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Länderbericht

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Serbia: Political and Social Impacts One Year After the Start of Russia's War of Aggression Against Ukraine

One Year of the Ukraine War in Serbia - Turning the Tide the Serbian Way?

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In many commentaries dealing with Serbia's handling of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine over the past twelve months, many Western observers saw a simple continuation of pro-Russian policies. This analysis is too simplistic and does not do justice to the complex situation in Serbia. A classification.

Official reactions¹

The Serbian government voted to condemn Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in five votes at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the Council of Europe. In this context, supporting Russia's exclusion from the UN Human Rights Council was particularly important. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, made it explicitly clear once again on the side-lines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2023 that both the Donbas and Crimea are integral parts of Ukraine for Serbia. The Government and the President regularly reiterate that they support and respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This argument is of great importance for Serbia, as Belgrade also claims this for itself with regard to Kosovo.

¹ On 27 February, Kosovo and Serbia issued a declaration on normalisation under EU mediation. For editorial reasons, this development is not yet part of this report.

No sanctions

Serbia has not joined any of the sanctions packages adopted by the European Union so far, which has led to a great deal of criticism in Brussels and some other member state capitals. The Serbian Government has so far insisted on its position that the introduction of sanctions against Russia, Russian companies or citizens would currently run against the country's fundamental interests. Among other things, Belgrade refers here to its heavy dependence on Russian energy supplies. In 2008, the Government led by the Democratic Party sold majority shares in the only state-owned oil refinery, NIS, to the Russian company GAZPROM. Serbia imports 90% of its natural gas from Russia, although natural gas accounts for only 10% of the energy mix in Serbia. With great support, especially from the USA and also the EU, Belgrade is trying to find solutions to these challenges.

Talks are underway with Norway to restructure the deficit-ridden state electricity company Elektroprivreda Srbija (EPS), among other things, and to make the energy supply more efficient. A new contract on future gas supplies has been signed with Azerbaijan, and work is underway with Bulgaria on an interconnector partly financed by the EU. With this, Serbia should be able to obtain natural gas via the Black Sea ports in Bulgaria in the future. In addition, in the wake of the energy crisis, efforts are being made to interconnect the electricity grids in the Western Balkans more closely. These are all important steps towards becoming less dependent on Russian energy supplies and diversifying sources.

What makes society tick?

In dealing with the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, Serbia is experiencing a peculiar encounter with its own recent history. In large parts of the population, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine awakens memories of the still present experiences of war, sanctions and traumas that Serbian society continues to carry with it today. Many issues, such as the Kosovo war and the NATO intervention in 1999, have not been dealt with.

On the day of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, large sections of the influential tabloid press in Belgrade headlined that Ukraine had attacked Russia.

For months after that, the Russian narrative of a "special operation" continued to be conveyed in many pro-government media outlets. Large parts of the Serbian media landscape, regularly publish false or distorted information on the course of the war in Ukraine with a bias towards the pro-Russian narrative. On the TV channel "HappyTV", the programme "Aktuelnosti" discusses the military-tactical situation in Ukraine at prime time and with high coverage. This is clearly dominated by pro-Russian points of view.

All mainstream survey institutes certify that over 80 % of citizens in Serbia reject any sanctions against Russia. However, this percentage drops to 60 % in case the EU threatens Serbia with political or economic sanctions.

Only 41% believe that the current Serbian Government will not impose sanctions, 25% expect sanctions to be adopted and 33% are undecided. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is repeatedly linked to the NATO intervention in 1999. The criticism is that "the West" had already broken international law during the NATO intervention at that time, as the intervention took place without a corresponding mandate from the United Nations. This was not possible at the time because Russia and China would not have agreed to a mandate in the UN Security Council. In the current situation, a large part of Serbian society cannot understand why there is so much outrage in the "West" when Russia also breaks international law. Moreover, people are sensitive to the fact that top politicians in Berlin or Brussels speak of the first major war on European soil since the Second World War. In this context, too, "the West" is accused of double standards, both in discussions in the bar and with official representatives. So there is no resentment among the Serbian population against Ukraine, but only against NATO and the USA. Polls conducted by the Demostat Institute last summer also made it clear that love for Russia is not as strong as antipathy towards the USA and NATO. In the survey, a total of 66 % of respondents saw NATO as the main culprit for the Ukraine war. Only 10 % of respondents see Russia as the cause of the war. Ukraine, on the other hand, is seen either as a victim of aggression or as a pawn of great powers.

The battle of the graffiti sprayers

For many months now, a cat-and-mouse game has been going on between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian representatives all over Belgrade. Almost daily, graffiti pictures are painted on house fronts, which are sprayed over or denigrated by the opposing side at the next opportunity.

The best-known example of this is a mural of one of the best-known Ukrainian writers, Lesja Ukrajinka, which was painted by Russian artists in the centre of Belgrade. A short time later, it was sprayed over with the Russian Z symbol and later painted over again in the blue and yellow colours of Ukraine. A mural of Vladimir Putin was also completely sprayed over at least four times.

Aggressive mood and disinformation

Besides the remarkably strong presence of pro-Russian interpretations about the course of the war, which can be found mainly in part of the tabloid media, there are also cases of fake news from the other political side. A lot of attention was paid to a news item in a pro-Russian Telegram group on 21 November 2022 about the alleged establishment of a representative office of the Russian paramilitary organisation Wagner in Belgrade on 21 November 2022.

This news was spread by the anti-government activist and US journalist with Serbian roots Ivana Stradner as a message on Twitter. Shortly afterwards, the Belgrade government-critical newspaper Danas reported on the founding of a Wagner representative office. Western media, including the WELT, picked up on this. At the beginning of the year, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić strongly denied these allegations. On this occasion, he made it unmistakably clear that participation in combat operations abroad is a criminal offence according to Serbian law.

Prospects

Should the Serbian President and Government decide to join the EU sanctions, Serbian society would experience a turning point. This would result in an intensive social discussion about Serbia's role in Europe and its relationship with Russia.

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