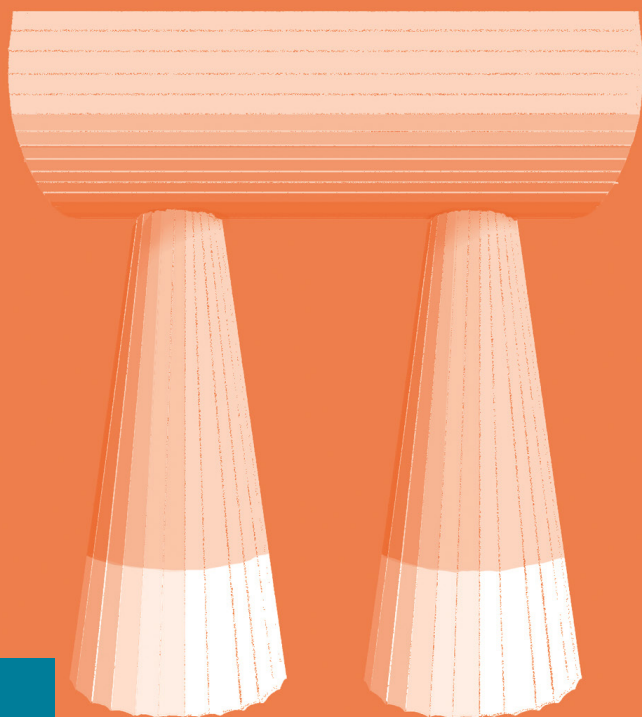


EUROPE AND RUSSIA ON THE BALKAN FRONT

GEOPOLITICS AND DIPLOMACY
IN THE EU'S BACKYARD

edited by **Giorgio Fruscione**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy
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Edited by Giorgio Fruscione

First edition: March 2023

Cover image by Francesco Fadani.

The monument in the cover is a memorial to Mitrovica's Albanian and Serbian fighters who worked at the Trepca mines and lost their lives during World War II, symbolizing unity between the ethnic groups.

Print ISBN 9788855268929

ePub ISBN 9788855268936

Pdf ISBN 9788855268943

DOI 10.14672/55268929

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5
20121, Milan
www.ispionline.it

Catalogue and reprints information: www.ledizioni.it




**Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation**

This Report is realized with the support of the Policy Planning Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967.

The opinions contained in this Report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and ISPI.

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Introduction

This June, it will be exactly 20 years since the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki reiterated the EU's "unequivocal support" to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. "The future of the Balkans", the joint declaration stated, "is within the European Union". Since that eventful day, only two Western Balkan countries have become members of the EU: Slovenia (in 2004) and Croatia (in 2013 – a full decade ago). Six other countries remain non-members, four of which are now negotiating their accession (Albania and North Macedonia having begun talks in July 2022), while Bosnia and Herzegovina was awarded candidate status and Kosovo applied for membership only last December. If the EU wants to restore trust in its relations with many countries in the region, it does not need to reinvent the "geopolitical wheel": it simply needs to relaunch the enlargement process in a credible way, by setting a clear timetable and milestones to be achieved.

The 20-year anniversary of the Thessaloniki summit is not the only one being celebrated this year. It has also been 15 years since Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence from Serbia, and 10 years since the "Brussels Agreement" that first normalised relations between Belgrade and Pristina. And only a few weeks ago, in late February, the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo accepted in principle the EU plan for an effective path to normalisation between the two countries. This EU-brokered initiative has come on the heels of a Franco-German proposal, trying to reduce tensions after the "license plate crisis"

threatened to jeopardise any further improvements over the past two years. With this agreement, the EU is probably also trying to throw a spanner in the works for Russia, by attempting to limit its influence over the Serbian government or, more likely, reducing the likelihood of Moscow remaining the indirect beneficiary of actions undertaken by the Serbian government.

Faced on the one hand with seemingly endless EU negotiations that continue to sour relations with Brussels, but on the other with a possible breakthrough in Serbia-Kosovo relations that would improve the EU's position in the region *vis-à-vis* Moscow, it is only fair to ask: are the Balkans at a crossroads? This is the main question which this Report revolves around.

The first chapter by Milena Lazarević and Sava Mitrović focuses on the EU integration process in the Western Balkans. The analysts from the European Policy Centre look at the current state of play in enlargement policy, analysing both its political and procedural deficiencies and mapping their main consequences. They then provide an overview of the main non-EU actors' influences, and examine their means and methods of penetration into the countries of the Western Balkans. Next, the chapter introduces innovative proposals for overcoming the enlargement impasse developed by the European Policy Centre in Belgrade together with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels. The "Template for Staged Accession to the EU", published by the two think tanks in October 2021, seeks to achieve a twofold objective. On the one hand, it sets out to restore motivation for the reforms needed to attain EU membership by proposing that certain benefits should be extended to the candidate countries. On the other, it aims to unlock political will in the enlargement-sceptic member states by allaying their fears about the functioning of a further enlarged Union.

In the second chapter, Vuk Vuksanović focuses on Russia and analyses the nature and the elements that characterise its presence in the Balkan region. According to Vuksanović, the

Balkans have never been a priority for Russian foreign policy in itself, but are mainly important as an indicator of Russia's place in the world and as an extension of Russia's wider relationship with the West. In that context, Russia uses the Balkans as a staging ground to demonstrate that it has reclaimed the status of global and European great power which the West denied Moscow in the 1990s. Moreover, by being present in the region, Russia gains leverage and bargaining power with the West, which is particularly important as rivalry dynamics currently dominate ties between Russia and the West. These are important considerations, as Russian influence in the region is frequently overstated. As a matter of fact, in economic and security terms, the West outmatches Russia's strategic clout in the Balkans. However, Russia has three sources of influence in the Balkans and the region's pivotal country, Serbia, that it exploits skilfully and effectively: energy, the unresolved Kosovo dispute, and soft power, interpreted as the enormous popularity that Russia enjoys among large swaths of the local population.

Here, the most important considerations have to involve Serbia and its foreign policy. The focus of the editor of this Report, Giorgio Fruscione, is on the choices that Belgrade needs to make. In fact, the war waged by Russia has been the greatest game changer for Serbian foreign policy, as it directly affects Belgrade's "game of musical chairs", turning off the music and forcing the Balkan state to sit on only one seat – a move that has not been made yet. For almost ten years, an ambivalent foreign policy has underpinned the success of Aleksandar Vučić, whose country is economically dependent on the EU while nurturing a special relationship with Russia – mainly intended to preserve Moscow's support over Kosovo. For its part, the EU has been partly complicit in Belgrade's game of musical chairs, as in recent years the EU enlargement process has become less credible, allowing scope for Russia and its soft power tools to fill the credibility gap among Serbian citizens. However, the war in Ukraine has revived the role of the EU in the region, particularly concerning the Kosovo dispute. Last summer,

France and Germany proposed a plan, eventually endorsed by all EU member states, to relaunch the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristina amid new tensions and crises which erupted following the license plates dispute. For the EU, reaching an agreement could indirectly represent a way of killing two birds with one stone: to normalise relations between Belgrade and Pristina preventing new hotbeds of tension in Europe, and to push for Serbia's alignment with EU foreign policy.

In any case, reviving EU engagement around the Kosovo dispute will be no easy task. In the fourth chapter, Tefta Kelmendi, from the European Council on Foreign Relations, analyses the role of Western diplomacy on Kosovo and reviews the main problems of the normalisation process. In fact, the normalisation of relations mediated by the EU since 2011 have produced very limited or artificial results and, until recently, both parties regularly held each other hostage and stuck to inflexible positions on several outstanding issues. The Kosovo government has not yet implemented the 2013 agreement for the creation of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) and, until recently, has made its implementation conditional on Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence. Serbia has been waging a diplomatic war against Kosovo by blocking its international recognition and accession to international organisations. And today Belgrade makes the implementation of the ASM by Kosovo a precondition of any further agreement and demands that the question of Kosovo's recognition be off the table. Furthermore, the nationalist rhetoric of both countries' leaders has not contributed to easing tensions and normalising relations. Neither side has prepared their public for concessions, therefore the current pressure they face from the West puts them in a very uncomfortable position. Until recently, there was little motivation in both countries to re-engage in the dialogue with the EU acting as a facilitator in the process. This is explained by the EU's generally weak policies over the past ten years, as well as its many unkept promises.

However, is the EU's geopolitical revival in the Balkans due to the fear of an open confrontation with Russia? Is a new war a real possibility? The chapter by Bojan Elek and Maja Bjeloš from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy focuses on such a possibility and discusses Russia's trouble-making potential over the Kosovo issue within the changed geopolitical context. With the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in fact, many experts started talking about the potential spillover effects of this conflict into other regions, the Balkans being one of them. The increasingly unstable situation between Serbia and Kosovo came to the forefront and international news headlines were filled with questions on whether this was the place where Russia could start a new war. These fears, coupled with the heightened tensions between Belgrade and Pristina over licence plates that led to increased hostilities in North Kosovo, left many wondering whether this was the proverbial pot that Russia could stir in order to cause more troubles and draw attention away from what has been going on in Ukraine.

But Bosnia and Herzegovina too could be the stage where Russia might cause trouble in the region through local secessionist leaders. This is the focus of Samir Beharić's chapter. In fact, Russia has been actively empowering its proxies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sabotaging the country's EU path and threatening its leaders with a Ukraine-style invasion if the country joins NATO. Moscow's efforts to destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina have been rather poorly addressed by the European Union from the start. The fact that certain European leaders have engaged in appeasing populists responsible for democratic backsliding, erosion of the rule of law and a skyrocketing brain drain has not helped the EU to adequately respond to Russia's meddling in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In order to advance its interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian regime has not only relied on its partners within the country, but has also used a wide array of tactics and strategies ranging from social media campaigns to covert financial support for anti-Western actors such as the Bosnian Serb strongman Milorad

Dodik. In order to counter such serious threats, it is important for the international community and the EU in particular to remain vigilant against the Kremlin's attempts to undermine Bosnia's stability and security. By doing so, the EU would invest in preserving the peace and stability not only of Bosnia and Herzegovina itself but of the wider region too.

The final chapter of the Report focuses on energy issues. Although Western Balkan countries have a comparatively low energy consumption (including of natural gas), they have all been strongly affected by the energy crisis. In her chapter, Agata Łoskot-Strachota, an energy expert from the Centre for Eastern Studies, focuses on how Western Balkan countries – which are relatively poor and insufficiently diversified in terms of energy sources – are among the most vulnerable in Europe. High and highly volatile prices, the still unfinished EU integration process, the continuing challenges to regional integration and the heavy dependence on Russia of some countries in the region (above all Serbia, the largest Balkan energy consumer), highlight the structural energy problems facing the Western Balkans. This is clearly visible in the natural gas sector. Although Serbia has not joined EU sanctions and continues to import gas from Russia, it has started, in parallel, to look more actively for options to diversify its sources and to secure stable and affordable supplies in the future. This shows that the war, the crisis and the intensification of Balkan energy problems may, with stronger EU involvement, also offer an opportunity to reduce Balkan energy dependence both on Russia and, in the longer term, on hydrocarbons.

Paolo Magri
Executive Vice-President, ISPI

1. The EU and Third Actors in the Balkans. Relaunching Enlargement, Reviving Credibility

Milena Lazarević, Sava Mitrović

Two decades after the Thessaloniki Summit, which declared the European perspective for the Western Balkan (WB) countries,¹ only Croatia has become an EU Member. In contrast, the rest of the region is still a long way from attaining this goal. Membership negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia have spanned a decade with limited success, while accession talks with Albania and (conditionally) North Macedonia have just been opened. After years of groping in the dark, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has just become a candidate country, while Kosovo² has yet to surmount the obstacles to this initial milestone, having just received the green light for visa liberalisation. Individual Member States have – for various reasons – frequently blocked the process, causing it to become tediously slow and fragmented. As the process has dragged on with little real success, political will for reforms has dwindled, while autocratic tendencies have flourished in the weak WB democracies. A geopolitical vacuum in the WB which emerged due to the absence of a credible accession perspective has been

¹ “[Eu-Western Balkans Summit Thessaloniki](#)”, European Commission, 21 June 2003.

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

filled by the growing influence of third powers, most notably Russia and China as two dominant actors.

Although the Russian aggression against Ukraine has prompted the EU to advance enlargement policy on its political agenda, it is still struggling to reinvigorate real progress, transform the candidates into viable members and prevent the perverse influence of third actors. The authors of this chapter argue that policy innovations along the lines of the Model of Staged Accession to the EU³ would help restore political will for demanding reforms in the accession countries as well as unlock political will among the sceptical Member States to further enlarge the Union. By making a success out of enlargement to the WB, the EU would not only reaffirm itself as a key geopolitical actor in its immediate neighbourhood, but also restore its status as a normative power capable of transforming accession states into consolidated democracies. The latter would also be of tremendous importance for the three Eastern Partnership countries which have just been granted either candidate status (Ukraine and Moldova) or a European perspective (Georgia) but are in an even more dire situation *vis-à-vis* external influences, particularly Russia's.

