



The PFP Consortium Regional Stability in South East Europe Working Group at 25: The Transformed Balkans and the Work Ahead

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Abstract: The Partnership for Peace Consortium’s Regional Stability in South East Europe Working Group aims to foster transformation in South-east European societies and their defense and security establishments through academic research, education, training, and intensive cooperation and networking in the region and beyond. The positive practical effects over its 25 years of existence include the development of a new culture of addressing security issues in young democratic societies, evidenced by numerous academic publications, policy recommendations, and the membership of most Balkan countries in NATO and the European Union. New tasks lie ahead, and the Working Group remains committed to its mission, working closely with the Senior Advisory Council, the PFP Consortium Secretariat, and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

Keywords: NATO, European Union, Southeast Europe, security, defense, conflict, Russian world, Serbian world, regional security community, historical background, academic approach.

Introduction

The launch of the PFP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes as a vehicle for education, training, and encouraging cooperation among former adversaries was as innovative as the NATO Partnership for Peace (PFP)¹ program itself. Rooted in the diplomatic and intellectual creativity of NATO countries exiting the Cold War, the PFP seeks to ensure hope and peace

¹ “Partnership for Peace Programme,” NATO, last updated June 28, 2024, accessed December 16, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm.

for the future of the Euro-Atlantic area. At its inception, there were no established templates or models to follow. However, there was the political will to avoid repeating the post-World War II developments in Europe that had divided the continent into opposing blocs and spheres of influence dominated by powerful hegemonies. The vision of a Europe that is whole, free, and secure was embraced by the political leaders of NATO and the European Union, who sought to reform the security and defense sectors in ways that would prevent violence and provide opportunities for democratic progress in East European societies and states transitioning from Soviet-induced totalitarianism.

Southeast Europe deserved special attention: during the Cold War, it was home to a diverse range of politically oriented states, including NATO members, Warsaw Pact countries, Non-Aligned Movement participants, and the autarchic state of Albania. The region also included a dictatorial regime in traditionally chauvinistic Serbia, which sought to expand territorially and impose its expansionist policies on neighboring states. In addition, in the early 1990s, the European Community and the United States attempted² to encourage the peaceful dissolution of the artificially constructed Yugoslav federation. However, political and financial incentives from Brussels and Washington were rejected by Belgrade in pursuit of its ill-conceived “Greater Serbia” agenda. During this period, Moscow supported the regime in Belgrade, including by supplying weapons, even after Milošević’s rule. The persistent malign Russian geopolitical ingredient made the problem of pacifying, modernizing, and democratizing the Balkans even more difficult to solve.

The Launch of the Working Group

It was during this period, burdened by history but also filled with hope following the demise of the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, that the Partnership for Peace Consortium *Regional Stability in South East Europe Working Group* was born.

In the early 1990s, Southeast Europe experienced a rare window of historical opportunity: the Cold War had ended, and the Soviet Union, followed by Russia, could no longer impose its political will on the nations in the region. The prospect of joining the European Union and NATO became realistic for the former communist states and was supported by their democratic-leaning societies and the

² Aleksandar Brezar, “Euroviews. Delors Advocated for Peace in Europe, and Others Should Too,” *Euronews*, December 28, 2023, accessed December 16, 2024, www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/28/delors-advocated-for-peace-in-europe-and-others-should-too; “The Breakup of Yugoslavia, 1990-1992,” Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/breakup-yugoslavia>; “The Vain Mediation Attempts of the European Community and the United Nations,” Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.cvce.eu/en/collections/unit-content/-/unit/df06517b-babc-451d-baf6-a2d4b19c1c88/d4fd90c9-36d1-4130-8bc7-b36771dd0e43>.

West.³ There were also promising developments in the realm of nuclear disarmament: Ukraine, the world's third-largest nuclear power at the time, voluntarily relinquished its military nuclear arsenal in exchange for solemn guarantees from Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to uphold its territorial integrity and security. Meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific region, Washington provided China with political and technological support to advance the economy of the demographic giant, likely with the expectation that Beijing would focus on addressing domestic and regional poverty, potentially emerging as a peaceful geopolitical actor. The U.S. policy of engagement was a defining feature of the 1990s.⁴

The 1990s were crucial for the future of the Balkans. The lessons learned from the UN's ineffective involvement in the first half of the decade, particularly in failing to prevent the massacres in Bosnia and Herzegovina, prompted the Alliance to take decisive historical and political action. In 1999, NATO intervened to stop Serbia's ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. Shortly thereafter, the government of Slobodan Milošević fell, and the war criminals were brought to justice in The Hague.

