia. This should not distract from the prospect of accession to the Union having considerably lost credibility. While the EU has become more assertive in insisting that European integration is incompatible with preserving close ties to Russia, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić continues his balancing strategy between the West and Russia – Kosovo of course defining the

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33 See Rémy Ourdan, "L'Ukraine. À l'épreuve du temps", *Le Monde*, October 1–2, 2023, p. 22–23.

34 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Future of NATO's European Land Forces. Plan, Challenges Prospects* (London: IISS, 2023), p. 5.

35 On Russia's implication in the Western Balkans and in wider Europe until the mid 2010s, see Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

limit of Serbian support for Russia. Both Vučić and the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik have invested so much in pro-Russian sentiment that they are unable to wean themselves off this PR dependency. As Maxim Samorukov concludes:

Without the assistance of local actors, Russian influence in the Western Balkans would disappear overnight. But the opposite is also true. As long as local politicians can capitalize on invoking Moscow's long shadow, Russia will remain a salient part of the Balkan landscape.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, neither sanctions nor other formal commitments matter: both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (specifically, Republika Srpska) are not fully aligning their foreign and security policies with those of the EU.

Nevertheless, Russia's overall influence, the field of economic cooperation included, was not strong enough to have serious influence in the Western Balkans and is in decline.<sup>37</sup> Samorukov identifies the oversaturation of Russia-Balkan relations: "Russian influence in the Balkans is increasingly confined to the headlines of propagandist media: both Russian and Balkan."<sup>38</sup> And that narrative must be curbed. Contrary to what many argue, Belgrade and Moscow's partnership is not due to some deep historical bond or Slavic brotherhood. As Ivana Stradner pinpoints, their partnership is "strategic and transactional. They support each other only to the extent that it serves their separate agendas."<sup>39</sup>

All in all, despite the heated rhetoric, Russia is fast losing influence in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, instability is shaking Kosovo, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, acutely. This strengthens the ongoing de-democratization process as well as the dramatic increase of the "brain drain". Nevertheless, Western Balkan countries – including their illiberal actors – will continue to integrate, albeit at different speeds, the sphere of influence of Central Europe.

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36 Maxim Samorukov, *Surviving the War: Russia-Western Balkan Ties After the Invasion of Ukraine* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), p. 18.

37 A viewpoint also shared by Andrey Makarychev, "Incomplete hegemonies, hybrid neighbours: Identity games and policy tools in Eastern Partnership countries" (Brussels: CEPS Working Document 2018/02, February 2018), pp. 10–12. See also Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*. On Russian attempts to influence Western democracies, see Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

38 Samorukov, *Surviving the War*, p. 18.

39 Ivana Stradner, "Russia's Failed War Has Created an Opening in the Balkans", *Foreign Policy*, February 3, 2023. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/03/russia-serbia-ukraine-war-kosovo-vucic-putin-balkans/> [last accessed July 31, 2023].

This corresponds to the framework presented in this volume and also legitimizes an understanding of the present situation against the background of the fate of post-Wall transformation processes. This volume thus proposes a journey in the land of transition based on a chronological sequencing: while Part One reviews the 1989–2008 period, the second focuses on 2009–2020 and the third explores what might come after.

Methodologically, conceptual frameworks and theories for analysing the processes of European construction are numerous and abundant. They are closely linked to empirical developments in European integration or in regional integration more generally.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, first the constitutional crisis (2005) and then the economic and financial crisis (2008) and, second the – at the time of writing, ongoing – systemic crisis challenge the conceptual frameworks and theories which have previously been developed. Beyond the critic of conceptual frameworks belonging to the past, I take here the risk of engaging in new approaches.

### *On the road*

Thirty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a highly conflictual geopolitical context, this volume is conceived as an essay focusing on Central Europe *and* the Western Balkans in an integrated approach attempting to provide evidence on the main trends and common features, review the variety of interacting trajectories and offer new insights. Therefore, it does not deal with individual countries and neither does it consider disjointedly the partly overlapping post-Yugoslav space, the Balkans *and* Central and Eastern Europe (see Box 1: Space and names).<sup>41</sup>

The aim is to shed new light on some key issues such as transition, integration, democratization, the East-West divide and the core-periphery gap. The intent is also to highlight systemic change, to acknowledge the hybridization of structural factors and individual ones, to identify the oscillation between formality *and* informality, consolidation *and* de-consolidation, democratization *and* de-democratization. The term “and” – intro-

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40 See the excellent overview provided by Saurugger, *Théories et concepts de l'intégration européenne*.

41 Exploring further the common regional denominators, see Adam Bence Balazs and Christina Griessler (Eds), *The Visegrad Four and the Western Balkans. Framing Regional Identities* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020).