This chapter starts by looking at the current state of play in enlargement policy, analysing both its political and procedural deficiencies and mapping their main consequences. It then provides an overview of the main non-EU actors' influences and examines their means and methods of penetration into WB countries. Next, the chapter introduces innovative proposals for overcoming the enlargement impasse, before concluding with how the EU should move towards both restoring the transformative power of its once most successful policy and reaffirming its geopolitical primacy in its own inner courtyard.

³ "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre – CEP, Belgrade, and Centre for European Policy Studies – CEPS, Brussels, October 2021.

EU Enlargement 20 Years After the Thessaloniki Summit

Whereas the process of WB integration into the EU has been underway for the past two decades, its end goal is still nowhere in sight. Several factors, related to both politics and the enlargement policy itself, have contributed to such a status quo. This section discusses those factors, to illustrate how the EU's position in the region has weakened and opened up space for interference by third actors.

Problems of a political nature

The core problem relates to the open-endedness of the process in the case of Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates (following Croatia's accession in 2013), which has led to a growing belief among both the region's citizens and political leaders that their countries might never join the Union as full-fledged members. In the twenty years following the declaration of the European perspective for the Western Balkans at the Thessaloniki Summit, the process has been slow and often obstructed by Member States' vetoes on the individual steps of the already highly fragmented and incremental process. In the five years of the Juncker Commission (2014-19), enlargement was even officially removed from the list of priorities in the EU's political agenda. The fact that the process was made into a bureaucratic exercise, with little political steering, has created widespread disillusionment and fatigue. It has also turned EU integration into a politically unattractive issue and has led local politicians to make unfavourable cost-benefit calculations regarding major reform actions.

The lack of political inclination on the EU side to further push for enlargement arguably came as a consequence of the polycrisis as well as difficulties with the functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law in some of the countries that have acceded to the Union since 2004. Both these factors have made it abundantly clear that enlarging the Union further with weak and poorly

law-abiding democracies might lead to decision-making paralysis and added crises of unity and confidence among Member States. As a result, individual Member States have repeatedly indicated that an internal reform of the EU would have to precede any further enlargement. Yet, with the existing Member States largely divided on the question of whether the Union even needs further treaty and institutional reforms, EU enlargement policy emerges as a major casualty of such a position.

Equally importantly, the lack of a clear and predictable membership perspective has negatively affected internal political developments in the Western Balkans, lowering the appetite for the most fundamental – and for EU membership most critical – reforms related to the functioning of democratic institutions, governance and the rule of law. By failing to properly reward bold political decisions and reforms with equally bold advances towards membership (most vividly demonstrated in the case of North Macedonia – a country that changed its name in order to advance its EU perspective), the EU has shot its own “most successful policy” in the foot. With the dwindling credibility of the process and no accession on the horizon, the region’s leaders have resorted to less politically costly and more advantageous, albeit highly contentious, internal practices. These have included thwarting democratic processes, capturing of state institutions, increasing corruption as well as growing voluntary as well as forced exposure to both political and economic influences of third actors, most notably Russia and China.

Problems inherent in the enlargement methodology

All of these political issues are further exacerbated by specific inherent traits of the enlargement policy, related to the methodology of accession negotiations as well as the way that Pre-accession assistance (now through IPA III) is allocated and disbursed. Although the 2020 revision of the methodology – and to an extent the programming framework for IPA III – have led to some improvements, they fall short of tackling those problems effectively.

To begin with, in terms of actual benefits to citizens, even with the revised methodology, the accession process delivers little along the way, saving almost everything for the period after accession. Unlike the early phases of the process, which include the signing and ratification of the association agreement, liberalisation of the visa regime with the Schengen area and entry into the regime of the Instrument for Pre-accession assistance, after the start of accession talks, the process does not include additional benefits along the way. Benefits, including participation in EU programmes, have no clear connection with progress in the accession process and the level of preparedness for membership. The same goes for the amount of funds a country can draw from the pre-accession funds. Admittedly, the IPA III programming framework now states that one of the three key criteria for approving proposed actions will be “progress of the beneficiaries on their enlargement agenda.” Yet, the limited total envelope of IPA III (€9 billion for the Western Balkans – corresponding to the structural funds appropriation for Croatia in the 2021-27 Multiannual Financial Framework - MFF) diminishes the possible impact of this factor on the creation of real political motivation and on closing the wide socio-economic development gap between the EU and the region.

Another inherent problem of the enlargement policy, which has plagued its credibility over the years, is its complete dependence on the unanimity rule for each decision by the Member States. Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) does indeed provide for a unanimous vote in the Council when a membership application is submitted. Similarly, the act of accession is dependent upon the ratification of the Accession Treaty, which is an international treaty, requiring a lengthy ratification procedure not only at the EU level, but also by each Member state as well as the acceding country. Yet, in practice, this rule has been translated into each operational decision within a process that has become so fragmented over the years that North Macedonia has now been subjected to a

two-phase process just to formally open accession negotiations, requiring two separate unanimous votes by the EU27. That country provides a clear demonstration of the ineffectiveness of such an approach, having been obstructed by the vetoes of two Member States, despite major efforts to secure its EU future. Considering that Member States already have the two above-mentioned instances in which they can use their veto, keeping the generalised unanimity rule throughout the intricate accession process appears both excessive and unnecessary. Most importantly, it severely undermines the capacity of the EU27 to properly reward political commitment and progress in reforms with adequate graduation towards membership.

Finally, the approach that the Commission uses to monitor and rate progress and preparedness for membership is inconsistent and lacks credibility among at least some Member States, notably those mostly concerned with the state of democracy and the rule of law in the candidate countries. While some fundamental reform areas, such as public administration reform, rely on very detailed and evidence-based monitoring methodologies, others, such as democratic institutions, lack even a basic assessment of preparedness and include analyses of different issues and elements for different countries. Such inconsistencies arouse unnecessary suspicions among Member States and create distrust towards the Commission, resulting in additional problems when crucial decisions on rewarding progress (as well as sanctioning backsliding) need to be taken. Ultimately, this leads to a further slowing down of the overall process.

Third Actors' Impact in the Western Balkans

With enlargement proceeding at such a slow pace, some authors have warned that the WB is gradually becoming a “geostrategic chessboard” for external actors, and the EU is no longer unchallenged as the dominant force in the region.⁴ When

⁴ L. Hänsel and F.C. Feyerabend, “[The influence of external actors in the Western](#)

speaking about third actors capable of projecting significant economic and political power in the WB, either diverging from or opposed to the EU's approach, Brussels primarily refers to the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China.⁵ Altogether, it appears that "enlargement fatigue", caused by both the EU's internal challenges and external factors, costs the EU the dominant position in the region and allows third actors to gain meaningful influence. This section identifies the key fields of external actors' influence and shows the various ways in which their power projection has a negative impact on the European path of the WB.

Russia – the sources of its political influence

Despite a significant increase in investments since 2006, Russia's economic role in the region has remained limited, but not negligible, in a few important strategic sectors. Its economic influence is most visible in the energy sector, as most of the WB countries are highly dependent on natural gas and oil imported from Russia. Russia's energy influence is highest in Serbia, North Macedonia and BiH, where it supplies nearly 100% of gas needs and owns several important assets.⁶ After the Russian company Lukoil opened the first petrol stations in Serbia in 2005 – which is regarded as the beginning of Russia's economic offensive in the region⁷ – Russian energy companies started expanding their network throughout the WB. In 2008, Serbia sold its most important strategic company Petroleum Industry of Serbia to the Russian energy giant Gazprom, which became the majority shareholder of the company. Russian enterprises also play a significant role in the energy sector of BiH, where the petroleum industry of the Republika Srpska entity, including its oil refineries in Brod and Modrica and distribution company

Balkans: A map of geopolitical players", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, p. 4.

⁵ "EU chief: Russia, China vying for influence in West Balkans", *ANews*, 6 December 2022.

⁶ "Russia's influence in the Western Balkans", European Parliament, June 2022.

⁷ Hänsel and Feyerabend (2018), p. 36.

Petrolis, is owned by NeftGazinKor. Although Russia remains a marginal trade partner (3.9% for imports and 2.7% for exports)⁸ and a modest foreign investor in the WB (4.6% of total foreign direct investments),⁹ its control over the energy sector allows it to wield disproportionate political power. All in all, it is evident that Russian gas pipelines carry more than just energy products, and Russia's strong presence in certain Western Balkan countries is a textbook example of converting energy dependence into political influence, which Moscow has tried to use extensively in the wake of its aggression in Ukraine.

Besides the influence it draws from the energy sector, Russia's geopolitical power in the WB also stems from the unresolved Kosovo status. Given that Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), with the power to veto a decision on Kosovo's potential membership of the UN, Moscow is a key factor in this regard. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin manipulated Kosovo's secession from Serbia to justify the annexation of Crimea in 2014¹⁰ and currently uses it as a precedent to justify the right of four Ukrainian regions to declare independence,¹¹ Moscow's Kosovo policy remains unchanged and Russia has continued to refuse to recognise Kosovo.¹² By endorsing Serbia's stance on the Kosovo issue, the Kremlin has gained significant leverage in the country, building on historical, religious and cultural ties between the Russian and Serbian peoples. As a consequence,

⁸ “Western Balkans-EU – international trade in goods statistics”, Eurostat, March 2022.

⁹ I.N. Sushkova and A. Koumpoti, “FDI to and from the Russian Federation: A Case Study of the Western Balkans and the Role of the EU”, in C. Nikas (ed.) *Economic Growth in the European Union: Analyzing SME and Investment Policies*, Springer, 2020, pp. 127-53.

¹⁰ “Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession”, *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2014.

¹¹ “How the ‘Kosovo Precedent’ Shaped Putin’s Plan to Invade Ukraine”, *Balkan Insight*, 9 March 2022.

¹² “Russian Ambassador to Serbia Denies Change in Putin’s Kosovo Policy”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 April 2022.

Serbia is the only WB and one of the few European states that refuse to impose any sanctions against the Russian Federation. This has led to *backsliding* in its alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy for the first time since the accession process began.¹³ To conclude, even though Russia's influence in the WB is generally limited to the areas where the Orthodox Christian population lives, as long as the Kosovo dispute remains unresolved and until energy supply is diversified, Moscow remains an important geopolitical player in the region.

China – down the New Silk Road

After launching the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative, now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),¹⁴ China proved to be the EU's most serious economic competitor in the WB. A year before the OBOR Initiative was officially announced in September 2013, China's cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) was launched by the First China-CEEC Summit in Warsaw, with the goal of enhancing cooperation in the infrastructure, transportation, trade and investment sectors.¹⁵ The fact that all WB partners participate in this format of cooperation – with the exception of Kosovo,* which is not recognised by China – proves that the region plays an important role in the BRI and, from Beijing's perspective, represents a “gateway to the EU market and land bridge between the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus and Central Europe”.¹⁶ Although WB countries do not represent a formal sub-group within broader China-CEEC cooperation, at the

¹³ See: “[Serbia 2022 Report](#)”, European Commission, 12 October 2022, pp. 134-37.

¹⁴ Belt and Road Initiative is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale (For more information: “[China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape](#)”, OECD, 2018).

¹⁵ For more information: <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>.

¹⁶ Hänsel and Feyrabend (2018), p. 6.

bilateral level, China's approach to the WB partners includes more prominent financing of infrastructure projects compared to other CEEC.¹⁷ Altogether, it can be concluded that China unequivocally perceives WB as a region in which it can project its growing economic power, which may come into conflict with the EU's value-based approach.¹⁸

Even though Beijing officially supports the EU integration process of the WB and the realisation of planned infrastructure projects that can contribute to economic modernisation, competitiveness and connectivity in the region, China's investments are mostly incompatible with EU standards and pose a serious threat to the rise of corruption.¹⁹ These concerns are primarily related to economic practices that fail to meet environmental standards, competition regulations, as well as public procurement procedures. For instance, there are serious indications that a China-owned tyre factory in Zrenjanin, Serbia, has compromised the air, soil and water in this area, which many environmental activists have warned about.²⁰ Moreover, there are many cases of violation of EU competition rules, which in the case of a Chinese loan for coal power plants in Tuzla resulted in the Energy Community opening a procedure against BiH over illegal state aid.²¹ The lack of transparency of Chinese projects also fuels already growing corruption in the region, clearly illustrated by the project for the construction of two highways in North Macedonia by the Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro, in what became one of the biggest

¹⁷ W. Zweers, V. Shopov, F. Putten, M. Petkova, and M. Lemstra, "China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?", Clingendael, August 2020, p. 8.

¹⁸ M. Vučić, "European Union integration and the Belt and Road Initiative: A Curious case of Serbia", *International problems*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2020, p. 346.

¹⁹ Hänsel and Feyerabend (2018), p. 6.