In 1994-1995, the two former Warsaw Pact countries, Romania and Bulgaria, embarked on their path toward European and Atlantic integration. Both nations signed agreements with the European Union in 1995 and applied for accession. After joining all NATO-created institutional structures following the end of the Cold War—the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991 and the Partnership for Peace (Pfp) in 1994—they began preparations for NATO membership. Both Turkey and Greece, also Balkan countries and former adversaries, supported their bid for membership in the Alliance.

Amid the evolving Kosovo crisis, on June 12, 1998,⁵ the Ministers of Defense of 44 nations representing the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council welcomed the proposal to establish the Pfp Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes (hereafter referred to as the Consortium). The U.S. and German governments proposed that the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies serve as the interim secretariat for the Consortium. Switzerland, demonstrating how a traditionally neutral state can contribute to the peaceful efforts of a political-military alliance, offered to support the launch of this initiative in October 1998. At the same meeting, Bulgaria volunteered to host a conference for interested nations. The thinking and the collaborative efforts of the European and North American countries aimed to lay a new foundation for European security in the twenty-first century. The following paragraphs illustrate

³ For example, on April 4, 1991, the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria was established in Sofia, bringing together members from all walks of life, including members of Parliament, academia, the military, business, and media. See <https://adn.bg/en/acb-home-en/>.

⁴ U.S. Embassy & Consulates in China, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/>.

⁵ "Chairman's Summary of the Meeting of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council in Defence Ministers Session," NATO, June 12, 1998, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1998/p98-076e.htm>.

the importance of responsible political leadership during periods of geopolitical transformation and the decisive role concrete decisions and actions play in shaping the future of European security.

On September 25, 1998, during an informal meeting of the Alliance Defense Ministers in Vilamoura, Portugal, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen raised several initiatives in preparation for the April 1999 NATO Summit in Washington, D.C. Among these was the implementation of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council's proposal to enhance Ally-Partner interoperability for future NATO-Partner contingencies. This was to be achieved through an improved education and training framework, which included the establishment of the Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes sponsored jointly with Germany.⁶

On October 20, 1998, in Zurich, Switzerland, during the 3rd International Security Forum, Workshop 3 in the Gartensaal of the Kongresshaus, Dr. Robert Kennedy, the Director of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, presided over the discussion and the effective launch of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes. At the ceremony marking the launch of the Consortium, Bulgaria was institutionally represented by the Rakovski Defense College and the Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS), who actively participated in the subsequent forums.⁷

The Second Annual Conference, and the first after the Washington Summit, was convened from December 8-10, 1999, in Sofia, Bulgaria. The Zurich conference was a highly successful event, leading to the approval of the Consortium's concept. During the Sofia Conference, various Consortium activities were initiated. A crucial task assigned by the Washington Summit was to determine what type of strategic leaders and decision-makers—both civilian and military—would define the future of the continent, including the traumatized Balkans. Research, education, and training were identified as decisive tools in this regard.

Twelve Working Groups were established in Sofia. One of these was the *Early Warning and Crisis Management in the Southeast European Region*. Although the location was Sofia, the proposal originated from the Austrian Government, specifically its Bureau for Security Policy within the Ministry of Defense and the National Defense Academy in Vienna. The Statement of Purpose/Vision at the launch of the Working Group was:

To assess the situation in the Southeast European region through enhanced international cooperation, especially with institutions, located in or close to the region of interest. Commence strategic research on an academic level, parallel to the stabilization pact.

⁶ NATO, <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/1998/9809-vil/>.

