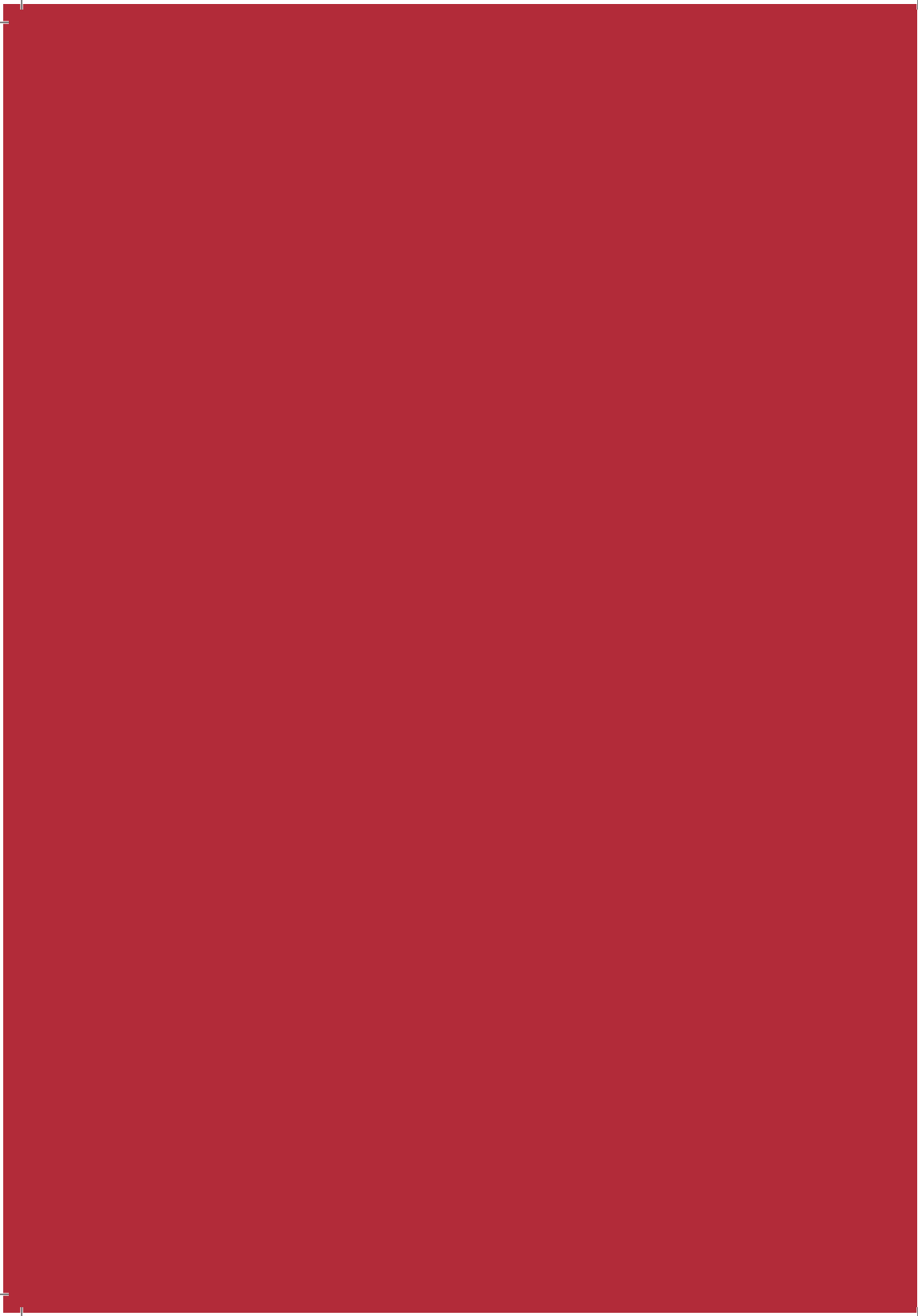


Prepared by Milena Berić and Srđan Hercigonja



Research with proposals and recommendations for the involvement and cooperation of civil society organisations regarding activities in response to the aggression against Ukraine



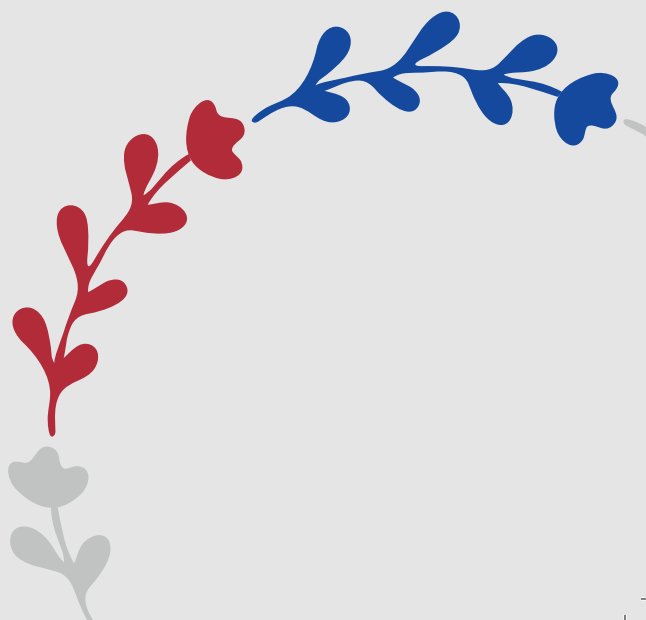


LIBERTE,  
EGALITE,  
SOLIDARITE!