²⁰ "Aktivisti traže ekološke garancije za fabriku Linglong u Zrenjaninu" ("Activists demand environmental guarantees for the Linglong factory in Zrenjanin"), *Radio Free Europe*, 16 February 2021.

²¹ "Energy Community opens infringement procedure against Bosnia-Herzegovina over illegal Tuzla 7 state aid", BankWatch Network, 26 March 2019.

corruption cases in the country's history.²² Altogether, these examples indicate that the WB's cooperation with China, although it has helped these countries reduce unemployment and boost economic growth, often has other harmful societal effects and might negatively affect their accession to the EU.

Although current China-WB cooperation primarily involves the economic domain, there is a reasonable fear that China's growing economic influence could easily be used as political leverage in the future. Besides the usual conflict between China's economic practices and the EU *acquis communautaire*, the fact that most of these infrastructure and energy projects are financed through loans is gradually bringing WB countries into a Chinese debt trap. Montenegro's loan from China's Export-Import Bank for the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway is the most illustrative example of this,²³ though the situation is only slightly better in other countries. Large sums of money have been borrowed from China by North Macedonia for its highways, for instance, by BiH for a number of energy projects, and by Serbia for several infrastructure projects. These loans have increased each of these countries' debt to China to around 10% of their total foreign debt, and if this borrowing trend continues, other WB countries could fall into a state of financial dependency on China.²⁴ These are undoubtedly the main tools for China's potential political influence over WB governments and one of the greatest challenges for the EU, which has yet to show a strong resolve to deal with them.

²² A. Krstinovska, "Exporting Corruption? The Case of a Chinese Highway Project in North Macedonia", China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, 6 November 2019.

²³ "Montenegro, the first victim of China's debt-trap diplomacy", *New Eastern Europe*, 7 May 2021.

²⁴ Zweers, Shopov, Putten, Petkova, and Lemstra (2020), pp. 14-15.

Innovating the Enlargement Policy for a 2030 European Integration Agenda

Previous sections have analysed the drawbacks of enlargement policy and have demonstrated how the undemocratic regimes of third countries have used the vacuum left by the EU to advance their own political and economic agendas, often to the detriment of that of the European Union. This section turns to a discussion of proposals made by the European Policy Centre (CEP) in Belgrade and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels, with the goal of breaking the enlargement gridlock and restoring the EU's footing in the region.²⁵ The Template for Staged Accession to the EU, published in October 2021, seeks to achieve a twofold objective. On the one hand, it sets out to restore motivation for reforms needed to attain EU membership by proposing that certain benefits, which normally only belong to the membership phase, be extended to the candidates while they are still negotiating accession, in two separate pre-accession stages. On the other hand, it aims to unlock political will in the enlargement-sceptic Member States so as to proceed towards actual accession of the candidates by allaying their fears related to the functioning of a further enlarged Union.

The Staged Accession proposal:
Pre-accession benefits

The Model of Staged Accession proposes bundles of benefits for acceding states as a reward for improved EU membership preparedness. To make them effective and ensure they really can stimulate reforms, rewards need to be clearly outlined and predictable as well as matter in terms of size and amounts. The Model therefore intentionally proposes packages of rewards which combine increasing funding with more substantive institutional participation, in order to create a positive impact

²⁵ "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", European Policy Centre (CEP) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), October 2021.

on the society, economy and political representatives of the candidate countries.

Access to increasing funding would have to be strongly conditional on progress in reforms and improved readiness for assuming membership obligations and functioning within the EU. The initial proposal of the Model is that already in the first stage a candidate gains access to funding corresponding to up to 50% of what it would be eligible for as a conventional Member state, on condition that it achieves at least moderate ratings for cluster averages (3 on the 1-5 scale). In the second stage, the funding could reach a level of up to 75% of conventional membership, on condition that each cluster reaches a good average rating of 4. Once a candidate closes all negotiation chapters and the accession treaty is signed and ratified, it enters the EU as a new Member state – the third accession stage, detailed in the next section. At that stage, it can benefit from all funding mechanisms as conventional Member States and also starts to contribute to the EU budget. The opening of new funds to support socio-economic development as part of progression towards membership would serve as a major carrot for the governments in the Western Balkans to press forward with otherwise hesitant reform agendas.

An additional incentive for the candidate governments would be created by allowing them to participate more closely in the political life of the EU through gradual access to various institutions as observers. Already from Stage I, candidates would attain selective observer status in the main EU institutions – the European Parliament and select configurations of the Council. As the country proceeds to Stage II, its level of participation in the institutions advances, and it obtains generalised observer status. Once a country becomes a new Member state in Stage III, its ministers and other representatives gain voting powers in the Council and its committees in simple and qualified majority voting procedures. Moreover, its citizens can vote and be elected as members of the European Parliament, just like in any other Member state.

The bigger pre-accession carrots, however, need to be coupled with effective sticks to ensure that reforms are carried out continuously and to prevent regression in achieved standards and values. Hence, the Model envisages a functional approach to freezing and even reversing certain rights and benefits, relying on the qualified majority vote (QMV) of conventional Member States or indeed on reversed QMV, as proposed in the revised enlargement methodology. Reversibility between stages is also possible, though as a last resort against a backsliding candidate country. If it is transparent and easily implementable, the threat of reversal would help to dissuade political leaders from non-compliance and backsliding in the reform processes.

The staged accession proposal:
Allaying the Member States' fears

One frequently cited obstacle to enlarging the European Union is the fear that additional members would further hamper EU decision-making due to the still extensive use of unanimity voting. To address this concern, the Model proposes that, during the temporary Stage III, new Member States' veto rights in the Council would be limited, based on specific provisions laid out in their accession treaties as temporary derogations of membership rights. A new Member State would still be able to play a constructive role in consensus-building, without being able to block major EU decisions. Once the provisional status expires, a new Member State proceeds to the stage of conventional membership, which includes full voting rights in the Council. This time-barred limitation would allow the entry of new Member States into the Union while it is still undertaking internal reforms aimed at improving the decision-making processes to fit the growing number of members.

Another problem which has created fears of further enlargements to "new" and unconsolidated democracies, such as those in the Western Balkans, concerns the weaknesses of the EU's mechanisms to keep its own members in check regarding respect for the fundamental values enshrined in

Article 2 of the TEU. The Article 7 procedure of the TEU is cumbersome and the requirement for a unanimous vote to sanction a Member state that is in breach of the Union's values hampers its effectiveness when troublemakers forge alliances. The Model recognises that Western Balkan countries would need a long time to prove themselves as functional democracies and proposes a period of post-accession monitoring and even freezing of certain membership rights (such as funding) in case of backsliding in these fundamental areas. This provision of the Model, too, creates a safety period in which internal EU rules for sanctioning breaches of fundamental values would be fixed and made effective, without making the candidates wait at the EU's door. Moreover, subjecting the new members to post-accession monitoring of functioning in areas in which the EU lacks proper mechanisms to sanction non-compliant Member States can go a long way towards securing sustainability of reforms implemented before accession.

Eventually, as the transitional provisions of the third stage expire based on the provisions of accession treaties, the new members become conventional members with all rights and benefits – whatever that status would mean in the EU treaty framework of the day. In a way, the automatic expiration of these limitations creates a risk for the EU should it not manage to reform itself while the new members are still under the special regime in stage III. However, it would also create pressure on it to agree on these internal improvements and ensure that it is fit for future challenges.

So far, the Model of Staged Accession has managed to create visible traction in the policy reality. It was echoed in the speeches of the President of the European Council in the European Economic and Social Committee,²⁶ as well as in the “non-papers” of two Member States (Austria and later Czechia), all of which have proposed the gradual integration of the

²⁶ “Speech by President Charles Michel at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee”, European Council, 18 May 2022.

Western Balkan region into the EU, picking up on several ideas from the Model. Building on the invitation of the June 2022 European Council, the EU's institutions are already working on proposals to further advance their gradual integration. The implementation of the Model, in all its aspects, has strong potential to restore trust in the EU's enlargement policy and strengthen pro-EU policies in the Western Balkans, as well as in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Towards the Epilogue of EU Enlargement to the Balkans

Enlargement has historically often served as a major incentive for the EU to reform its institutions and decision-making procedures, in order to retain functionality with an increased number of Member States. The 2004-07 enlargement wave is a case in point, as both the Treaty of Nice and the Treaty of Lisbon were to a great extent motivated by the anticipated expansion to the East and the need to prepare the Union for a much more diverse membership. The EU today similarly needs a boost to address the already demonstrated problems of its functioning as EU27, which may be further exacerbated once it is enlarged. Although the Model of Staged Accession offers a solution for the EU's own reforms to proceed in parallel with enlargement, they should be initiated immediately, to demonstrate that the EU is willing to and capable of making itself apt for the current and future challenges, which span much wider than accommodating the next enlargement.

Therefore, to secure a strong and enlarged EU at the end of the current turbulent decade, as a complement of the proposed innovations of the enlargement procedure, members and candidates should agree on a political pledge, acknowledging the common challenge and marking the start of a joint effort towards that goal. As recently proposed, such a "joint plan would explicitly state the obligations of the EU member and candidate states in terms of strategic EU integration with

clearly stated measures and deadlines for its implementation by 2030, which should be [its] indicative timeframe”.²⁷ This Joint European Integration Plan 2030 would in a way mark the end of the current “teacher-student” relationship in which the “perfect” EU continuously makes demands from the “naughty” candidates, who repeatedly fail to deliver. It would put the two sides on an equal footing, recognise the joint interests as well as the challenges they need to face, and create concrete plans, with actions and deadlines that need to be met in order to safeguard the EU’s functionality as well as geopolitical autonomy in the face of vast and growing challenges. Indeed, such a common agenda could go a long way towards supporting institutional preparations for enlargement, creating a consensus about the will to proceed with accepting new members into the Union and ensuring that candidates pursue a proactive reform agenda.

While the year 2030 would be a target date for accession and for the EU’s internal preparations, it should in no case be communicated as a promised date for either. Clearly, if the candidates fail to undertake the reforms and prepare for membership, the target year will move back. As for the EU’s own reforms, the temporary membership rights limitations for new members would give the Union an additional “grace period” to make itself fit for the enlarged membership. What is more, new Member States would thus get an opportunity to play a constructive role in building a better functioning Union, as they would be included as partners in these discussions, without being given the power to block decisions.

Finally, such a joint political pledge, coupled with further enlargement policy innovation based on the Model of Staged Accession, would signal to third actors seeking to undermine the EU in the Balkans that the Union is serious about its own sphere of influence and geopolitical ambitions. A smoother and accelerated accession process and eventual enlargement by

²⁷ S. Majstorović, “[Joint European Integration Plan 2030](#)”, European Policy Centre (EPC), 22 December 2022.

2030 would logically lead to a diminishing dependence on third actors and also require their influence to be contained within the framework of EU membership, i.e. to respect the EU's fundamental values and environmental, state aid, competition and other rules and standards. The strong cultural ties that exist, for example, between the region's Orthodox Christian populations and Russia, as well as economic relations with China, will continue to exist, but they will be shaped to a large extent by the democratic, human rights and other fundamental values of the EU.

2. Russia in the Balkans: Interests and Instruments

Vuk Vuksanović

There has been much talk about Russian influence in the Balkans in recent years. The ongoing war in Ukraine has increased interest in Moscow's presence in the region. The frequent concern is that Russia will try to act as a destabilising force in the region to disrupt the West, with which Russia is in a state of rivalry in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹ This raises the need to assess Moscow's interests and instruments in the region.

In order to do that, there are a number of important points to consider. The first is that this region has never in itself been a priority for Russian foreign and security policy but is only important as an indicator of Russia's place in the world and as an extension of Russia's wider relationship with the West. In that context, Russia uses the Balkans as a staging ground to demonstrate that it has reclaimed the status of global and European great power that the West denied Moscow in the 1990s. Moreover, by being present in the region, Russia gains leverage and bargaining power with the West, which is particularly important when the dynamic of rivalry begins to dominate ties between Russia and the West.

The second important point is that Russian influence in the region is frequently overstated. In reality, in economic and

¹ P. Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor", *Carnegie Politika*, 20 September 2022.

security terms, the West outmatches Russia's strategic clout in the Balkans. However, Russia has three sources of influence in the Balkans and the region's pivotal country, Serbia, that it exploits skilfully and effectively: energy, the unresolved Kosovo dispute, and soft power, interpreted as the enormous popularity that Russia enjoys among large swaths of the local population.

The third point is that after the ongoing Ukraine war, it is theoretically possible that Russia will try to generate a security crisis to divert Western attention from Ukraine. However, this option is also unlikely as the Western security presence and pressures on local power centres remain, leaving limited options for Moscow if it decides to pursue that goal. Moreover, to stir trouble in the Balkans, Russia needs support from the local elites, but none of them wants to take any chances on behalf of Moscow.