⁷ Based on the author's personal notes from attending the event on October 20, 1998, in addition to the official agenda of the 3rd ISF Conference organized by the Swiss Government and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

An agreement was reached on the future development of the Working Group. The initial collection of potential new members was completed, and the first discussion on the group's name took place. While early warning and crisis management reflected the practical needs of the region, ideas were also shared about fostering positive, constructive processes that would lead to stabilizing the security situation. There was a shared understanding and agreement that the most effective preventive measure against conflict was the development and modernization of South East Europe. This discussion continued in the following years.⁸

The first comprehensive study of the Working Group, titled *Civil-Military Relations in South-East Europe: A Survey of the National Perspectives and of the Adaptation Process to the Partnership for Peace Standards*, was completed in April 2001.⁹ This 218-page book provided valuable insights into the thinking within the defense establishments and societies of most South East European countries at the time. It also assessed and compared how national views and values aligned with the standards required for membership in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program. Important lessons were drawn from understanding how democratic societies function in defense and security areas, which helped improve the ability to adapt national activities to the PfP Program requirements. The book served as a solid foundation for further deepening the knowledge of reforming defense and security sectors in young democratic societies. The study was publicly presented during the Fourth Annual Conference of the PfP Consortium in June 2001 in Moscow. It demonstrated to the host country that the traditionally pro-Russian Balkan states had embarked on their own democratic, pro-Western path and were beginning to develop a new, Alliance-centered strategic culture for their military and security sectors. It also sent a clear signal to Moscow that the South East European sphere of influence no longer welcomed destructive Russian influence.

In December 2002, the name of the Working Group was changed to *Regional Stability in South East Europe*, reflecting both the objectives of the group's activities and the various tools required to achieve them. The vision statement was revised and improved, and it remains in effect today:

Evaluate the situation and factors in the South East European region that promote regional stability through enhanced international cooperation, especially with institutions located in or close to the region of interest. Execute strategic research on an academic level supplementary to and stimulating the

⁸ Second Annual Conference: Enhancing Cooperation in Education and Research in the 21st Century, 8-10 December 1999, Sofia, Bulgaria.

⁹ Plamen Pantev, ed., *Civil-Military Relations in South-East Europe: A Survey of the National Perspectives and of the Adaptation Process to the Partnership for Peace Standards*, published by the Institut für Internationale Friedenssicherung, Vienna and the Institute for Security and International Studies, Sofia, in Co-operation with the PfP Consortium (Vienna, Austria: National Defence Academy, 2001), 218 pp., www.isis-bg.org/Publications/online/pantev_relations_in_south_east_europe.pdf.

practical work done in the region. Provide support for the improvement of networks in the field of security policy and help create a peaceful, strategic and stable community in the South East European region compatible to the broader Partnership for Peace network and beyond.

Impact of the Working Group

During its first 12 years (1999-2011), the *Regional Stability in South East Europe* (RSSEE) Working Group supported the recovery of war-torn Balkan countries as they gradually reintegrated into the international community. The various challenges faced by this part of Europe during those years required purposeful and strategically managed shifts in perspective across crucial areas to strengthen democracy. These included reforming civil-military relations and the security sector, overcoming historical animosities and extreme nationalistic stereotypes, and developing new political and strategic cultures, particularly within the defense, intelligence, and policing institutions.

During the next period (2012-2024), the RSSEE Working Group engaged in purposeful efforts to support the national ambitions of Western Balkan countries as they worked toward integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This endeavor included 47 practically oriented workshops, 75 academic publications, and 29 policy recommendations for national governments and international organizations. This significant academic activity has been supported by three major factors: *political*, *theoretical*, and *organizational*.

The Political Factor

Since 1990, regional politics have been characterized by the interplay of national and international factors, as countries in the region have worked toward accession to both NATO and the European Union. Across the region, integration into these institutions has been viewed as a unique opportunity to accelerate delayed modernization processes in areas such as the economy, infrastructure, political culture, and standard of living – essentially offering a faster path to a more prosperous and secure life. The challenges of delayed modernization and the potential role of NATO and EU integration were well understood and encouraged by both organizations as the most reliable and sustainable means of improving the future of the Southeast European region.