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## IN SITU

Two years have passed since the all-out Russian invasion of Ukraine and a whole decade since the annexation of Crimea. The challenges that are a direct consequence of this unjustified aggression are felt in different ways throughout Europe, and its impact on the European political order, security architecture and economy, and above all on human lives, is enormous.

The region of the Western Balkan, acutely prone to instability and insufficiently consolidated governance structures, has felt the full effect of this negative impact. A full quarter of a century has passed since the last in a series of wars that tore the region apart during the nineteen nineties but it still does not possess neither a political formula nor the necessary minimum of will and maturity to face the past, accept responsibility for crimes and build reconciliation and trust between close, neighbouring nations and states. The Western Balkans exist in a state of perpetual turmoil, handicapped by constant inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts, weak institutions and imperfect democratic systems in which ethno-nationalism persists and continues to intensify as the most powerful political concept, often promoted as the highest or even the only social value.

All of these elements make the region of the Western Balkans inherently unstable and susceptible to the influence and interference of external actors. Encouraged by its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has sought to take advantage of the region's vulnerability, creating additional trouble and conflicts in this proverbially troubled part of Europe<sup>1</sup>.

Russia's strategic interest lies in preventing positive trends or long-term stable solutions in the form of democratisation and liberalisation of society and the economy, strengthening of human and political rights, reinforcing of institutions and the rule of law, reduction of corruption and, in connection with this, connecting the region to Western economic, political and defence alliances and arrangements. The real interest of official Moscow in the region of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://atlantskainicijativa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/RAT-U-UKRAJINI-I-ZAPADNI-BALKAN.pdf>

the Western Balkans is the constant building of tensions, the exploitation of existing, frozen conflicts and the fuelling of new territorial, border and ethnic disputes in which Moscow will retain a major influence.

Using existing linguistic, cultural and religious ties, Russia has strongly positioned its media, cultural, religious and intelligence presence and influence in the Western Balkans. Russian and pro-Russian media such as Sputnik, RT, TV Happy, Geopolitika, Pravda, in4S and others have been operating in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2012 and have successfully worked to strengthen anti-democratic and anti-Western narratives, while turning some local political actors into their spokesmen and puppets.

After many years dedicated to the creation of a favourable cultural and informative climate, Moscow has also shown its determination to carry out subversive and revolutionary activities in the Balkans that undermine the democratic progress of these countries and their accession to NATO and the EU, or that disrupt democratic and electoral processes or hinder the implementation of election results<sup>2</sup>.

However, we must also take the objective limitations of this influence into account, together with the fact that the future of the region is undoubtedly in the EU. The Western Balkans, at least on paper, is committed to joining the European Union, but the slow and lengthy integration process has raised criticism on all sides. This deadlock in accession has also raised fears in the international community of the increasingly malign influence of other external powers.

Although Serbia has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), it has at the same time consistently resisted all EU calls to join other European countries in imposing sanctions on

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<sup>2</sup> On the importance and significance of the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to integration such as the EU and NATO, especially from the security aspect, see in detail in: Kico, A. (2021), Security and economic aspects of the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Euro-Atlantic integration: Proceedings Security and Society, Banja Luka: CKM Mostar, Union College in Mostar, European Defence Centre for Scientific, Political, Economic, Social, Security, Sociological and Criminological Research, Banja Luka, p. 119.

Russia. The mutual interest of the two countries is reflected in the fact that Russia uses Serbia as a foothold to maintain its presence in the Western Balkans, while Serbia has in return received Russia's veto on the 2015 British proposal for a resolution on the genocide in Srebrenica in the United Nations Security Council.

Finally, regarding the views of the Serbian public, support for Russia is quite high. Surveys show that 51% of Serbs believe that relations with Russia are very good, 48% do not want any relations with NATO, while 50 percent of respondents support EU membership<sup>3</sup>.

The propaganda of official Moscow has found particularly fertile ground in Serbia, primarily due to pre-existing pro-Russian sentiments, which especially started to strengthen after the declaration of Kosovo's independence. The pro-Russian narrative has been openly promoted in pro-government tabloids and media for years. Maintaining this narrative harmonises with the needs of the political authorities in Serbia: in their attitude towards the West, they emphasise the objective possibility of "turning to Russia" as a realistic alternative to European integration<sup>4</sup>; in turn, a blind eye is often turned to this same government when it systematically captures state institutions and undermines the rule of law and the level of democracy in society. The pro-government media, which completely dominate Serbian society, have continued to promote the pro-Russian agenda even after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is they who have created public opinion in which, according to a survey at the end of 2022, only 12% of Serbian citizens believe that Russia is most responsible for the outbreak of war in Ukraine, as opposed to 32% who attribute that responsibility to NATO, and 29% who believe that the United States of America is most responsible for the war. It is interesting that in the same survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 9% of respondents believe that Ukraine is most responsible for the war<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> International Republican Institute. "Regional survey of the Western Balkans in 2022 | January - February 2022.