The three above-mentioned instruments of influence that Moscow has in the Balkans remain, but there will also be major changes in that domain. The Russian energy footprint will be weakened as Russia's Gazprom is having a tougher time conducting its operations, particularly in Serbia, as a result of EU sanctions against Russian companies. This footprint will also be weakened by the EU's efforts to help the region with energy diversification. The region will probably continue to buy Russian gas, but Moscow's ability to use energy as political leverage will be hindered. Nevertheless, Russia's two other sources of influence will remain, particularly in Serbia: the unresolved Kosovo dispute and soft power. These two factors will ensure that Russia still has some pull in the Balkans, although to a limited extent.

More Than Just the Balkans – Moscow's Interest in the Region

Despite frequent claims that Russia is a major threat to the Balkans, this goes against the region's geopolitical realities. The region itself has never constituted a strategic priority from the

Kremlin's foreign and security policy. Naturally, Russia has some interests in the Balkans that are region-specific. The region can be important for Moscow as a territory in which to construct the alternative infrastructure of gas pipelines that bypass Ukraine, or Russia can simply try to win new markets there for the Russian state and private enterprises. At one point in the early 2000s, Russian foreign policy elites defined economic cooperation as the main focus of Russia's foreign policy in the region.² For instance, it was during that period, in 2005, that Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska acquired an aluminium plant and its associated bauxite mines in Montenegro, abandoning it a few years later after falling out with the local government.³

However, these are minor interests for Moscow compared to Russia's position in the post-Soviet space or its status as a global superpower. Therefore, the Kremlin perceives the Balkans as important only to the extent that it has implications for Moscow's regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space or Russia's place in the wider international system. While it is tempting to trace the historical roots of Russia's engagement in the Balkans to the former days of Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union, such engagement falls under the domain of the strategic realities of the post-Cold War world.⁴ Russian modern-day interests in the Balkans were shaped by the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the wars that followed the latter's dissolution.

During the Yugoslav wars, Russia tried to participate in international peacekeeping in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina within UN and NATO peace missions.⁵ With

² S. Secieru, *Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks*, Brief 8, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Paris, 2019, pp. 2-3.

³ N. MacDonald, "Oligarch's Battle Clouds an Economy", *Financial Times*, 17 October 2008.

⁴ "Russia in the Balkans - Panel 1 (The Balkans in Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy)", Russia in the Balkans conference, London School of Economics and Political Science, 13 March 2015.

⁵ S. Secieru (2019), p. 2.

the passage of time, Russia became more frustrated with the West as it believed that the West did not perceive Russia as an equal partner. Moscow's frustration became particularly pronounced regarding Western military unilateralism, starting with NATO's 1995 intervention against Bosnian Serbs.⁶ NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 played an even greater role in shaping Moscow's thinking about the Balkans. For the Kremlin, the war in Kosovo indicated Russia's vulnerability to ethnic separatism and ethnic conflicts within Russia and in its periphery. This perception was partly shaped by the fact that the Second Chechen War occurred in the same year as the Kosovo war.⁷

Russian frustration also grew because NATO's intervention against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia took place the same year as the first round of NATO enlargement, in 1999, when Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary become members of the Alliance. For Moscow, this meant that NATO was penetrating what was formerly Moscow's sphere of influence and getting closer to Russia's borders, but more importantly than that, the Kosovo war marked NATO's transformation from a defensive alliance into a battle group.⁸ Ultimately, the Yugoslav wars also provided painful insights to Russia, not just regarding the post-Soviet space or Moscow's role in European security, but about Russia's place as a global power within the international system. NATO's war against Belgrade because of Kosovo underscored Moscow's disdain towards American unipolarity as the war displayed a world in which Washington is the ultimate rule-maker and Moscow is not a power centre whose point of view needs to be taken into consideration.⁹

⁶ J.J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5, 2014, p. 78.

⁷ V. Vuksanović, "An Unlikely Partnership in Trouble: Serbia and Azerbaijan", Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 19 August 2020.

⁸ F. Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 3, 2016, p.33.

⁹ V. Vuksanović, "Serbs Are Not 'Little Russians'", *The American Interest*, 26 July 2018.

Today, Russia's interest in the post-Soviet space and its global power status-seeking trumps anything that the Balkans can offer to Moscow. The Balkans have become a useful instrument for Russia in cementing its regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space as Kosovo's slide towards independence again awakened Moscow's tendency to draw analogies between territorial conflicts in the Balkans and those in Moscow's backyard. Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia with Western backing in 2008, which provided Russia with a precedent to invoke territorial disputes in its neighbourhood and a way to deflect Western criticism by accusing Western powers of double standards. Moscow skilfully invoked the Kosovo precedent when it imposed the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on Georgia in 2008 in the wake of the Russo-Georgian war.¹⁰ The Kosovo precedent was also invoked in 2014 as a justification for the annexation of Crimea.¹¹ Most recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin used the case of Kosovo in 2022 to justify the Russian claim on Donbass.¹²

Russia's search for great power status also informs Russia's Balkan policies. The Balkans are important for Russia as an arena in which to demonstrate that Russia has reclaimed global and European great power status after being denied that status by Western powers during the 1990s, including through Western interventions in the region.¹³ The period when Russia became more active in the Balkans in the second half of the 2000s also corresponds with tensions between Russia and the US on issues like the colour revolutions, missile defence, potential NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, and the Russo-Georgian War.¹⁴

¹⁰ Vuksanović (2020).

¹¹ B. Barlovać, "Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession", *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2014.

¹² "Putin: Right to recognise Donbas republics same as how Kosovo got recognition", *NT*, 18 March 2022.

¹³ B. Buzan and O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 430.

¹⁴ V. Vuksanović, "Systemic Pressures, Party Politics and Foreign Policy: Serbia Between Russia and the West, 2008-2020", London School of Economics and

Russia's *modus operandi* in the Balkans frequently falls under the description of "spoiler power", not a power interested in acting as a geopolitical alternative to the West but one intent on undermining Western policies and interests in the region.¹⁵ In the worst-case scenario, Russia gets the satisfaction of irritating and obstructing the West. In contrast, in the best-case scenario, it gets a bargaining chip that it can trade in a hypothetical great power deal with the West, particularly the US, for something important to Russia, particularly in the post-Soviet space.¹⁶ This role became particularly pronounced in the wake of the original Ukraine crisis of 2014, when Russia started to perceive the Balkans as a way to push back against the West for what Moscow believes is encroachment into its sphere of influence.¹⁷ For Moscow, the region remains Europe's "soft underbelly", an area of European vulnerability where the Kremlin can instigate controlled crises to pressure the West and divert its attention from Ukraine.¹⁸ In 2015, Russia also vetoed a resolution describing the Srebrenica massacre perpetrated during the Bosnian war (1992-95) as genocide.¹⁹

Security cooperation with Serbia is one way for Russia to irritate the West. The military exercises, like the Slavic Brotherhood trilateral drill, held with Belarus since 2015, weapons delivery to Serbia and the existence of a Serbo-Russian humanitarian centre in Niš fall under that rubric.²⁰ Moscow's

Political Science (PhD Thesis), July 2021, p. 105.

¹⁵ N. Burazer, "[EWB Interview] Bechev: Russia is playing the 'spoiler' in Western Balkans", *European Western Balkans*, 28 November 2017.

¹⁶ Vuksanović (2021), p. 213.

¹⁷ D. Bechev, "Russia's Foray into the Balkans: Who Is Really to Blame?", Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), 12 October 2017.

¹⁸ I. Krastev, "The Balkans are the soft underbelly of Europe", *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015.

¹⁹ "Russia Vetoes UN Move to Call Srebrenica' Genocide", *BBC*, 8 July 2015.

²⁰ V. Vuksanović, "Russia and China in the Western Balkans: The Spoiler Power and the Unexpected Power", in N. Džuverović and V. Stojarová (eds.), *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective*, London and New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 241.

spoiler tactics also extend to the realm of diplomacy and politics. The UN Security Council veto is an effective tool for Moscow. In 2014, Russia abstained in the UN Security Council vote on the extension of the mandate for the EU's stabilisation mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUFOR.²¹ Seven years later, in 2021, Moscow allowed the extension of EUFOR's mandate on condition that the Office of the High Representative (OHR) would not be mentioned in the UN resolution and that the High Representative would not address the UN Security Council.²² Russia also uses political tools. In August 2018, Greece expelled Russian diplomats who communicated with Greek political groups intent on sabotaging the deal resolving the name dispute between Greece and what is now North Macedonia.²³ Russian intelligence can also be employed. In 2019, an online video emerged of a Russian intelligence officer then stationed at the Russian embassy in Belgrade bribing a retired Serbian military officer.²⁴

Limited, but Effective – Russia's Instruments of Influence in the Balkans

Russian influence in the Balkans is limited in both economic and security terms, particularly compared to the EU. For the Western Balkans, the EU is the main partner for exports (81.0 %) and imports (57.9 %).²⁵ After the December 2022 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana, the EU launched €1 billion energy support package for the region, as part of the

²¹ Secieru (2019), p. 2.

²² "Russia's Victory in Bosnia-Herzegovina; 'Giving an Ultimatum'", *B92*, 3 November 2021.

²³ A. Osborn, "Russia Expels Greek Diplomats in Retaliatory Move", *Reuters*, 6 August 2018.

²⁴ "Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic Confirms Russian Spy Operation after Bribe Video", *DW.com*, 22 November 2019.

²⁵ "Western Balkans-EU - international trade in goods statistics", *Eurostat*, March 2022.

Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans of €9 billion in grants, with the ultimate aim of mobilising €30 billion in total.²⁶ In comparison, except for energy, Russia is a minor partner in exports (2.7 %) and imports (3.9 %).²⁷ Even before the war in Ukraine, in 2021 Russia's Sberbank sold its subsidiaries in Southeastern Europe.²⁸

In security terms, Russia is also heavily outgunned. Unlike the West, Russia has no military presence in the Balkans. In 2003, in the early years of the Putin era, Russia pulled back its peacekeepers stationed in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁹ Even now, this 2003 decision strengthens the argument about the Balkans not being a priority for Moscow and Russia having limited capacity in a NATO-dominated environment. Indeed, most countries in the region are members of NATO or aspirants for NATO membership.

Serbia is not interested in joining NATO and is geographically encircled by NATO members. However, even Belgrade has a formal relationship with the Alliance, as it has been participating in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme since 2006 and has adopted the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest level of cooperation between NATO and non-Member states.³⁰ NATO's Liaison Office is situated in Serbia's Ministry of Defence building, and its staff have diplomatic immunity.³¹ In contrast, despite numerous Russian requests, the Russian staff at the Serbian-Russian humanitarian centre do not enjoy diplomatic immunity in Serbia, and the Centre's future is uncertain because of Western sanctions against Russia and

²⁶ I. Todorović, "EU launches EUR 1 billion energy support package for Western Balkans", *Balkan Green Energy News*, 7 December 2022.

²⁷ B. Stanicek, "Russia's influence in the Western Balkans", European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2022, p. 2.

²⁸ "Russia's Sberbank to Sell Subsidiaries in Central and Eastern Europe", *Reuters*, 3 November 2021.

²⁹ A. Nikitin, "Partners in Peacekeeping", NATO, 1 October 2004.

³⁰ "Relations with Serbia", NATO, 23 May 2022.

³¹ V. Velebit, "Serbia and NATO: From hostility to close cooperation", European Western Balkans, 15 November 2017.

pressures by the EU.³² The Serbian military also conducts more military exercises with NATO than with Russia. In 2021, the Serbian army participated in 14 exercises with NATO members and partners and four military exercises with Russia. Two years earlier, in 2019, the Serbian military held 23 military exercises with NATO members and five with the Russian military.³³

Despite objective limitations to Russia's capabilities in the Balkans, Russia still has three main instruments through which it exercises its influence: the unresolved Kosovo dispute, energy dependence, and Russian soft power, manifested through its popularity among parts of the population.³⁴ The independence of Kosovo and the global financial crisis of 2008 ushered in a power vacuum in the Balkans due to Western inattentiveness, representing two systemic realities that allowed Russia to be more assertive in the region. These two transformations were decisive in creating an opening for Russia in the Balkans, but they also encouraged some Balkan nations, primarily Serbia, to hedge their bets by engaging with Russia.³⁵

In the years before Kosovo issued its declaration of independence, Russia became more active in the Balkans by backing the Serbian case in the dispute as a counterweight to the US, which supported the claim of Kosovo Albanians.³⁶ Kosovo's independence placed Serbia in a relationship of political dependency towards Russia because of Moscow's protection within the UN Security Council, giving Russia a political and diplomatic presence in the region via Serbia. That way, Russia also perpetuates the Kosovo dispute, creating a situation similar to frozen conflict that prevents the region from being integrated

³² "Demostat claims Belgrade changing status of Serbian-Russian humanitarian center", *N1*, 20 June 2022.

³³ L. Sterić, M. Bjeloš, and M. Ignjatijević, "Balkan Defence Monitor", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), 14 March 2022, p. 37.

