

Putin's Invasion of Ukraine and the Implications for the Western Balkans

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We, the undersigned civil society and political actors from the Western Balkans and the wider Europe are following Putin's invasion of Ukraine with deep sadness and anger.

The attack against a peaceful and independent nation was preceded by a campaign aimed at denying Ukraine's statehood, history, and national identity. We strongly condemn Putin's unprecedented and unprovoked invasion during which we have witnessed Russian forces deliberately attacking civilians and journalists, targeting residential areas and using proscribed weapons and military tactics.

The gravity of Putin's aggression is not only a tragedy for Ukraine. It is a serious threat to peace and stability around the world – including the Western Balkans. During the 90s, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo were attacked by Milošević's Serbia under a pretext similar to what we see today in Ukraine.

The attempts to deny countries' history, culture, and statehood – so central to the wars of the 1990's – are still present in the Western Balkans. Today, the region is exposed to growing malign foreign influences. The leader of Bosnia's entity Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, is rare amongst political leaders in Europe in failing to condemn the Russian invasion. The position of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has changed only in response to pressure from the EU, US, and other Western nations. The far-right movements and pro-Russian political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia – openly support Putin's policies. Choosing to stay pragmatically neutral towards blatant Russian violations of international law is in stark contrast to the fundamental EU values. Such positions are a clear "red flag" for peace and stability in the Western Balkans.

We call on the European Union, NATO, and their allies not to neglect developments in the Western Balkans. They must not allow themselves to underestimate those aligned with Putin's Russia as it commits its war crimes in Ukraine. The European Union in particular should seize the moment, and make the EU perspective for the Western Balkans concrete and tangible. Introducing immediate steps towards delivering on its promises, including granting visa-liberalization for Kosovo, is a good place to start. We firmly believe that democracy and freedom in the Western Balkans can only be protected and promoted in a strong coalition between the EU and the local democratic forces, that are now standing up in support for Ukraine against Putin's aggression.

Russian army must immediately end its criminal intervention and withdraw from Ukraine without delay as this invasion is a stain on humanity. Vladimir Putin and his accomplices are demonstrating the worst of human nature.

Human Rights, State Sovereignty, Rule of Law, and Freedom of Expression are not just words on paper and should consistently be protected and implemented on the ground. Many in the Western Balkans have suffered in the pursuit of these precious ideals and are heartbroken to see them being attacked with such brutality in Ukraine today. As civil society and political actors, we stand with our colleagues and friends in Ukraine at this moment of terrible peril.

We commit ourselves to mobilize all our resources in the Western Balkans and the wider Europe to help and support refugees from Ukraine and demonstrate solidarity with all victims of the war.

SIGNATORIES (1 / 3)

1. Adnan Ćerimagić, Senior Analyst, European Stability Initiative (ESI)
 2. Adnan Mahmutović, PhD, Stockholm University
 3. Adriatik Kelmendi, CEO and Chairman, Klan Kosova
 4. Dr. Alexander Christiani, retired Ambassador
 5. Almasa Bečić, President / Executive Director, Omladinski Pokret Revolt / Youth Movement Revolt
 6. Amina Duraković, Researcher, Forum za saradnju i istraživanja
 7. Ammar Grabić, Project Officer, Youth resource center (ORC) Tuzla
 8. András Inotai, Professor Emeritus, Institut für Weltwirtschaft, Ungarische Akademie der Wissenschaft
 9. Anto Janković, President, Center for Economic Prosperity and Freedom – CEPS
 10. Arjeta Maka, Project Coordinator, NGO Gruaja Hyjnore
 11. Armin Klimenta, Student, Diplomatic Academy of Vienna
 12. Astrit Istrefi, Executive Director, The Balkan Forum
 13. Aulone Memeti, Researcher
 14. Avdyl Gashi, Director, Global Shapers Community Prishtina
 15. Avni Dervishi, Head of the Global Department, Diaspora Power – Europe – Sweden
 16. Azra Berbić, Project Program Coordinator, Centar za mlade KVART Prijedor
 17. Azra Zornić, citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina
 18. Balazs Trencsenyi, Professor, Central European University
 19. Bert Preiss, Lecturer, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna
 20. Blendi Sheremeti, Project Assistant, Kosovar Youth Council (KYC)
 21. Blina Salihi, Project Coordinator, Kosovar Youth Council (KYC)
 22. Boris Mijatovic, Member of Parliament, German Bundestag
 23. Branimir Janković, Assistant Professor, University of Zagreb
 24. Burim Ejupi, Executive Director, Institute for Development Policy – INDEP
 25. Carna Brkovic, Lecturer, Georg–August–Universität Göttingen
 26. Christian Hagemann, Deputy Director, Southeast Europe Association
 27. Christian Miess, Member of the Board, Citizens for Europe
 28. Christophe Solioz, Co–ordinator, MAP – nomad think thank
 29. David Pettigrew, Professor, Southern Connecticut State University
 30. Dion van den Berg, Senior policy Advisor, PAX
 31. Donarta Fetahu, Kosovar Youth Council (KYC) Volunteer
 32. Dorothea Indru
 33. Dzevad Kuric, Editor-in-chief, Nasa Bosna
 34. Ed Vulliamy, Senior International Correspondent, Former Guardian / Observer
 35. Edina Becirevic, Professor of Security Studies, University of Sarajevo
 36. Emir Ramic, Director, Institute for Research of Genocide Canada
 37. Fatbardhë Salihu, Executive Director, NGL Kosovo initiative for the blind
 38. Florian Bieber, Professor, University of Graz
 39. Françeska Muço, Secretary–General, Young Professionals Network
 40. Friedrich Peloschek
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SIGNATORIES (2 / 3)