<sup>4</sup> V. Vuksanovic, S. Cvijic, and M. Samorukov, "Beyond Sputnik and RT: How Does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?" Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (blog), December 2022, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/beyond-sputnik-and-rt-how-does-russian-soft-power-in-serbia-really-work/>

<sup>5</sup> The research was conducted under the Western Balkans Security Barometer project. More about the research results: V. Vuksanovic, S. Cvijic, and M. Samorukov, Beyond Sputnik and RT: How Does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (blog), December 2022, same link



Regardless of the outcome of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the fact is that for now the Western Balkans, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, remain key Russian levers for the destabilisation of the region, which adversely affects the interests of NATO and the EU in the region. Unfortunately, this will remain the case until Western Balkan societies are democratised and the influence of Russia, anti-liberal ideologies, ethno-exclusivist narratives, nationalist and religious radicalism and intolerance are suppressed, or at least reduced to an acceptable level. As in the case of Ukraine, there are two central points that must gradually be addressed to prevent the destructive influence of Russia in the Western Balkans or prevent the complete stagnation of Serbia's EU accession process and the potential long-term isolation of the region. They are:

1. Democratisation and institution building;
2. Achieving social, economic and technological progress and integrating into the EU as quickly as possible.

Civil society organisations in Serbia and other countries of the region should energetically, consistently and in solidarity commit to these points to form a joint response to the unilateral Russian aggression against Ukraine, whose real face is a threat to democracy and all its basic values.

## OBJECTIVES

The aim of this publication is to respond to the need to harmonise the public interest with the policies advocated by civil society against the extremely sensitive position of Serbia in relation to the war in Ukraine and the dominant Russian influence as well as all related mechanisms of so-called soft power that directly conflict with the actions and principles of most organisations in this sector. Its goal is also to strengthen the capacity of local civil society organisations in the implementation of various projects and activities aimed at the impact of the war in Ukraine on the citizens of Serbia and the entire Western Balkans. Furthermore, the project emphasises a practical

bottom-up approach to strengthening civil sector capacity and the need to share experience and methodologies that have proven to be effective in the field, successfully raising awareness of the importance of active, timely and coordinated action.

This publication also aims to present proposals and recommendations for the development of cooperation between civil society organisations in Serbia and Ukraine. The Russian Federation's all-out invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, caused political, social and economic upheavals throughout Europe, including Serbia.

The analysis of reactions, as well as possible models of cooperation between civil society organisations of Serbia and Ukraine, is approached through the Republic of Serbia's strategic political commitment to membership of the European Union, but also in the spirit of Article 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which defines the state as belonging to (or respecting) European values and principles. Due to the complexity of the context in which civil society organisations operate in Serbia, especially in connection with the Ukrainian issue, it is clear to us that at this moment proposals and recommendations cannot be final, and that they will change in accordance with the further dynamics of the war, but also in accordance with changes regarding the European integration of Serbia. We therefore hope that this publication will serve above all as an inspiration for new ideas that can contribute to the further development of cooperation between civil society organisations in Serbia and Ukraine.

## **WHAT CAN SERBIAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS 'OFFER'?**

Civil society organisations operating in Serbia are in an extremely disadvantageous environment, especially with the lack of medium- and long-term financial sustainability causing difficulties in planning their activities. In addition, relations between civil society organisations and the state are at an extremely low level. This is primarily the case for non-governmental organisations that deal

with human rights, democracy and various types of public policy and those that, due to the nature of their work, are critical of the authorities. The government in Serbia is hostile to critically oriented, independent non-governmental organisations, which results, among other things, in exclusion from the decision-making process and their marginalisation in political and social processes in the country. In certain areas of public policy, non-governmental organisations have greater expertise than the responsible institutions, so their role towards the executive and legislative authorities should not be limited to the corrective, since in certain areas they have superior knowledge and expertise. In the context of a captured state, some civil society organisations even assume the role of institutions when the latter are not capable of the tasks they perform.

The historical development of the non-governmental sector in Serbia in the last thirty years is the result of several processes, the most salient of which are the anti-war character of the first major non-governmental organisations formed during the regime of Slobodan Milošević, the focus on the democratisation of society and the state after a decade of autocratic rule, the focus on human rights in the context of transition to a capitalist economy and the country's European integration (political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights). This context of historical development directly indicates the areas in which civil society organisations in Serbia can make their greatest contribution in relation to the consequences of the war in Ukraine, where public advocacy policy can provide the strongest results and the areas in which effective partnerships with civil society organisations in Ukraine can be established. These areas are: dealing with the consequences of war(s) and war crimes, transitional justice, good governance, democracy and human rights and, finally, European integration.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In preparing this publication, the research was conducted which included:

- Analysis of the engagement and work of civil society organisations in connection with the various consequences of the comprehensive Russian invasion of Ukraine;

- Analysis of the position and needs of Ukrainian refugees in Serbia;
- Three focus groups whose participants were thirty representatives of civil society organisations in Serbia;
- Interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, cultural workers, artists;
- An online survey completed by forty-eight representatives of civil society organisations.