³⁴ V. Vuksanović, "Why Serbia Won't Stop Playing the Russia Card Any Time Soon", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 October 2019.

³⁵ V. Vuksanović (2021), pp. 5-6.

³⁶ D. Ekinci, *Russia and the Balkans after the Cold War*, Libertas Paper 76, Rangendingen: Libertas, p. 68.

into Western institutions. In doing so, Russia can try to trade its cooperativeness in resolving the Kosovo dispute for Western acquiescence in resolving disputes in the post-Soviet space in a way that suits Moscow.³⁷ Through the Kosovo dispute, Russia profits as it gets the satisfaction of opposing the West while establishing a precedent to invoke in the post-Soviet space.³⁸

Energy supplies are also part of Russia's toolkit in the Balkans. The Balkans are frequently perceived as a territory through which gas pipeline infrastructure can bypass Ukraine to enable Moscow to supply gas to the European market, an idea which came to the fore as price disputes between Moscow and Kiev in 2006 and 2009 caused an energy crisis in Europe.³⁹ This was the main driver behind the South Stream gas pipeline project, envisioned in 2006 to transport 63 billion cubic metres of Russian gas annually across the Black Sea and the Balkans onto Italy and Austria.⁴⁰ In 2008, Russia's Gazprom acquired a majority stake in the Serbian multinational oil and gas company Naftna Industrija Srbije (Petroleum Industry of Serbia, NIS) from the Serbian government.⁴¹ The South Stream project was cancelled in 2014 as the EU opposed the project because it breached the EU's Third Energy Package, which limits how much pipeline ownership a company can have if it also owns its contents.⁴² In January 2021, the Russo-Turkish gas pipeline project TurkStream, a replacement of South Stream, began operating, affirming the gas dependency of Balkan countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on Russia.⁴³

³⁷ Vuksanović (2021), p. 138.

³⁸ D. Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 60.

³⁹ A. Vihma and U. Turksen, "The Geoeconomics of the South Stream Pipeline Project", *Journal of International Affairs*, 1 January 2016.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ O. Shchedrov, "Serbia signs strategic energy deal with Russia", *Reuters*, 25 January 2008.

⁴² G. Gotev, "Russia confirms decision to abandon South Stream", *Euractiv*, 10 December 2014.

⁴³ "Russia's Gazprom begins gas deliveries to Serbia, Bosnia via TurkStream

Such energy ties also provide Russia with a conduit for political influence. Speaking about the cancellation of the South Stream pipeline project in 2014, former Serbian President Boris Tadic (2004-12) stressed that Serbia's sale of NIS to Gazprom was motivated by both energy and political interests, explaining why NIS was sold to Gazprom below the market price. Namely, Serbia believed that by selling NIS it was securing Russia's guarantee that the South Stream pipeline project would be constructed across Serbian territory and Moscow's protection on Kosovo.⁴⁴ Russia's presence in the energy sector also takes the form of the Russia-leaning Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), a junior partner in Serbia's ruling coalition.⁴⁵ This party is led by Serbia's new Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, who will also be the coordinator of Serbia's security services, while the director of Serbia's state-owned natural gas provider Srbijagas, Dusan Bajatovic, another player closely linked to Russia, is also a member of the SPS.

The perfect example of how Russian energy also provides political leverage to Moscow was seen in November 2021. In response to the energy crisis, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met President Putin in Sochi to negotiate a new gas price for Serbia as the old supply contract was expiring and the heating season and electoral cycle in Serbia were about to begin. The deal stipulated the price of US\$270 per 1,000 cubic meters for a six months period and a commitment that the amount of gas delivered would also increase as Serbian gas consumption had doubled at that point. Belgrade's political counter-favour to Moscow remains unknown, but there is a strong belief that Putin used the moment to politically discipline Vučić.⁴⁶

pipeline", *Reuters*, 1 January 2021.

⁴⁴ "Tadić uveren da će Južni tok biti izgrađen" ("Tadić is convinced that the South Stream will be built"), *N1*, 2 December 2014.

⁴⁵ S. Mitrescu and V. Vuksanović, "The Wider Balkan Region at the Crossroads of a New Regional Energy Matrix", New Strategy Center and Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, October 2022, p. 30.

⁴⁶ V. Vuksanović, "Russia's gas gift to Serbia comes with strings attached",

Soft power is the final source of Russian influence in the region, and Russia has profited from it significantly. Russia's soft power credentials manifest themselves in the enormous popularity it enjoys among significant portions of the local population. Frequently, Russian soft power allure is not based on the genuine attractiveness of Russia's social and political model but on the dissatisfaction of local societies with the West.⁴⁷ This is particularly pronounced in Serbia, Russia's main partner in the Balkans. A very important display of, and a watershed moment for, Russia's soft power allure in Serbia came in 2011 when Vladimir Putin, in the capacity of Russian Prime Minister, visited Belgrade. On that occasion, Putin received the highest distinction granted by the Serbian Orthodox Church and then attended a friendly football match between Red Star Belgrade and a team from his hometown, Zenit St Petersburg, with Red Star fans chanting "Putin, you Serb, Serbia is with you".⁴⁸ From that point on, it became clear that Russian influence could also be openly displayed because local elites frequently used ties with Russia as tools of domestic promotion.⁴⁹

Russia itself has established links with local players across the region, including pro-Russian business groups, left and right political groups with pro-Russian sympathies and Orthodox Church representatives.⁵⁰ Moscow builds public support and bargaining power with local governments through these groups.⁵¹ Russian Radio Sputnik has operated its Serbian bureau since 2014.⁵² To compensate for the closure of RT channels in

Euronews, 4 December 2021.

⁴⁷ V. Vuksanović, S. Cvijić, and M. Samorukov, "Beyond Sputnik and RT. How Does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), December 2022, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Bechev (2017), p. 225.

⁴⁹ Vuksanović (2021), pp. 147-48.

⁵⁰ H. Conley et al., *Kremlin's Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Eastern and Central Europe*, Washington DC and Lanham, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), October 2016, pp. 6-7.

⁵¹ Bechev (2017), p. 236.

⁵² Secieru (2019), p. 2.

Europe, Russia's RT decided to open a news portal in Serbia, with plans to launch a news channel in 2024.⁵³

These facts support the notion that the Russian definition of soft power is different from the American definition of the concept which presumes the ability to influence others through the power of attraction, whereas Moscow believes that soft power credentials can be boosted through deliberate state policies.⁵⁴ However, the main source of Russia's soft power appeal does not come from Kremlin-orchestrated campaigns but from local players and local amplifiers. In Serbia, the main source of pro-Russian narratives are pro-government tabloids, which glorify Russia so that the ruling elites can profit domestically from Russian popularity and blackmail the West by inflating the presence of the Russian factor.⁵⁵ A powerful example of how local elites use ties with Russia to build domestic legitimacy is Vladimir Putin's 2019 visit to Belgrade, where he was greeted by vast crowds in front of the Orthodox Church of Saint Sava at a time when the Serbian government was faced with massive protests.⁵⁶ As a result of this approach, according to a recent poll, 50.5% of Serbian citizens believe that Russia is the country's most important partner and 65.8% that Russia is Serbia's greatest friend.⁵⁷

The Future After Ukraine

With Russia invading Ukraine in 2022, the question remains: what is the future of Russian influence in the Balkans? In theory, it is possible that Russia could resort to hybrid war measures against Western interests in the region, but Western vigilance

⁵³ "RT Launches Local Website, Broadcasting in Serbia", *The Moscow Times*, 15 November 2022.

⁵⁴ Bechev (2017), p. 226.

⁵⁵ Vuksanović, Cvijić, and Samorukov (2022), p. 10.

⁵⁶ Vuksanović (2019).

⁵⁷ Vuksanović, Cvijić, and Samorukov (2022), p. 8.

would seriously lower that possibility.⁵⁸ It is already evident that the West is taking this possibility seriously. The European Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo has received extra personnel, as has the EUFOR mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵⁹ NATO's KFOR mission in Kosovo is also on the ground. Serbia cannot get weaponry purchased from Russia because of EU sanctions, as it remains encircled by the EU and NATO.⁶⁰ In June 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov cancelled his visit to Belgrade because the European air space was closed to Russian aeroplanes.⁶¹

If Moscow has the ambition to cause trouble, it cannot do so without assistance from local elites, and they are unwilling to take any risks for the sake of Moscow's geopolitical ambitions.⁶² The local elites and the ethnic groups they lead are not Moscow's obedient proxies but self-interested actors who leverage their ties with Moscow for their own ends. Even the regime in Serbia, one of the rare European countries that have not completely closed its doors to Russia, is not fully aligned with Russia. Instead, it balances and plays off Russia and the West against each other in order to score a better bargain on issues like Kosovo and improve the country's position in the Western security architecture.⁶³ In April 2022, Serbian pro-government tabloids accused Putin of betrayal for comparing Kosovo to Donbass.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ D. Bechev, "War Won't Be Coming Back to the Balkans", *War on the Rocks*, 24 March 2022.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ž. Banović, "Ministar odbrane potvrdio nove probleme sa isporukama naoružanja iz Rusije i Kine; analiziramo šta još nedostaje" ("Defence Minister Confirmed New Problems with Weapons Deliveries from Russia and China: we Analyse What Else is Missing"), *Tango Six*, 27 December 2022.

⁶¹ "Lavrov cancels flight to Serbia after countries close airspace, Interfax reports", *Reuters*, 5 June 2022.

⁶² M. Samorukov, "Why Is All Quiet on Russia's Western Balkan Front?", *Carnegie Politika*, 5 December 2022.

⁶³ Vuksanović (2018).

⁶⁴ M. Stojanović, "Russian Ambassador to Serbia Denies Change in Putin's

The elites in the Balkans frequently play the Russian card to deter the West from criticising the democratic backsliding that the region has experienced in the past several years.⁶⁵ We saw this phenomenon in Serbia in the summer of 2020, when the Serbian pro-government tabloids accused the Russian deep state of fomenting violent anti-lockdown protests in Belgrade.⁶⁶ More famously, the case of the 2016 Montenegro coup, where Russian agents allegedly failed to overthrow the government in an attempt to prevent the country's membership of NATO, shows many inconsistencies in the government's official narrative and leads to the suspicion that the story was used by the Montenegrin government for electoral purposes and to attract Western backing.⁶⁷

The three sources of Russian influence will remain energy, the unresolved Kosovo dispute and soft power. Regarding energy, in May 2022, as the Kremlin suspended gas deliveries to Finland, Poland and Bulgaria after they refused to pay in roubles, Moscow and Belgrade agreed on new gas prices.⁶⁸ The deal involved the replacement of the old 10-year gas supply contract with a new three-year supply contract for the annual delivery of 2.2 billion cubic meters of gas at a price ranging from 340 to 350 per 1,000 cubic meters, depending on the amount.⁶⁹ However, in November 2022, Serbia had to switch oil suppliers as it could no longer import Russian oil via the Janaf oil pipeline in Croatia because of the EU's ban on imports of Russian seaborne oil.⁷⁰ Gazprom's ownership of NIS is also

Kosovo Policy", *Balkan Insight*, 29 April 2022.

⁶⁵ B. Pula, "The Budding Autocrats of the Balkans", *Foreign Policy*, 15 April 2016.

⁶⁶ V. Vuksanović, "Belgrade's New Game: Scapegoating Russia and Courting Europe", *War on the Rocks*, 28 August 2020.

⁶⁷ V. Hopkins, "Indictment tells murky Montenegrin coup tale", *Politico*, 23 May 2017.

⁶⁸ "Serbia secures gas deal with Putin, as West boycotts Russia", *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2022.

⁶⁹ T. Ozturk, "Serbia secures new 3-year deal with Russia for gas supply", *Anadolu Agency*, 29 May 2022.

⁷⁰ V. Dimitrievska, "Serbia and Croatia spar over ban on oil transport through

uncertain in the light of EU sanctions.⁷¹ The EU is willing to support energy diversification projects in the region, which will decrease Moscow's ability to use energy as a political tool.⁷²

However, the Kosovo issue and soft power still help to sustain Moscow's presence in the Balkans. The Kosovo dispute remains unresolved, forcing Belgrade to preserve its partnership with Moscow. Russia's soft power capital is also a powerful force in Serbia and, by extension, in the region. With 63% of the population blaming the West for the war in Ukraine, Serbia is a global outlier ahead of other countries with sympathetic attitudes towards Russian perspectives, including Senegal (52%), Indonesia (50%), Turkey (43%), Nigeria (39%), Moldova (35%) and India (34%).⁷³ The overwhelming majority of Serbs are opposed to sanctions against Russia, 44.1% of them because Serbia experienced sanctions in the 1990s, 24.3% because they perceived Russia as the country's greatest friend, and 11.8% because of the Kosovo issue.⁷⁴ In April 2022, thousands of people gathered in Belgrade to support Russia and its Ukraine campaign, although it is unknown who the organisers of the gathering were.⁷⁵ This is a vulnerability that Russia can also potentially exploit if Belgrade tries to align with EU sanctions against Russia.⁷⁶

The continued salience of the Kosovo dispute in Serbian politics and Russia's popularity in Serbia gives Russia the ability to disrupt the Serbian government if it ever negotiates a settlement of the Kosovo dispute that excludes Russia and denies it an opportunity to ask for something in return. This

Janaf pipeline", *bne IntelliNews*, 6 October 2022.