41. Fumiko U, teaching staff, University in Japan
 42. Genc Broqi, Programs Manager, Roma Versitas Kosovo
 43. Gorjan Jovanovski
 44. Gudrun Steinacker, Vice-president, Southeast Europe Association
 45. Halil Kaja, Director, CBDC
 46. Hekuran Muja, Project Assistant, Kosovar Youth Council (KYC)
 47. Heleen Touquet, Chair in European Values, University of Antwerp
 48. Helga Kerschbaum, UN Vienna chair, Committee on Peace
 49. Hendrik Geiling, PhD Student, Philipps-University of Marburg
 50. Ivana Dukic
 51. Jasmin Mujanović
 52. Jasminko Halilovic, Managing Director, War Childhood Museum
 53. Johanna Deimel, Member of the Board, Southeast Europe Association (SOG)
 54. Kamal Karim, Researcher
 55. Karola Kunkel, Executive Manager, Friedenskreis Halle e.V.
 56. Katharina Sigwald
 57. Dr. Kornelija Ajlec, Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts, Department of History, University of Ljubljana
 58. Kurt Bassuener, Senior Associate, Democratization Policy Council
 59. Lanc Erwin, Honorary President, Federal Minister of Austria 1956 – 1983, International Institute for Peace
 60. Lukas Wank, Deputy Director, ASPR
 61. Lura Juniku
 62. Maida Zagorac, Mirovna Aktivistica
 63. Marigona Shabiu, Executive Director, Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Kosovo (YIHR KS)
 64. Marijan Pavlovic
 65. Marjan Verplancke, Coordinator Education and Training, Hannah Arendt Institute
 66. Marnix Beyen, Historian, Universiteit Antwerpen
 67. Mehmed Proho, President, Student Union “Džemal Bijedić” – University of Mostar
 68. Milosh Dimitrovski, President, Association IZVOR Kratovo
 69. Miralem Tursinović, Director, Omladinski resursni centar (ORC) Tuzla
 70. Dr. Nderim Juniku
 71. Dr. Nicolas Moll, Co-founder and Partner, Crossborder factory
 72. Dr. Norbert Griesmayer, Inst. f. Germanistik d. – retired, Universität Wien
 73. Patrick Hoemke, Managing Director, Foundation Schüler Helfen Leben (SHL)
 74. Peter J. Lippman, Human Rights Activist; Author of Surviving the Peace; The Struggle for Postwar Recovery in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Working Group for Bosnia-Herzegovina, USA
 75. Radina Vučetić, Associate Professor, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade
 76. Randall Puljek-Shank, Director, Peace Academy
 77. Regjë Mulaj, Executive Director, NGO “VISION 02”
 78. Romeo Franz, Member of European Parliament
 79. Sabahudin Mujkić, Project Manager, Sanchild Foundation
 80. Sabine Rutar, Senior Research Associate / Editor-in-Chief, Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies
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SIGNATORIES (3 / 3)

81. Mr. Sabit Jakupović, Member of Committee, Bosnia UK Network
 82. Samir Agić, Executive Director, Centar Za Obrazovanje i Druženje, Jajce
 83. Sanije Grajčević, Executive Director, Aureola
 84. Satko Mujagic, Member and former detainee of Omarska and Manjaca camps in 1992, Association of former camp prisoners 'Kozarac' – Bosnia and Herzegovina
 85. Sofija Todorovic, Programme Director, Youth Initiative for Human Rights – Serbia
 86. Srđan Šušnica
 87. Srgjan Vidoeski, Master Student, Uppsala University
 88. Štefica Galić, Editor-in-chief of the tacno.net portal, Tacno.net
 89. Stephanie Fenkart, Director, International Institute for Peace (IIP, Vienna)
 90. Stevo Đurašković, Assistant professor, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia
 91. Susanne Jalka, Konfliktkultur Trainer
 92. Thomas Schad, Project coordinator, Balkanbiro e.V.
 93. Tineke Strik, Member of European Parliament
 94. Vahidin Preljević, University Professor, Chairholder of the Chair of German Literature and Cultural Studies, Filozofski fakultet Univerziteta u Sarajevu
 95. Valery Perry, Senior Associate, Democratization Policy Council
 96. Vjeran Pavlaković, Associate Professor, Department of Cultural Studies, University of Rijeka
 97. Xhabir Memedi Deralla, President, CIVIL – Center for Freedom
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