Some Serbian participants in the Working Group workshops expressed concerns about NATO membership, referencing the Alliance's 78-day campaign against the Milošević regime in 1999. However, these expressions of national pride were not widely accepted or embraced, as the individuals voicing such sentiments failed to address the reasons behind the ethnic cleansing of the Albanian population in Kosovo.

The strong appeal of EU membership for the Southeast Europe region dates back to the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council,¹⁰ where the Council stated that

¹⁰ See "Proposal for a Council Decision on the Principles, Priorities and Conditions Contained in the European Partnership with Croatia," COM(2004) 275 final/2, Brussels,

“the Western Balkan countries will become an integral part of the EU, once they meet the established criteria.” In many cases, the political recommendations generated by the Regional Stability in South East Europe Working Group have been translated into practical diplomatic, educational, and media activities. In some instances, these recommendations served as timely warnings, highlighting practical issues that required greater political attention and action. This impact can be systematically traced in most of the policy recommendations issued by the Working Group since 2004.¹¹

Today, only three Southeast European states are not members of NATO, though they maintain intensive links with the Alliance. All countries in the Balkan region are either members of the European Union or at various stages of the accession process. The institutional guarantees of the regional security community¹² in Southeast Europe are significantly stronger compared to 1999, greatly enhancing the security of the Balkans.

The Theoretical Factor

The theoretical factor was undoubtedly a necessary guarantee that the academic efforts of a network comprising scholars, diplomats, military personnel, media representatives, and civil society members from various Balkan countries, along with experts from other regions and continents, would be brought together in a joint effort to develop common definitions, understandings, and potential solutions. The concept of building a regional security community in Southeast Europe as a logical component of the broader Euro-Atlantic security community, was widely accepted due to its constructiveness, inclusivity, and potential for adding new dimensions.

This was powerfully demonstrated in the study examining the impact of the fight against terrorism on democratic reforms and evolving civil-military relations in South East Europe.¹³ The team of experts from all Balkan countries and beyond, working under a common methodology, identified key historical factors—including negative experiences with security forces in totalitarian states that dominated the region until 1990 and the humanitarian consequences of the Yugoslav wars—that contributed to damaged relationships between security institutions and citizens, which, though unfortunate, were not unexpected. The fight against terrorism required new attitudes better aligned with the cooperative security principles embedded in the broader Euro-Atlantic framework rather than the totalitarian, state-centered security models of the past. At the same

April 28, 2004, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2004:0275:FIN:EN:PDF>.

¹¹ See <https://www.bmlv.gv.at/wissen-forschung/publikationen/>.

¹² The essence of the concept of Karl Deutsch is that in a security community no conflict issue would be solved by military violence.

¹³ Philipp H. Fluri et al., *The Evolution of Civil-Military Relations in South East Europe: Continuing Democratic Reform and Adapting to the Needs of Fighting Terrorism* (Heidelberg, Germany: Physica-Verlag, 2005).

time, reformers sought to transform state security cultures to reflect these cooperative security standards. The construction of the regional security community in the Balkans would not have been possible without adapting to the effective fight against terrorism. Alongside this, it was necessary to internalize Euro-Atlantic standards, norms, and procedures, such as the preeminence of the rule of law, accountability, parliamentary and public democratic oversight, civil-military relations with a strong focus on democratic civilian political leadership, and enhancing the competence of civil society organizations.

A similar contribution to the development of the regional security community in Southeast Europe has been the potential for extending post-conflict rehabilitation lessons learned in the Balkans to similar situations elsewhere.¹⁴

From a theoretical point of view, the academic organizational effort itself has been equally important. It has brought together people of diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and viewpoints to discuss and debate the issues at stake for South-eastern Europe. The “academic workshop” has provided participants with opportunities to share their understanding of the issues, brainstorm potential solutions to specific problems, define preliminary results, and develop frameworks for future negotiation strategies to be conveyed to political decision-makers. The academic workshop has proven to be an effective organizational construct for addressing mistrust, coping with selective and distorted perceptions, and mitigating competitive attitudes among participants who might otherwise view such discussions as zero-sum. In its two-and-a-half decades of existence, the Regional Stability in South East Europe Working Group has succeeded in fostering an atmosphere of collaborative problem-solving, transforming post-Yugoslav animosities in the very first workshop into forums for debate and exchange of views.