⁷¹ M. Stojanović, "Serbia Mulls 'Taking Over' Mainly Russian-owned Oil Company", *Balkan Insight*, 14 July 2022.

⁷² Mitrescu and Vuksanovic (2022), pp. 32-33.

⁷³ Vuksanović, Cvijić, and Samorukov (2022), p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁵ "Pro-Russia Serbs protest in Belgrade to support Russia and against NATO", *Euractiv*, 17 April 2022.

⁷⁶ U. Hajdari, "Pandering to Putin comes back to bite Serbia's Vučić?", *Politico*, 7 March 2020.

would be a political fiasco for the Serbian leadership, which cannot afford to be perceived by its population as softer on the issue of Kosovo than the Russian leadership.⁷⁷ We will see this possibility tested in the future as we witness the European efforts to resolve this dispute. This is important in the context of the recent Franco-German proposal to resolve the Kosovo dispute. The proposal involves Serbia not actually recognising Kosovo but not objecting to its membership of international institutions, while Kosovo is expected to form an Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM), an entity guaranteeing autonomy for Kosovo Serbs. The Franco-German proposal enjoys the backing of the US, and Western governments appear willing to pressure both Serbia and Kosovo to accept the agreement. This new reality is primarily the result of the fear caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the desire to close any windows of opportunity for Russian influence.⁷⁸ There are signs that Russia, primarily through its diplomatic representatives in Belgrade, has expressed displeasure with the Franco-German proposal.⁷⁹

However, despite Western pressures, it remains uncertain whether Serbia and Kosovo can agree to Kosovo having a seat at the UN and to the formation of the ASM, respectively.⁸⁰ Russia, preoccupied with Ukraine, can patiently wait and see whether the proposed deal will be accepted and, more importantly, implemented, hoping that just like many previous diplomatic efforts on Kosovo, this too will fail. Nevertheless, suppose the proposal reaches the point of final implementation. In that case, Russia may find a way to sabotage it in order to

⁷⁷ M. Samorukov, “Escaping the Kremlin’s Embrace: Why Serbia Has Tired of Russian Support”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 22 January 2019.

⁷⁸ M. Stojanović, “EU, US Piling Pressure on Serbia to Accept Kosovo Plan, Vucic Says”, *Balkan Insight*, 24 January 2023.

⁷⁹ A. Brzozowski, “Serbia, Kosovo leaders expected to endorse EU plan to normalise relations”, *Euractiv*, 27 February 2023.

⁸⁰ S. Dragojlo, Serbia Rules Out Signing EU Plan Over Kosovo’s UN Membership”, *Balkan Insight*, 1 March 2023.

humiliate the West and prevent the loss of a useful leverage tool. This possibility will remain in play for both the Serbian leadership and the West. Meanwhile, in Serbia, the government in power will have to balance its ties with the EU and Russia for the sake of domestic political survival as Russia remains the most popular foreign country among the population, but the economic well-being of the country is still largely dependent on the EU.⁸¹

Conclusion

Despite frequent suggestions that Russia will generate a new crisis in the Balkans in the wake of Moscow's war in Ukraine, there have been many misconceptions about the region's standing in the strategic thinking of the Russian foreign policy elite. While Russia might have some interests in the region, these are secondary compared to the greater strategic considerations shaping Moscow's thinking and its behaviour in the Balkans.

The region is important to Moscow to the extent that it has implications for Russia's role in the post-Soviet space or its overall position in the international system. This means that the region is important when it gives Russia a precedent (e.g. Kosovo) to invoke in territorial disputes in the post-Soviet space, or as a way to demonstrate that Russia has reclaimed great power status after the humiliations of the 1990s. Russia's presence in the Balkans also gives Moscow leverage in its relations with the West, showing that the region should be viewed as a sideline arena in the wider theatre of Russia-West relations.

Despite the scaremongering of media commentators, Moscow's influence in the region was overstated even before the Ukraine war. Economically, the EU trumps Moscow in the Balkans. Regarding security, Russia has no military presence in the region, where NATO remains the primary security provider.

⁸¹ V. Vuksanović, "Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 June 2020.

Even occasional military cooperation with Serbia is likely to decrease. For years, Russian policy in the region has been based on three instruments of influence: energy dependence, the unresolved Kosovo dispute and soft power.

The war in Ukraine raises the question of the future trajectories of Russian behaviour in the Balkans. While it is theoretically possible that Russia might attempt some subversive operations in the region in order to divert the attention of Western powers away from the war in Ukraine, this scenario is unlikely. It is doubtful because of the increased scrutiny of the Western capitals on local players and Moscow's resources being overly focused on Ukraine. Equally important is the fact that Moscow cannot cause trouble in the Balkans without assistance from the local elites. These elites want to use Russia to gain leverage with the West, but none want to be used as an expendable pawn of Moscow.

The traditional instruments of Russian influence will remain but in an altered form. The sanctions against Russian firms, including Gazprom, and initiatives to decrease the region's energy dependency on Russia will reduce Moscow's ability to use energy as a political tool. The other two instruments, the Kosovo dispute and soft power, will guarantee that Russia remains a political factor in the region, primarily in the strategically most consequential player, Serbia. However, Moscow's reach will be much more limited due to the constraints brought by the Ukraine war. No less important is the fact that while it might be attractive for Russia to instigate a security crisis that would divert the West's attention away from Ukraine, Moscow needs the support of local actors and local elites in that endeavour. However, these players are self-interested and want to use Russia for their own ends but not to be sacrificed for Russia's strategic interests.

In the future, we can expect that Russia's three sources of influence in the Balkans – energy, the Kosovo dispute and soft power – will remain, particularly in Serbia. However, Russian influence will change. The diversification of energy supplies will

decrease the Kremlin's ability to use energy as political leverage. However, the unresolved Kosovo dispute and Moscow's soft power capital in Serbia will make it difficult for Belgrade to pivot away from Moscow, because of the salience of the Kosovo dispute but also to avoid Moscow using its popularity in Serbian public opinion to politically subvert the government in Belgrade. For Moscow, a partnership with Belgrade will also be important for its political symbolism as it will signal that Russia has not been entirely kicked out from the region. Consequently, Russian influence in the Balkans will continue to exist, although in a significantly altered and toned-down form.

3. Serbia's Game of Musical Chairs Is Over

Giorgio Fruscione

At the last UN General Assembly (UNGA), when the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić started his speech, the audience in the hall still had to sit down after its standing ovation for the video message delivered by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.¹ The Serbian leader took the floor addressing the Assembly on the importance of protecting territorial integrity and national sovereignty. His speech clearly referred to the case of Kosovo. The same principles were underlined right before him by Zelensky who spoke about Ukraine's integrity and sovereignty violated by Russia – Serbia's most important ally over the Kosovo issue.

In an ironic twist of fate, the order of speakers at the 77th UNGA highlighted the contradictions of Serbian foreign relations – contradictions that have backed Serbia into a corner since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Apart from Belarus, Serbia – a candidate for European Union membership – is in fact the only European country that has not imposed sanctions against Russia.

This would of itself aptly summarise Serbia's decade-long "swing policy" between Russia and the West. However, on the sidelines of that same General Assembly meeting, then Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Nikola Selakovic signed a cooperation agreement with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. What they signed, dubbed "Consultation Plan", was soon downplayed

¹ ["World leaders address the United Nations general assembly in New York"](#).

by Selakovic himself as merely “technical”.² Yet, the cameras were there capturing a less technical handshaking between the two. The impression is that while Selakovic was right, in that the substance of cooperation between the two ministries is limited to a few issues, what matters more is the way it appears, and how Serbian voters perceive it. In Serbia, in fact, Russia and the European Union were perceived as poles apart long before the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine.

Since February 2022, the war waged by Russia has been the greatest game-changer for Serbian foreign policy, as it directly affects Belgrade’s “game of musical chairs”, turning off the music and forcing the Balkan state to sit on only one chair – a move that has not been made yet. For almost ten years, an ambivalent foreign policy has underpinned the success of Aleksandar Vučić, whose country is economically dependent on the EU while nurturing a special relationship with Russia – mainly intended to preserve Moscow’s support over Kosovo.³ For its part, the EU has been partly complicit in Belgrade’s game of musical chairs, as in recent years the EU enlargement process has become less credible, allowing scope for Russia and its soft power tools to fill the credibility gap among Serbian citizens. Moreover, for years Brussels supported Belgrade and relied on Vučić’s official stances to bring Serbia into the EU, but turned a blind eye to the drift towards the Russian-style authoritarianism that completely eroded the rule of law and undid the democratisation process of the post-Milosevic years. The support Vučić enjoys from the EU also serves him to promote his alleged rule as a factor of peace and stability in the region – as underlined during his speech at the UNGA – even though he simultaneously endorses secessionist moves by Serb leaders in former Yugoslav republics within the framework of what Belgrade refers to as *Srpski svet* (“Serb world,” a modern

² “Serbian foreign minister plays down deal with Lavrov after flak from Brussels”, *Euronews*, 25 September 2022.

³ D. Bechev, “Hedging Its Bets: Serbia Between Russia and the EU”, Carnegie Europe, 19 January 2023.

version of the nationalist “great Serbia” concept and which recalls the Russian idea of *Russkiy mir*).

The geopolitical disruption caused by the war in Ukraine began one month before Serbia's general elections in which President Vučić gained his second mandate. As for the parliamentary elections, despite the landslide victory of his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), it took seven months to form the new government. During that period, Vučić's Serbia was under a twofold pressure. On the one hand from local voters, the majority of whom⁴ consider Moscow as the most important Serbian partner, and on the other from the European Union, which was asking Belgrade to align with EU foreign policy and adopt sanctions against Russia.

But the war in Ukraine has put unprecedented pressure on the EU, too. Brussels diplomats fought Russia back on its main contact point with Belgrade: the issue of Kosovo.

Last summer, France and Germany proposed a plan to relaunch the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristina amid new tensions and crises. The plan was eventually endorsed by all EU Member States, including the five non-recognisers of Kosovo, further reducing the time President Vučić has to make a final choice: whether to be consistent with the ten-year long path towards the EU, or to safeguard a relationship with an ally whose popularity contributes to his internal support. In this respect, the EU's plan for Kosovo indirectly represents a way to kill two birds with one stone: to normalise relations between Belgrade and Pristina preventing new hotbeds of tension in Europe, and to push for Serbia's alignment with EU foreign policy.

The official contents of the plan were finally accepted at the high-level meeting in Brussels on the 27th February by Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti.⁵ Before that meeting,

⁴ V. Vuksanović, L. Sterić, and M. Bjelos, “Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the War in Ukraine”, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, December 2022.

⁵ “Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: EU Proposal - Agreement on the path to

Vučić has preferred to capitalise on it by drawing attention to the dire consequences that he claims could have followed if Serbia rejected the plan, making it look like an ultimatum from the EU. According to him, refusing to accept it would have meant “the interruption of the process of European integration, the halting and withdrawal of investments and comprehensive economic and political measures that will cause great damage to the Republic of Serbia”.⁶ By presenting the plan with the focus exclusively on what could have happened if Serbia rejected it, Vučić pursued two interdependent goals: to shake off political responsibility for the most important national issue for Serbia and to present himself as a victim of Western blackmailing – which could further alienate his voters from the EU. Whether this plan is a true ultimatum or not, Vučić has incidentally delivered another message: Serbia cannot get along without the European Union.

The choice between the EU and Russia is in fact mainly one between what matters most to Serbia: a set of stable economic and political relations or a strategic alliance limited to certain issues. While the EU represents by far its biggest trade partner and source of foreign investment, Russia is an essential ally mainly for hindering the recognition of Kosovo in international organisations.

In Serbia, Russia and the EU have never been on the same level, and the way their respective relationships with Belgrade have developed over time have followed different trends. While Russia’s ties with Belgrade have remained largely unchanged, the EU’s have considerably improved, so that the EU is now an indispensable trade partner for Serbia,⁷ and ultimately the only real mediator in the normalisation process with Kosovo.

normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia”, EEAS Press Team, 27 February 2023

⁶ “Serbia under Western pressure to reach deal on Kosovo, Vucic says”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2023.

⁷ “Western Balkans-EU - international trade in goods statistics”, Eurostat, March 2022.