The findings, recommendations and suggestions reflect the results of research in which more than forty representatives of civil society organisations, cultural workers and artists shared their views and opinions on the three main groups of research questions that were asked:

1. How much does the non-governmental sector deal with Ukraine, the Ukrainian issue and assistance to vulnerable Ukrainian citizens? How much and to what extent does it have an advocacy effect? What are we doing as civil society organisations in this regard?
2. Has there been any shift in official policy since the beginning of the attack on Ukraine, and has the non-governmental sector influenced it and how? Would the opening of funds focused on Ukraine raise interest in that issue among non-governmental organisations?
3. Do you think that now, because of the war between Israel and Hamas, there is a noticeable absence of Ukraine in public speech? Will the crisis in the Middle East affect policies concerning Ukraine and reduce the activities of NGOs? Will this result in reduced civil society interest in Ukraine?

## ANALYSIS

The online questionnaire was sent to dozens of civil society organisations dealing with different topics and based in various parts of Serbia, including smaller towns. Forty-eight representatives of civil society organisations responded to our short e-mail questionnaire. The first question concerned the

issue of whether the organisations through their programmes or projects deal at all with the issue of Russian aggression against Ukraine, providing help to Ukrainian citizens or other activities related to the war in Ukraine.

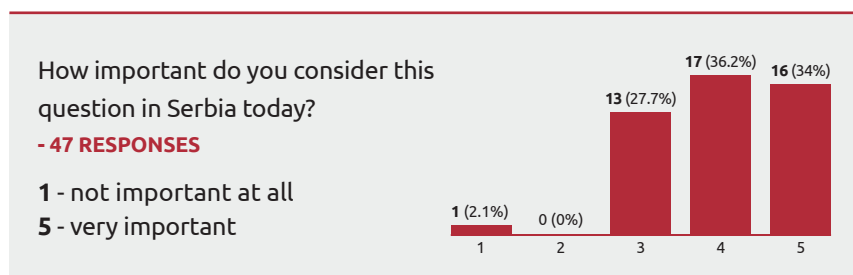


As the diagram shows, most organisations answered yes to this question, but it is important to note that it refers to dealing directly and indirectly with the consequences of the war in Ukraine. Certain organisations that deal with these topics have opened new and special programmes and projects, or strengthened existing ones, and some of them have devoted a large part of their regular activities to dealing with the war and its consequences. They include media associations and organisations, such as the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina, which has organised several panels on the war in Ukraine in which panellists from Ukraine also participated.

Some organisations, such as CRTA, contacted partners in Ukraine with whom they normally cooperate. CRTA cooperates with Ukrainian partners from OPO-RA, which also monitors elections and fights disinformation. This cooperation aims to exchange experience and positive practices. Similarly, organisations tackling transitional justice are in contact with organisations in Ukraine dealing with similar topics. Thus, the Fund for Humanitarian Law is in contact with partners from Ukraine with the aim of exchanging experience on documenting crimes in order to initiate mechanisms of transitional justice. Human rights organisations dealing with complex issues such as the right to asylum, assistance to victims of human trafficking, etc. continued to provide direct assistance to vulnerable persons from Ukraine (these organisations include, among others, the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights and the Atina UG centre for the fight against human trafficking and all forms of violence against women).

For those organisations that normally deal with international politics and relations, and European integration, such as the Centre for European Policies and the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, their research has focused directly on the course and consequences of the war in Ukraine, including its consequences on the European integration of the Western Balkans. This issue has become one of the most important topics of their research.

There are a large number of organisations that, due to lack of human and financial resources, have not launched their own programmes and projects to deal with the consequences of the war in Ukraine, but did so indirectly, through cooperation with organisations based in Serbia that direct a large part of their activities towards these issues. Thus, many associations established cooperation with organisations such as the KROKODIL Association or Save the Children.



Whether they deal with the consequences of the war in Ukraine or not, the majority of respondents believe that the war and its consequences are a very important issue in Serbia. When asked whether the issue of the war is important, the absolute majority of respondents (33 out of 48) stated that on a scale from 'not important at all' to 'very important' this issue is 'important' or 'very important' and that it should be dealt with accordingly. It seems that this attitude stems from adherence to the values of civil society organisations that are currently under attack in Ukraine, the values of democracy, human rights and peace. Even though the organisations are not able to independently implement activities that would deal with the consequences of the war in Ukraine, they believe that due to the principle of solidarity in support of the vulnerable groups, this issue is among the most important ones in Serbia today.