The Organizational Factor

The rich activities of the RSSEE Working Group would not have been possible without the strong commitment of the leaders and staff of the Bureau for Security Policy—later the Directorate General for Defense Policy—at the Ministry of Defense of Austria and the Commandants of the Austrian National Defense Academy and its Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management. Their responsible decisions and unwavering support have been implemented in practice thanks to the tremendous work and dedication of Andreas Wannemacher, Gustav Gustenau, Ernst Felberbauer, Benedikt Henseleck, and Dr. Predrag Jureković. The atmosphere of friendliness and cooperation they fostered guaranteed the creative contributions of the other co-chairs of the Working Group, including our late colleague and friend, Mladen Staničić. The significant organizational efforts of these colleagues, representing the Austrian Ministry of Defense, have another

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques de Dardel, Gustav Gustenau, and Plamen Pantev, eds., *Post-Conflict Rehabilitation: Lessons from South East Europe and Strategic Consequences for the Euro-Atlantic Community* (Vienna: NDA, PfPC, 2006), 235 pp., https://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/10_wg_pcr_10.pdf. This study is frequently referenced across many countries and continents.

very important aspect: the incomparable publication activity of the Working Group. Many of the publications, along with the well-designed and functional website,¹⁵ continue to serve as valuable resources in educational programs at universities and colleges in Southeast Europe and beyond.

The Austrian administration of the Working Group has been consistently and effectively supported by the Senior Advisory Council and the Operational Staff of the Pfp Consortium in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, as well as by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. Everyone involved in the Study Group's activities knows that the joint US-German support can always be relied upon.

Dr. Franz-Lottar Altman, Ambassador Michael Schmunk, and Dr. Mathew Rhodes have provided significant conceptual support for many years. Their regular participation has driven intellectual interactions and ensured that debates are conducted in a respectful and scholarly manner. Together with Dr. Predrag Jureković from the National Defense Academy, Vienna, they have consistently fostered meaningful and constructive discussions.

The Work Ahead

The work of the Working Group will not be complete until all Southeast European countries fully internalize effective democracy and all achieve NATO and EU membership. Significant progress has been made in the Balkans over the last 25 years, leading to a decisive improvement in the region's security situation. In this context, two legitimate questions arise regarding the activities of the Working Group for Regional Stability in South East Europe:

- 1) Why are not all Balkan countries members of NATO and the European Union yet, despite the considerable work and investments toward this goal?
- 2) What major obstacles have slowed down the transition of the Western Balkans into a fully integrated part of the Euro-Atlantic community of nations?

There is a common answer to these questions that could be reflected in the research agenda of the RSSEE Working Group and its networking activities in the Balkans in the coming years. For decades, regional analysts as well as ordinary citizens have observed, though often underestimated, two dangerous phenomena with significant geopolitical implications: the so-called "*Russian world*" ("*Русский мир*") and the "*Serbian world*" ("*Српски свет*").¹⁶ Both phenomena

¹⁵ <https://www.bmlv.gv.at/wissen-forschung/publikationen/>.

¹⁶ Igor Zevelev, "The Russian World in Moscow's Strategy," Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), August 22, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-world-moscows-strategy>; Oleksii Polegkyi and Dmytro Bushuyev, "Russian Foreign Policy and the Origins of the 'Russian World'," *Forum for Ukrainian Studies*, September 6, 2022, accessed December 16, 2024, <https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2022/09/06/>

are conceptualized to serve as platforms for political activities and as motivators for Russian and Serbian nationalistic propaganda. They are logically interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Rooted in history, these phenomena are periodically revived and actualized according to the current whims of the ruling regimes in Moscow and Belgrade. Moreover, they consistently negatively impact European and Southeast European security, undermining the principles of cooperation and integration as guarantors of peace and stability. They always generate ideas and inspire individuals and institutions to engage in destructive activities, thus maintaining local political tensions ripe for manipulation and exploitation to achieve calculated gains.