The EU: An Essential Partner

In 2009, Serbian exports to the EU amounted to just €3.2 billion, while today they exceed €40 billion.⁸ Also, 63% of current total foreign direct and indirect investment comes from EU Member States and, over the years, Serbia has received more than €3.5 billion in EU grants. Since 2008, when Belgrade and Brussels signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, Serbian citizens have been positively affected by the rapprochement with the EU, enjoying several real benefits, such as the lifting of the visa regime in 2009 and participation in the Erasmus+ programme since 2019. More recently, the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced⁹ an energy support package of €1 billion in EU grants to help the Western Balkans to mitigate the consequences of the energy crisis and build resilience in the short and medium term. Similarly, after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commission proposed to mobilise up to €9 billion of Instruments for Pre-accession assistance (IPA) funding for the period 2021-27 “through investments and support to competitiveness and inclusive growth, sustainable connectivity, and the twin green and digital transition”.¹⁰ In 2014, when Serbia was hit by one of the worst floods in its history, the EU Commission acted quickly to help the country by investing over €170 million in flood relief and prevention.¹¹

Despite the essential trade partnership and assistance it provides in times of need, the EU still suffers from low popularity among Serbian citizens. As a political partner, in fact, over the years the EU has disappointed even the most pro-Europeans,

⁸ “Main trade partners of Serbia in 2021”, EU in Serbia.

⁹ “Berlin Process Summit: EU announces €1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans and welcomes new agreements to strengthen the Common Regional Market”, European Commission, 3 November 2022.

¹⁰ “Commission Communication on An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans”, European Commission, 6 October 2020.

¹¹ “Floods in Serbia – European Union continues supporting”, EU in Serbia, 25 June 2020.

and the percentage of those who would support EU membership in a referendum is getting smaller.¹² The common belief is that the integration process will never be completed, or at least not in the near future, and that Serbian authorities will be given new timeframes that will not be respected. A case in point is the rhetorical announcement made by the previous EU Commission in 2018 that Serbia had “frontrunner country” status, combined with the possibility of final membership by 2025.¹³ Since then, Belgrade’s accession process has actually slowed down, and in 2022 no new negotiation chapters were opened. This setback in the integration process has two main, and complementary, reasons. The first is that EU enlargement itself has been called into question, with proposals for reforming its methodology,¹⁴ reflecting a certain degree of opposition to future expansion to the Balkans. In this sense, a negative attitude towards the region from within the EU has exposed its decoupling syndrome, with the official position of the EU Commission supporting enlargement on the one hand and the intransigence of some Member States on the other. The second reason is the gradual erosion of the rule of law that has driven Serbia away from EU standards regarding democracy. Paradoxically, in the same year that Serbia was granted EU candidate status, the achievements of the post-Milosević transition started to vanish. Since its rise to power in 2012, Vučić’s party has in fact tightened control over the economy, society and public institutions through state capture dynamics.¹⁵

¹² N. Zdravković, “Podrška EU se kruni, ali u jednom većina je složna: Kakva bi bila poruka građana Srbije kad bi se sad glasalo o članstvu” (“Support for the EU is growing, but the majority is in agreement on one thing: What would be the message of the citizens of Serbia if there was a vote on membership now?”), *Euronews*, 12 February 2023.

¹³ G. Gotev, “Juncker tells Balkan states 2025 entry possible for all”, *Euractiv*, 26 February 2018.

¹⁴ V. Tcherneva, “French connections: How to revitalise the EU enlargement process”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 11 December 2019.

¹⁵ B. Elek and G. Fruscione (eds.), “The Crime-Politics Nexus Entrapping the Balkans”, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 22 September

Since 2011, in parallel with Serbia's integration process, Brussels has been leading the mediation between Belgrade and Pristina. In 2013, the EU brokered the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations, commonly known as Brussels Agreement.¹⁶ The normalisation of relations between the two neighbours is a preliminary requirement for Serbia's final accession. However, while the Brussels Agreement helped in solving some technical issues and to partially remove Serbian parallel structures in Kosovo, the whole process suffered many interruptions because of local crises and incidents – often fuelled and exploited by Belgrade in an attempt to prolong the status quo in its former province. Pristina, for its part, over the last ten years has failed to establish the Association of Serb Municipalities (ASM), the main provision of the agreement and major demand from Belgrade, and has thus contributed to stoking up the Kosovo Serbs' anger that has led to all the main troubles in Northern Kosovo.

However, after last summer's car plate dispute,¹⁷ the EU relaunched its geopolitical commitment on the issue of Kosovo, offering Belgrade a diplomatic way out and mediating a new framework of relations with Pristina on the basis of a Franco-German proposal. The plan – which still lack an Implementation Roadmap – could eventually unlock the stalemate between the two countries and help them to move forward. The new deal seems to be based on the 1972 Basic Treaty by which East and West Germany de facto recognised each other.¹⁸ In fact, the plan do not provide for mutual recognition and it even avoids this wording, but engages Belgrade in ceasing to block Pristina's

2021.

¹⁶ "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations", Government of the Republic of Serbia. "First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations", Government of the Republic of Serbia <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/en/120394>

¹⁷ W. Preussen, "Kosovo, Serbia reach deal over car plate dispute, EU says", *Politico*, 24 November 2022.

¹⁸ M. Stojanović, "EU, US Piling Pressure on Serbia to Accept Kosovo Plan, Vucic Says", *Balkan Insight*, 24 January 2023.

accession to the UN and other international organisations. In return, Serbia will obtain the creation of “an appropriate level of self-management for the Serbian community in Kosovo and ability for service provision in specific areas” – a provision whose interpretation is still ambiguous. The eventual creation of the ASM – though it remains to be seen whether it will be called that – should be consistent with Kosovo’s constitution and its multi-ethnic structures.¹⁹ The diplomatic hyperactivity to convince Kosovo’s Prime Minister Kurti to accept its establishment even exposed the EU to the criticism of not being impartial, reinforced by the fact that both Lajčák and the EU high representative for foreign policy Josep Borrell come from two non-recogniser countries – Slovakia and Spain, respectively. Nevertheless, by pressuring the parties to respect the agreement provisions, and showing regard for the national interests of both, Brussels – with Washington’s support – reasserted its influence in the Balkans as the dominant geopolitical actor as well as strategic mediator.

Russia: A Brother or an Only Child?

Unlike Serbia’s relations with the EU, those between Moscow and Belgrade have not translated into significant improvements for the life of Serbian citizens. Since the end of the Yugoslav wars, the Russia-Serbia relationship has been mainly static and limited to a few issues as well as conservative, to the extent that it has mostly focused on preserving the regional status quo and Serbia’s perception of Russia as “big brother” at the local level, relying on cultural and religious proximity. Also, it would not be true to say that Russia has always sided with Serbia and its national interests. This is rather a myth that Serbian nationalists have been spreading over the years and which today makes the possible adoption of sanctions against Russia a gamble that could be costly for Vučić’s government.

¹⁹ A. Taylor, “Kosovo’s PM accepts EU, France, Germany backed normalisation plan”, *Enractiv*, 7 February 2023.

Looking at economic relations, in the last ten years, Russia has never been among the top three destinations of Serbian exports,²⁰ being a secondary partner compared to EU Member States and Serbia's neighbours. This seems to reflect a specific Russian intention to focus the relationship with Serbia – and in general its presence in the Balkans – only on limited spheres. For Russia, Serbia and the Balkans do not represent a vital strategic interest but rather another European region on which its influence may hamper Western geopolitical ambitions. This attitude has become particularly evident since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, with the West seeking political unity and cohesion.

As Vuk Vuksanović explains in his chapter, Russia has three main sources of influence in the Balkans: energy exports, soft power (i.e., the popularity that Russia enjoys among the local population), and the unresolved Kosovo dispute.²¹ As a matter of fact, the invasion of Ukraine influences all of these three pillars too. Energy dependence will most probably decrease because of sanctions; soft power is expected to increase as long as the war lasts; and the Kosovo issue can eventually be manipulated for mere Russian use and consumption, without offering Belgrade a diplomatic way out with Pristina.

As for energy, in June 2022 the Council of the EU adopted a package of sanctions that prohibits the purchase, import or transfer of seaborne crude oil and certain petroleum products from Russia to the EU.²² This will reduce Serbia's imports of Russian oil, which used to be distributed from the Croatian island of Krk.

Soft power, on the other hand, has been increasing since February 2022. Even if there are no scientific methods to measure the increase in soft power, a number of considerations

²⁰ “Country of destination rank /origin, by value of exports/imports”, Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia.

²¹ See the chapter 2 in this Report by V. Vuksanović.

²² Z. Radosavljević, “Serbia, Croatia leaders trade barbs over oil embargo”, *Enractiv*, 7 October 2022.

may confirm it has been on a growing path. On the very first day of the invasion, Serbia's biggest-selling pro-government tabloid featured the headline "Ukraine attacked Russia";²³ a few days later, Belgrade became the first European capital to host a mass demonstration in support of Moscow's so-called "special military operation".²⁴ That rally – the first in a series of pro-Russian public demonstrations – was organised by Serbian far right movements. The timing of such demonstrations, so close to the general elections, combined with the fact that the radical organisations behind them have never protested against Vučić's regime, raises the suspicion that they are under the control of Serbian authorities – or, at least, that they indirectly benefit from them. As a matter of fact, in the April 2022 elections, President Vučić and his party gained political support from those nationalist fringes that are sensitive to "Russian brotherhood" and would not have voted for Vučić if Serbia had unambiguously aligned with the West and with EU sanctions. The Russian card is thus a functional cornerstone for Serbia's regime, which returns the favour by echoing Kremlin propaganda. According to public opinion polls, in fact, only 12% of Serbian citizens believe Russia is responsible for the invasion of Ukraine.²⁵ Such data confirms that Russian soft power has been increasing since the beginning of the war. And since last November, Kremlin propaganda has obtained even more public space thanks to the opening of Russian state-owned TV and radio broadcaster RT in Serbia – despite a law providing otherwise.²⁶

²³ "Ukraine attacked Russia? How Serbian pro-government tabloids reported on yesterday's events", European Western Balkans, 22 February 2022.

²⁴ B. Filipović, "Pro-Russia Serbs march in Belgrade as country treads ever finer line between East and West", *Reuters*, 5 March 2022.

²⁵ Vuksanović, Šterić, and Bjeloš (2022), p. 11.

²⁶ M. Radenković, "Zakon ne dozvoljava pokretanje Raše tudej u Srbiji: Korak dalje od EU ili dimna bomba?" ("The law does not allow Raša to be launched there in Serbia: A step further from the EU or a smoke bomb", *Danas*, 15 July 2022.

Unlike energy and soft power, whose trends have been changing in two opposite directions since February 2022, the issue of Kosovo, as the main link between Belgrade and Moscow, has remained almost untouched. The substance of Moscow's diplomatic approach to the Kosovo dispute has not changed. Russia's military involvement is insignificant as Moscow has not had boots on the ground since 2003, when Russian troops left Kosovo after participating in the NATO-led peacekeeping mission.²⁷ That is why Russia's role in supporting Serbia over Kosovo is best described as static and conservative. In the various crises that occurred last year, Serbia's political alliance with Moscow did not materialise in the shape of a diplomatic mediation with Pristina. Russia has not been promoting any compromise agreement, officially sought by Serbia itself,²⁸ relying mainly on respect for UN Resolution 1244²⁹ and refusing to recognise Pristina's independence. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the case of Kosovo is rather a useful rhetorical tool: "a precedent"³⁰ he uses to justify the annexation and military occupation of Ukrainian regions and to highlight the West's alleged geopolitical inconsistency.

Last summer, many Europeans worried that Moscow was fuelling another war in the Balkans and was behind the troubles on the Kosovo-Serbia border. However, a Russian military intervention in Kosovo must be ruled out: Moscow has neither the military capacity to undertake such an operation, nor the financial capacity to add to the already heavy economic burden of the war in Ukraine. In the various crises that occurred in Kosovo in 2022, Russia therefore played a passive rather than a leading role. Moscow was not the architect of the car plate

²⁷ "Russian troops leave KFOR", NATO, 3 July 2003.

²⁸ A. Taylor, "Vucic claims compromise sought while announcing institutional walkouts in Kosovo", *Euractiv*, 22 August 2022.

²⁹ "Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) on the situation relating Kosovo", United Nations Peacemaker.

³⁰ D.B. Pineles, "How the 'Kosovo Precedent' Shaped Putin's Plan to Invade Ukraine", *Balkan Insight*, 9 March 2022.

dispute nor of the barricades in Northern Kosovo, but was rather its biggest, indirect beneficiary. And that is why Moscow will not promote a mediation between Belgrade and Pristina: the more unstable the Balkans will be, the more Russia will benefit from it. This attitude prompted the West's U-turn in its diplomatic approach to the Kosovo issue, as the restoration of the status quo after each eruption of local tension could only be in Russia's interest.

Finally, it is worth analysing how, when it comes to Serbian national interests, Russia has not always acted like a "brother". This concept, shared by nationalist politicians and organisations, should be understood rather as an anti-establishment, anti-West position that uses Orthodox Christianity as a natural link inextricably connecting the two peoples. However, recent history tells a different story.