Participants of the three focus groups insisted on the necessity of dealing with the consequences of the war in Ukraine. They emphasise three large groups of reasons for this. The first reason is the expression of solidarity towards vulnerable people (but also towards a state that is the victim of unprovoked aggression by a neighbouring state) Such responses can be interpreted through the prism of striving to respect universal principles such as international law, norms and rules of global society, human rights etc. When these principles and norms are threatened, civil society organisations need to react as energetically as they can. However, it is clear to almost all participants of the focus group that their possibilities in terms of solving the biggest issues are limited, both due to the fact that Serbia is not a significant factor in the process of solving large conflicts whose consequences have practically global dimensions, such as those in Ukraine and Israel/Gaza, but also due to the limited resources available to Serbian civil society organisations in general.

It is clear to participants of the focus groups that civil society organisations in Serbia cannot deal with the causes of the war, but only (and only partially) with its consequences. The context in which the organisations operate is clearly recognized, and most participants correctly conclude that “we are not actually dealing with Ukraine so much as with Russia, because Russia is the topic imposed by the media and the public”.

The participants rightly note that with the beginning of the war in Ukraine, a new ‘front’ has also opened in Serbia, which civil society organisations should deal with. This is an intensified disinformation campaign and the spread of pro-Russian narratives not only about the war in Ukraine, but also about the European Union and the West as such. Those narratives were followed by campaigns against the so-called promotion of gender ideologies, LGBTQ+ rights, attacks on the traditional family and traditional values of society. The close ties between Serbia and Russia are particularly reflected in the cooperation between the Serbian Intelligence Agency BIA and the Russian intelligence services, which reached its peak when Aleksandar Vulin was the director of BIA. The close cooperation of the intelligence services results in the harassment and even persecution of Russian citizens living in Serbia who are peace activists and who openly oppose Moscow’s official policy. Since tens of thousands

of Russian citizens currently reside in Serbia, many of whom left Russia for political reasons due to persecution and opposition to the war in Ukraine, many organisations are trying to help precisely that group of people whose rights are increasingly threatened by the state.

A second reason for dealing with the consequences of the war in Ukraine concerns European integration, the new reality which implies that Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia now have the status of candidates for membership of the European Union, and that in the context of European integration they are practically “in the same rank” as the countries of the Western Balkans. This new reality opens a new perspective for the cooperation of organisations dealing with European integration, but also an opportunity for Serbia to take advantage of the dramatically changed geopolitical constellation in Europe and to use the moment to accelerate the country’s approach to EU membership. Dealing with this issue, however, brings us back to the problems in our own backyard, to the terrible situation in Serbia relating to the rule of law, the state of democracy, media freedom and similar topics that are becoming a growing obstacle in the efforts of official Belgrade to be closer to the European Union.

Participants in the focus groups also noticed that dealing with the war in Ukraine depends a lot on the way the media reports on the war itself and on its consequences. Civil society often deals with topics imposed by the public, and these topics do not include Ukraine. The media covers the war in Ukraine, but the dominant narratives depict mostly the Russian view of the war. Although they are aware of this fact, many civil society organisations, which are very critical of Russia because of its aggression against Ukraine, do not have much information about what is actually happening in Ukraine. There is information about the war, but little is known about the dynamics of everyday life in war-torn Ukraine.

Many focus group participants also maintained that there is massive media manipulation of the war in Ukraine in Serbia. If an organisation deals with Ukraine, it is immediately labelled as ‘pro-Ukrainian’ in the public eye, which has certain consequences in the Serbian context. This may mean that the



pro-government media targets and places one in the category of “traitor”, “enemy of the Serbian people” or similar. These same organisations are already torn by attacks provoked by other issues, and they have to make a difficult decision whether to deal with the topic of Ukraine at all.

As one focus group participant noted, civil society in Serbia is more concerned with Russia than Ukraine. After the invasion of Ukraine, many human rights defenders and activists had to flee Russia and move to other countries. There was a great need to help both them and members of the Russian and Belarusian communities in Belgrade, whose human rights as foreigners in Serbia are seriously threatened.

Finally, organisations dealing with culture and art, as well as many publishing houses, have focused on Ukraine during 2022 and 2023. They are motivated to do so by calls for proposals by the European Commission and by the Creative Europe programme, which focuses on translation from the Ukrainian language, the mobility of Ukrainian artists and cultural workers, and cooperation with related organisations in Ukraine. This has resulted in a large increase in the production of cultural content that promotes the culture, art and language of Ukraine in Serbia, an increase in translations, cooperation and awareness of Ukrainian-Serbian historical ties.

## **EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES - KROKODIL ASSOCIATION, BCBP, ATINA**

Numerous organisations have included content related to the war in Ukraine in their regular activities. These are primarily organisations dealing with human rights and transitional justice. On the other hand, organisations that provided support to Ukrainian citizens even before the war continued those activities, perhaps on a larger scale than before. This particularly applies to organisations that provide assistance to women whose rights have been brutally violated and who have been victims of gender-based violence.