The “*Serbian world*” concept and its implementation have had significant consequences, particularly in four areas. First, it has resulted in several wars, causing the deaths and injuries of hundreds of thousands of people. In the early 1990s, Belgrade sought to unify the Serbs from all across the former Yugoslavia in an effort to satisfy nationalist ambitions. Slobodan Milošević chose to pursue this goal through conflict rather than through peaceful integration into the European Union. Rejecting financial aid for a peaceful transformation following the dissolution of the artificial federation, Belgrade, under Milošević, initiated wars against Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. The massacres in Srebrenica and the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo are enduring reminders of this period, as are the scars left by Serbian shells on the fortress of Dubrovnik.

Second, Serbian society remains undemocratized. Residual chauvinism prevents it from acknowledging the truth: for decades, Serbia has been creating the conditions for antagonism in the Balkans. The inevitable consequence has been the erosion of the instincts necessary for democratizing Serbian society. Any eventual democratization will require opening the files of the Yugoslav and Milošević-era secret services and revealing the truth to both the Serbian people and the Balkan countries about the destructive policies pursued for decades against all neighboring states.

Third, present-day Serbian leaders continue to exert a destabilizing influence on neighboring countries. The simplest explanation is that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has been one of Slobodan Milošević’s closest collaborators. A

russian-foreign-policy-and-the-origins-of-the-russian-world/; Ilya Budraitskis and Farida Kurbangaleeva, “The History of the ‘Russian World’ is a Story of the Failure of Russian Policy in the Post-Soviet Space,” *Russia.Post*, March 21, 2024, accessed December 16, 2024, https://russiapost.info/politics/russian_world; Marion Kraske, “Misguided Balkans’ Policy – Dangerous Appeasement,” Heinrich Böll Foundation, February 7, 2023, <https://eu.boell.org/en/2023/02/07/misguided-balkans-policy-dangerous-appeasement>; Adnan Ćerimagić and Majda Ruge, “Trump’s Tinderbox: US Politics and the Next War in the Balkans,” European Council on Foreign Relations, October 29, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/trumps-tinderbox-us-politics-and-the-next-war-in-the-balkans/>; Kenneth Morrison and Vesko Garčević, “The Orthodox Church, Montenegro, and the ‘Serbian World’” (Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina: Atlantic Initiative, January 2023), <https://atlanticinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/SPC-WEB.pdf>.

more nuanced analysis, however, would reveal that the Serbian political *modus operandi* has persistently involved launching destructive projects across the region. This know-how has been in existence since the 19th century.

Fourth, as a politically ambitious yet weak country, Serbia has traditionally and purposefully invited Russian aggressiveness to support its “Serbian world” ambitions in Southeast Europe. A pathological drive to dominate neighboring states has attracted Russian involvement. Russia, in turn, has consistently incorporated the Serbian component in its broader, more ambitious, and sophisticated geopolitical strategies. For example, the so-called joint Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš serves, in practice, as a platform for Moscow to spy on NATO countries in the Balkans.¹⁷ This Serbia-Russia cross-fertilization has led to permanent conflicts in the Balkans. There was an opportunity to reverse this trend after the Cold War, but, as mentioned earlier, Belgrade chose to follow the traditional scenario.

The “Russian world” concept and practice remained latent during the Soviet period of the empire, although the Soviet anthem clearly reminded everyone of the special role of the “Great Rus” in uniting the other constituent nations of the federation. For decades, communist ideology served as the integrating force in the multiethnic and multinational Soviet state, with its vast territory and myriad nationalities and ethnicities. After the collapse of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, the Moscow elite turned to Russian culture and language as substitutes to provide the cohesion needed for post-1991 Russia. With the decline of the integrating power of communist ideology, the “Russian world” (“Русский мир”) concept emerged as the closest equivalent to the Russian imperial tradition, with language and culture as its main pillars. Efforts to enhance this concept’s effectiveness led to its refinement, further drawing Russian society back to its totalitarian roots. The ambition to bring the former Soviet republics and former allied countries under the “Russian world” umbrella has remained a persistent goal in the minds of those in the Kremlin.