Vladimir Arsenijević of the KROKODIL Association (first from the left) together with Ukrainian writers Andriy Lyubka (centre) and Serhiy Zhadan (first from the right) during the delivery of donated medical vehicles to the Emergency Centre in Kharkiv, June 2022.

Certain organisations have worked on expanding already existing thematic programmes and units, such as the **KROKODIL Association**.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, KROKODIL Association has largely modified its regular programme of activities to meet the needs of its primary associates: writers and cultural workers. The premises of the KROKODIL Association (the KROKODIL Centre) were opened to Ukrainian refugees and to politically and socially active citizens of the Russian Federation who left that country due to support for Ukraine in the war or resistance to Vladimir Putin's reign of terror. The KROKODIL Centre has thus become an informal meeting point for the Russian and Ukrainian diaspora in Belgrade, both ordinary citizens and political activists who have so far organised a large number of peace actions, protests, and humanitarian initiatives. Also, since the very beginning of the aggression in February 2022, the KROKODIL Association has organised several actions to collect and distribute humanitarian aid to some of the areas most threatened by the war. KROKODIL Association members, together with Ukrainian partners (such as the famous Ukrainian writers Andriy Lyubka and Serhiy Zhadan), personally took and distributed humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable communities in war-torn areas of Ukraine. Vladimir Arsenijević, writer and president of this organisation, briefly explained all the

activities aimed at various types of assistance to Ukraine by the KROKODIL Association in the last two years:



“From the very start of the all-out Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, KROKODIL Association launched a whole series of activities dedicated to the victims of the war, and we are still engaged in these activities. We have already collected humanitarian aid three times (1. for the City Perinatal Centre in Kharkiv, 2. for the social centre in Bliznyuki and currently 3. for the Point of Invincibility at the Baptist Church in Kherson), which we took each time to Ukraine and delivered directly to the people. We have turned our residential programme for writers into a Writer-in-Exile programme so that we can offer it to literary creators from Ukraine. At the KROKODIL Centre, we started the first Ukrainian library in Serbia with about six hundred titles bought from Ukrainian publishers. It is open to everyone, and of course it is mostly used by Ukrainians who fled to Serbia. Besides all this, we have organised a whole series of activities, we have offered the KROKODIL Centre to Ukrainian and peace-making and dissident Russian formal and informal organisations in our country, we have organised workshops for Ukrainian refugee children to integrate them faster and more painlessly into our society, and much, much more.”

The Ukrainian library at the KROKODIL Centre and the atmosphere at one of the creative workshops intended for children who fled Ukraine to Serbia as part of KROKODIL's regular programmes and activities since the beginning of the all-out Russian attack on this country.





On 28 September 2023, women staying in the Bujanovac Reception Centre visited local institutions together with the members of the Advocacy Group and the Atina Association and handed out materials created as part of the project *Zajedno možemo više* (Together We Can Do More).

**The Atina Association**, dedicated to the care of women victims of human trafficking, directly supports this sensitive category of women. Jelena Hrnjak of the Atina Association says:

“When it comes to our organisation, our mandate is clear, we run a programme to protect victims of human trafficking and all who have suffered gender-based violence. This programme began twenty years ago and is based precisely on knowledge of the exploitation of Ukrainian women at that time in our country, so the entire system of victim protection is based on lessons from that approach. The programme is based on direct support to victims in exercising their rights and provides them with 24-hour support through safe housing, legal counselling, support in court proceedings, psychological, educational and economic empowerment.

“Our organisation has received a good response from the community that supports us and among them there is sensitivity towards refugees from Ukraine. We also have very good cooperation with the Ukrainian embassy in



Belgrade. At the same time, there are a large number of Russian women in our country who regularly call our SOS line and report various types of violence, ask questions such as whether and how they can get a divorce, and are interested in labour rights as foreign women in our country. We should not ignore the considerable number of refugees from Russia who are fleeing the war and politics there and who are staying with us.

“It is important for civil society organisations to be heavily involved in the prevention of violence. We must never lose our role, and we must always fight for it. Also, the key is to support women directly, despite everything. Without direct support for women, there is no way out of violence. I think that the violence against women happening in war-torn Ukraine is a topic that we should deal with as a priority, and find solutions so that women and children have better conditions for the future. We must network even more with Ukrainian organisations. I think that the experience of Serbia and what we have been through all these years can help a great deal. Other organisations in our country can also support the initiatives of Ukrainian society through their activities.”

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**The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy** or **BCBP** has focused its activities on supporting colleagues from organisations in Ukraine and formed a fellowship programme for exchange and cooperation with Ukrainian researchers. Srđan Cvijić, president of the BCBP International Advisory Board, says:

“One has to be realistic. Given the political circumstances in the country and the fact that for the past ten years the Serbian government has been continuously exposing its people to daily anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric, it has been very difficult for civil society organisations to provide an appropriate response to Russian aggression. However, I think that many organisations have done what they can to help Ukraine and its citizens. BCBP, for example, started the Safe Haven programme for Ukrainian think tankers who had to flee their country because of the war. In this way, BCBP showed solidarity with colleagues from Ukraine, but at the same time used their work to create an alternative discourse to the dominant pro-Russian narrative in Serbian society.



The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCBP) organises visiting programmes for researchers from Ukraine, who have had to leave their country or who cannot work because of the war. Researchers stay for up to three months at BCBP conducting research on a specific topic of security policy. During the discussion *Serbia and Ukraine: the Challenges of War*, the first researcher to be a guest of BCBP under the programme, Kateryna Shymkevych, shared her research conclusions.

I think that the articles and appearances in the media by our researchers have contributed to a much more balanced presentation of the war in Ukraine. But the main limitation of our work in this sense is the fact that we have failed to achieve sufficient penetration into the media, which is under the strict control of the regime. The war in Ukraine has affected the civil sector in Serbia by further politicising the issue of relations between Serbia and the Russian Federation, using the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia by Western countries in response to the aggression as a political issue par excellence in Serbia's internal politics."

The representatives of all three organisations agree that there is room to expand and deepen the cooperation of civil society organisations in Serbia and Ukraine, primarily in terms of helping the citizens of Ukraine, exchanging experience and knowledge, and including refugees who have found themselves in Serbia. All three also agreed that there is already a good base and that by no means should we bypass the existing platforms, experience and contacts of organisations dealing with this issue. This would help in forming and further developing potential donor programmes, which would definitely help increase the interest and engagement of civil society organisations in Serbia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the beginning of Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, many civil society organisations have responded with statements unequivocally condemning the aggression. For example, the organisations gathered around the Three Freedoms Platform strongly condemned the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and warned that it was a flagrant violation of the norms of international law<sup>6</sup>. As a sign of solidarity with Ukraine, many organisations individually responded publicly, both with announcements and by placing flags of Ukraine on their official profiles on social networks and thereby symbolically providing support to the people of Ukraine.

A large number of civil society organisations also offered to help with the arrival of the first refugees from Ukraine. However, by far the largest number of refugees from Ukraine came either to their relatives or friends in Serbia, or the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia took responsibility for their accommodation. In that process, monitoring and assistance to refugees from Ukraine was provided by civil society organisations that normally deal with refugee and migration issues.

In contrast to some neighbouring countries that are members of the European Union, Serbia received a large number of citizens of the Russian Federation who had to leave the country at the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine due to opposition to Vladimir Putin's regime or support for Ukraine in the war. By the end of 2023, almost two hundred thousand Russian citizens had temporarily settled in Serbia. What is characteristic of a number of these people is that they united with Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians who lived in Serbia before 24 February 2022, and organised protests and other peace initiatives aimed at sending anti-war messages and criticism of official Moscow's aggressive policy. It was around these initiatives, such as the informal group Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Serbs Together Against the War, that an informal centre of anti-war activities and actions was formed.

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<sup>6</sup> Platform of Three Freedoms: Stop the aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine, Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, 1.3.2022, <https://www.slavkocuruvijafondacija.rs/platforma-tri-slobode-zaustaviti-agresiju-ruske-federacije-na-ukrajinu/>

Invitations to participate in numerous peace actions and other activities aimed at supporting Ukraine and its citizens, were also distributed both in Ukraine itself and to those who fled to Serbia, on the social network platforms of this initiative.

Given the needs of Ukrainian civil society at the moment, and the experience of civil society organisations in certain areas, there is a possibility to cooperate in the following areas and on the following issues:

- transitional justice,
- European integration and
- human rights and good governance.

## TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

- Establishing cooperation with civil society organisations in Ukraine that deal with documenting serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law with the aim of:
  1. Transferring knowledge in the field of working with victims of war crimes, especially on the importance of sharing responsibilities among different organisations that deal with these issues;
  2. Transferring knowledge in the area of data collection on potential war crimes, including interviewing refugees and displaced persons from the areas most affected by the war, primarily from the areas of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhia, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkiv and Kyiv;
  3. Transferring knowledge about the challenges of criminal prosecution of persons suspected of violating international humanitarian law, both at the national and international level;
  4. Transferring knowledge about documenting collected data on war crimes, and the importance of sharing responsibility among organisations that deal with this issue;



5. Transferring knowledge about ways to inform the public about ongoing investigations of potential war crimes.
- Holding seminars and training with civil society organisations in Ukraine dealing with transitional justice with the aim of:
    1. Sharing experience on building an inclusive culture of remembering the wartime;
    2. Sharing experience about the challenges of material and symbolic reparations;
    3. Sharing experience on ways of working with the media, youth and political parties in the context of dealing with war crimes;
    4. Inclusion of cultural and artistic institutions in the processes of working with war crimes, from the very beginning of the process of dealing with the consequences of war and war crimes (before the activation of transitional justice mechanisms).
  - Cooperation with civil society organizations in Ukraine that tackle war crimes for the purpose of further international networking on a global level with already existing platforms that bring together organizations that deal with transitional justice, the culture of memory and the prevention of conflict and genocide;
  - Field visits to Ukraine by civil society organisations in Serbia, and return visits to Serbia by civil society organisations from Ukraine, with organised visits to places of suffering and mass crimes;
  - Involvement in peace activist networks for the promotion of solidarity and mutual assistance in work.

## EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

- Cooperation with civil society organisations from Ukraine in the framework of advocating the rapid integration of both countries into the European Union;

- Exchange of experience of Serbian civil society organisations dealing with European integration on ways to cooperate with institutions of the European Union (primarily with the European Commission);
- Sharing experience on networking and joint action of civil society organisations in the context of accession to the European Union and accession negotiations following the model of the National Convention on the European Union, including the potential joint use of existing mechanisms for pre-accession assistance;
- Sharing experience regarding the method, pace and procedure of adopting the *acquis communautaire*;
- Work on creating common platforms for the cooperation of civil society organisations from the Western Balkans and from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia on the mutual sharing of problems related to the European integration of these two groups of countries.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

- Cooperation among civil society organisations dealing with the rights of minority ethnic communities;
- Cooperation among civil society organisations that deal with the rights of the LGBTQ+ community;
- Cooperation of organisations dealing with the exercise of fundamental rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression;
- Cooperation of organisations that deal with the transparency of the work of state institutions.

## CONCLUSION

We conclude that Serbian civil society organisations generally recognize the importance of activities that are directly or indirectly focused on the war in Ukraine. They also recognize the consequent connections with Serbia, the region and its people, European integration, etc. Although the importance is recognized, passivity or a low level of involvement in this matter during the first two years of the war is noticeable. The organisations that were most active are characterised by a strong empathy towards the citizens of Ukraine who are also the beneficiaries of their programmes. The activities of organisations are narrowly focused on helping individuals, and a large number of them are realised even without additional funds.

One of the main reasons for the sector's passivity is a misunderstanding of the broader picture of the war in Ukraine and the resulting processes related to attempts to demolish democratic arrangements and processes, primarily in the region of the Western Balkans, which have been on the rise since the beginning of the aggression through various mechanisms, primarily Russian soft power. Organisations often feel that their field of action does not have many points of contact with the war in Ukraine and do not recognize ways in which they could get involved.

For a large number of civil society organisations, the question remains open as to how they can help the citizens of Ukraine, given the context in which they operate and the limited resources at their disposal. As noted by many participants in the focus groups organised as part of the research, the financial and administrative sustainability of civil society organisations in Serbia is not at a high level. A large number of these organisations barely manage to deal with the problems for which they were founded. To that should be added the difficult position of many civil society organisations that are critical of the Serbian authorities, and are therefore often the targets of various types of attack and pressure.

So far, the donor community has not reserved large funds to support civil society organisations in Serbia who are prepared to deal with the issue of the war in Ukraine. Huge financial resources are directed primarily towards organisations in countries such as Poland, Moldova, Slovakia, Lithuania and Hungary, whose work to help and support refugees from Ukraine has required urgent support. Finally, large financial resources have been directed in the form of humanitarian aid to organisations in Ukraine itself.


The opening of programmes aimed at the cooperation of organisations or individuals in Serbia and Ukraine would greatly change the aforementioned situation.

Finally, one cannot ignore the fact that a platform with already active organisations exists and that when forming programmes this should be taken into account along with the experience, contacts and good practices of these organisations. Networking of civil society organisations that directly or indirectly deal with the consequences of the war in Ukraine with the help of a pre-existing platform would enable the participation of organisations that want to deal with this topic but are currently not in a position to do so (while the importance of exchanging information on all current affairs should be emphasised, in particular on the consequences of the war in Ukraine among interested organisations). On the other hand, it would additionally stimulate the donor community to recognize the potential of Serbian civil society, both for dealing with the consequences of this war and for cooperation with colleagues from civil society organisations in Ukraine.



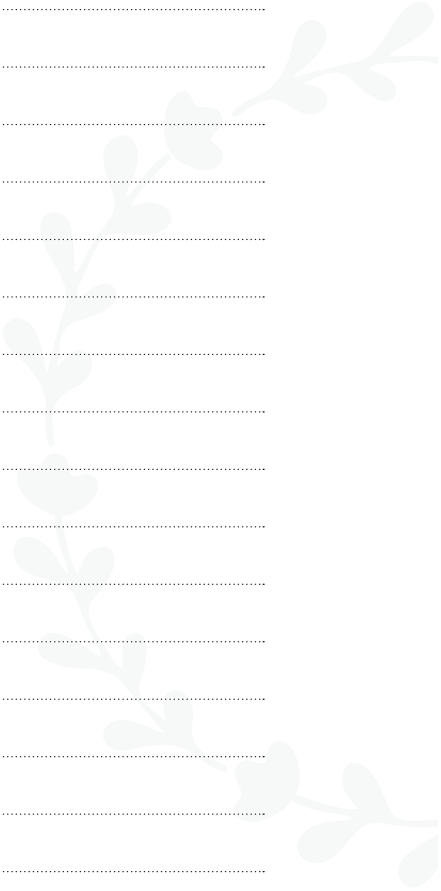
## NOTES

## NOTES



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## NOTES




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