The process of refining the concept included developing and promoting the notion of Russian cultural and spiritual superiority over the rest of humankind, particularly over Ukraine and its people. Russian propaganda, leading up to and continuing through the second Russian aggression against Ukraine launched in February 2022, has consistently conveyed this message. The practice of defining superiority on ethno-spiritual grounds, as exercised by Nazi Germany, has been rejected by history. However, political leaders in Moscow ignored these historical lessons and, after the end of the Cold War, baselessly divided human society into “us”(the “Russian world”) and “them” (those who did not belong to this “unique world of the Russians”). This chauvinistic intellectual trait in Russian political thought can be traced back through the country’s history, philosophy, literature, and poetry.

¹⁷ See, for example, Milena Djurdjic, “US Sees Russia’s ‘Humanitarian Center’ in Serbia as Spy Outpost,” *VoA*, June 15, 2017, accessed December 16, 2024, www.voanews.com/united-states-sees-russia-humanitarian-center-serbia-spy-outpost/3902402.html.

The deepest and most sincere beliefs of Russian leader Vladimir Putin, as shared candidly on September 30, 2022, highlight the core of the “Russian world” concept:

I would like to end my speech with the words of the true Russian patriot, Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin: “If I consider Russia my motherland, it means that I love, contemplate, and think in the Russian way; I sing and speak Russian; I trust in the spiritual power of the Russian people. Its soul is my soul; its destiny is my destiny; its sufferings are my pain; its flourishing is my joy.”¹⁸

It should be clarified that while the fight against Nazi Germany remains a major ideological foundation in Putin’s Russia, the dictator’s admiration for Ilyin stands in contradiction to his declarations against fascism and Nazism. Ilyin openly praised the significance of fascism and Nazism, viewing them as necessary ideologies that needed to be merged with the Orthodox Christian religion in Russia, combined with the rule of a powerful leader in a highly centralized state.¹⁹ Ilyin strongly believed that “fascism is a redemptive excess of patriotic arbitrariness.”²⁰

A peculiar feature of the “Russian world” is that its boundaries are never fixed, allowing the possibility of integrating into the federation those who live in other countries, as well as anyone who sympathizes with Russia and/or the Russian language.

The “Russian world” concept and practice have severe, long-lasting consequences, including:

- the Russian aggression against Ukraine marking the biggest war in Europe since the Second World War
- hundreds of thousands killed and wounded, and millions displaced due to the Russian aggression
- a devastated European state, economy, and society
- a totalitarian society led by a dictator evoking memories of the Nazi and fascist periods in recent European history
- real dangers of the Russian aggression continuing westwards.

Despite some chaotic Serbian reactions to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, Belgrade never joined the sanctions against the aggressor. Instead, Serbia continued its intensive rearmament and decided to reinstate conscription. Bilateral ties with Russia remain a priority for Vučić’s regime.

¹⁸ “Full Text of Vladimir Putin’s Address on September 30, 2022: Speech Transcript,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 30, 2022, accessed September 26, 2024, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27452.5/4655517/>. – in Russian

¹⁹ Ivan A. Ilyin, “About Russian Fascism,” *Russkiy Kolokol. Zhurnal volevoy idei*, no. 3 (1928), 54-64, https://vtoraya-literatura.com/pdf/rusky_kolokol_1928_3_text.pdf. – in Russian

²⁰ Ilyin, “About Russian Fascism,” 60.

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Jubilees are often a cause for festivity, and RSSEE has much to be proud of as a PfP Consortium Working Group. However, in light of the current political reality, we must remain vigilant: Europe is facing hybrid aggression from Russia and may potentially be on the brink of a broader, high-intensity war beyond Ukraine's borders. The negative trends across Europe—specifically in Southeast Europe—must remain a focus for our institution as the PfP Consortium continues its mission to effectively support our societies and states.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the Partnership for Peace Consortium or its governance stakeholders.

About the Author

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He is the author of four books, a co-author of 17 others, and has published approximately 160 academic articles on topics including international, regional, and national security; transatlantic relations; European security and defense policy; international relations theory and law; foreign policy forecasting; Bulgarian foreign and security policy; security issues in Southeast Europe and the Black Sea regions; civil-military relations; security sector reform; and international negotiations. His works have been published in Bulgarian, English, German, Italian, French, Ukrainian, Russian, and Bahasa (Indonesian).

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