When the USSR and Yugoslavia both ceased to exist, the restoration of what is now propagandised as a brotherhood between Serbian and Russian peoples was not without contradictions. As a survey by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy points out, "the majority of the Serbian public is against introducing sanctions against Russia, with the majority doing so on the grounds that Serbia experienced sanctions in the 1990s".³¹

But if sanctions are a traumatic event for the Serbian public, then it should be recalled that in the 1990s the Russian Federation supported all the sanctions imposed against Yugoslavia.³² This happened in 1991, with a UN resolution that prohibited arms exports to Yugoslavia; then in 1992 with resolution 757,³³

³¹ The survey shows that 44% of respondents is against sanctions because of personal, collective similar experience https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/WBSB-2022_Serbia-Report-1_Dec-2022.pdf#page=11

³² "Zaharova zaboravila da je Rusija podržala sankcije protiv SFRJ i SRJ" ("Zakharova forgot that Russia supported the sanctions against SFRY and FRY"), *Danas*, 14 April 2022.

³³ "Resolution 757 (1992) / adopted by the Security Council at its 3082nd meeting, on 30 May 1992", United Nations Digital Library, 1992.

which entailed the adoption of the first sanctions in UN history against Serbia and Montenegro; and yet again in 1993, when Russia voted in favour of the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, a United Nations body tasked with sanctioning the war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars – an institution that Serb nationalists label as “anti-Serb”. Finally, in 1998, during the first phases of the war in Kosovo, Russia supported UN resolution 1160, which imposed an arms embargo on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Although all these UN resolutions dealt with territorial issues and national interests pursued by the Milosevic regime, Russia never used its veto power. But that is not all. While Russia supported all these resolutions, it also violated the arms embargo and the ban on exporting weapons to the territory of Yugoslavia. But it did so in favour of Croatia, in its war of independence from Belgrade. According to the Executive Director of the Council for Strategic Policy Nikola Lunić, in the 1990s Russia armed Croatia both with financial and foreign policy benefits in its war against Belgrade-backed Croatian Serbs.³⁴ During the Yugoslav wars, the Croatian army received “everything but nuclear ballistic missiles”³⁵ from Russia through an estimated 160 flights from Russia to Croatia with an average of 100 tons of cargo per flight. In doing so, Russia violated not only the UN embargo, but above all the supposed brotherhood with the Serbs.

There were also other, highly symbolic moments in which Russia disregarded Serbian interests. Moscow not only recognised the independence of Croatia months before the United States

³⁴ N. Lunić, “[Moscow does not believe in tears](#)”, Council for Strategic Policy, 12 May 2019.

³⁵ As Lunić details: “Croatia received 18 Mi-17 transport helicopters, 12 Mi-24 combat helicopters commonly called “the devil’s chariot”, 40 MiG-21 fighter planes / interceptors, as well as a whole range of sophisticated weapons and military equipment such as the Fagot anti-armor systems, Sturm anti-tank missiles, R-60 air defense missiles, and non-guided S-5 missiles. Out of 40 fighters, 23 single-seat MiG-21bis and 3 two-seater MiG-21UM were put into operational use, while the rest of the aircraft was used for spare parts”.

and other Western countries but also honoured Croatian leaders with public awards. In 1996 – just one year after the “Oluja” ethnic cleansing operation that forced around 200,000 Croatian Serbs to leave their homes – the first President of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman, was awarded the Georgij Konstantinović Žukov medal for merits in and contributions to the fight against fascism. In 2005, a similar award was given by Putin to Stipe Mesić, the last Yugoslav President and Tuđman’s successor.

The abovementioned cases show how ambiguous Russia has been towards Serbia, especially concerning its national or territorial interests, calling for a more comprehensive interpretation of their relationship than today’s propagandistic focus on “brotherhood”. But they also show how since then Russia has only cared for its own interests in the Balkans. Therefore, when Putin mentions the “Kosovo precedent” today to accuse the West of double standards,³⁶ Serbia might use the same argument, recalling how back in the 1990s Russia did not safeguard Belgrade’s national interests but rather helped its opponents. In other words, Serbia should bear in mind such precedents in recent history before making a final choice for its future foreign policy.

Abandoning the Status Quo

Today, the EU and the US have a great chance to solve, through their mediation, the longstanding issue of Kosovo. While for years Russia has been doing nothing but back the Serbian position to respect UN Resolution 1244³⁷ and blocking Pristina’s accession to international organisations, Brussels and Washington have been intensifying their diplomatic activities in order to find a binding agreement.

³⁶ B. Barlovac, “[Putin Says Kosovo Precedent Justifies Crimea Secession](#)”, *Balkan Insight*, 18 March 2014.

³⁷ M. Stojanović, “[Russian Ambassador to Serbia Denies Change in Putin’s Kosovo Policy](#)”, *Balkan Insight*, 29 April 2022.

For the West, finding a solution to Kosovo that Serbia can accept would mean one step towards Western geopolitical cohesion. The new framework for normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina may not automatically translate into an unambiguous Serbian alignment with EU foreign policy, but would contribute to pushing Russia one step back from the Balkans.

In recent years, there have been several crises between Kosovo and Serbia – many of them “remote-controlled” from Belgrade – which have often interrupted the dialogue process. Both governments benefited politically from all these crises, intended as perfect circumstances for eventually presenting themselves as the only legitimate defenders of national interests threatened by “the old enemy”. As a matter of fact, each crisis only upset the status quo, and all consequent mediations to restore it have been falsely interpreted as steps forward. The reality is that maintaining the status quo has been the best option for both parties, as it has enabled them to avoid the responsibility of agreeing to any unpopular deal while taking political advantage of every moment of tension. This vicious cycle has left the two countries in a bilateral limbo, with repercussions for the political stability of the whole region – a predicament to the exclusive advantage of Russia. And herein lie the potential benefits of the new EU plan for Kosovo: preventing new hotbeds of conflict in Europe and depriving Russia of its influence in Serbia and the Balkans. That is why Western diplomats are making a great effort over the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities.³⁸ The future administrative status of a piece of land smaller than the Province of Naples could be the key for new geopolitical balances in Europe.

³⁸ N. Albahari, “[Beyond the status quo: A perspective from Serbia on relations with Kosovo](#)”, European Council on Foreign Relations, 8 December 2022.

However, the new deal won't be enough if no guarantee is given to Serbia and Kosovo for a faster integration process. If Serbia's foreign policy alignment with the EU is the goal, then the long-awaited deal with Kosovo is the means to attain it. And this should be the guarantee for Belgrade's new European momentum, as the normalisation of relations with Pristina has always been considered a precondition for Serbia's full EU membership. So, rather than an ultimatum, the plan for Kosovo should be interpreted as the basis of a renewed EU engagement. The disruption caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine compels the EU Commission to finally honour the geopolitical commitments it made at the start of the current mandate.³⁹ The time to deliver on that expectation is now.

³⁹ "Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme", European Commission, 27 November 2019.

4. The Way Forward for the Normalisation of Relations Between Kosovo and Serbia

Tefta Kelmendi

On 27 February, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, met in Brussels for what everyone expected to be the historic meeting in which both parties would sign an agreement based on the latest EU proposal for the normalisation of relations. The meeting ended without a formally signed agreement, and early reports gave way to confusion as to whether something was agreed after all. What is certain is that both parties seem to have accepted the EU proposal and agreed that there will be no further changes to it. The challenge remains in agreeing on the timeframe and priorities regarding its implementation, for which the parties have been given an additional few weeks, with the next meeting expected to take place on 18 March in Ohrid, North Macedonia.

This meeting follows intensive diplomatic efforts by the EU and the US to break through the decade-long stalled progress in the dialogue for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The war in Ukraine has certainly served as a wake-up call to Europeans, a warning that this is no time to ignore frozen conflicts and unresolved matters of security within Europe. Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have indeed mounted in recent years. Frequent flare-ups in northern Kosovo over a number of disagreements between the Kosovo government and ethnic Serbs have raised concerns about a

possible escalation of violence. The Kosovo government sought to extend its sovereignty in the north, de facto not under its control, trying to fight the parallel structures by taking firmer action on certain issues. Its punitive policy on vehicle licence plate conversion has been the main cause of tensions in the north last year, as the majority of Serbs have refused to convert their licence plates. They have since been very vocal in demonstrating loyalty to Belgrade, and expressing mistrust in the Pristina authorities and disappointment with the Kosovo government's overall engagement and policies in the north. The peak of their discontent was reached in November last year when they decided to collectively resign from Kosovo institutions, which they had successfully integrated as part of the first agreement for normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia signed in 2013.

The frequent outbreaks of violence in northern Kosovo have affected the dialogue process, switching its focus from high-level political dialogue to one that serves to put out small fires. The challenge for the EU as a main facilitator of the dialogue was therefore to make sure that the focus of the dialogue process remained on a comprehensive agreement for the normalisation of relations that addresses some of the most important outstanding issues such as the status of the Serb community in Kosovo, the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo and the issue of Serbia's recognition of Kosovo. This was a difficult task given the conflictual context in which the dialogue needed to be relaunched. Moreover, the nature of the relationship between Kurti and Vučić further complicated matters. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti strongly dislike each other, and they are both ardent nationalists. Neither side has prepared their public for concessions, therefore the current pressure they face from the West puts them in a very uncomfortable position.

The main disagreement between the parties is over the non-implementation by the Kosovo government of the 2013 agreement for the creation of the Association of Serb-Majority

Municipalities (ASM).¹ Until recently, Kosovo has made its implementation conditional on Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence. Serbia on the other hand, made the implementation of the ASM by Kosovo a precondition of any further agreement and was categorically against Kosovo's recognition.

The meeting of 27 February is a positive development towards settling these disagreements, as both parties have in principle accepted the most recent proposal,² which is being published for the first time since the first discussion about a version of it dating from last September – a sign of it being accepted, albeit not formally, by both parties. Among the most important parts of the proposal, it is worth mentioning that it gives a vague and confusing answer to the question of Kosovo's recognition by Serbia, as addressed by the fourth line of the preamble of the proposed agreement, which reads: "Proceeding from the historical facts and without prejudice to the different view of the Parties on fundamental questions, including on status questions". However, under Article 2, the parties are to respect each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty in line with the aims and principles of the UN charter. Furthermore, Article 4 states that Serbia shall not object to Kosovo's membership of any international organisation (therefore including its membership of the UN even though this is irrelevant given that Russia will do the job for Serbia). Article 7 refers to the right of the Serbian community to greater autonomy within Kosovo, including the possibility of financial support by Serbia, and requires settlement of the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo. Finally, under Article 10, both parties are to agree to implement all past agreements of the Dialogue, which in this case includes the establishment of the ASM as provided for by the 2013 agreement on the normalisation of

¹ Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities in Kosovo – general principles/Main elements, The Dialogue Platform, 25 August 2013.

² Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: [EU Proposal - Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia](#), EEAS, 27 February 2023.

relations between the parties. While the main disagreement in the past months was over the establishment of the ASM as part of this new agreement, that is no longer an issue. The ASM will be established, and the object of disagreement is now the implementation timeframe. Serbia wants the ASM established first, while Kosovo wants to avoid its immediate implementation, pushing for other matters first hence buying time.

However, for this agreement and its annexes to become legally binding and show the parties' serious commitment to the normalisation of relations, it needs to be formally accepted. While Joseph Borrell's declaration following the meeting sounded hopeful, the truth is that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed".

A Glimpse of the Background and Context

While Kosovo was off the news for more than a decade, the recent tensions have also raised interest in better understanding this conflict and the overall security concerns in the Western Balkans in the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A brief look at Kosovo's recent history is necessary for understanding today's conflict between Kosovo and Serbia, the main disagreements and the reasons behind the successive failures in reaching a comprehensive agreement between the parties.

After NATO's military intervention in Serbia and Kosovo in 1999 which ended the war and pushed back Serbian troops, a long and complex diplomatic process began on the question of the settlement of the status of Kosovo in the new regional context. The war atrocities committed by the Milosevic regime against the Albanians in Kosovo and the violations of international norms and values were strong arguments for ruling out any possibility of the return of Serbian rule over Kosovo. It was equally clear that Kosovo needed a final settlement, and that an extended UN administration was not a guarantee for sustainable peace and stability in the country and the region.

In 2007, the UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari presented a proposal³ to the UN Secretary-General, which would define Kosovo's internal settlement, give it a prospect of independence, but also create a mechanism for the protection of minorities – with extended rights for the Serbs in Kosovo. This proposal was the result of months of negotiation talks between the Kosovo and Serbian representatives, which ended in vain and without a mutually accepted agreement regarding Kosovo's final status. For Kosovo, nothing short of independence would be accepted, and for Serbia, nothing that would go beyond giving Kosovo autonomous status within Serbia was acceptable.

At that moment in history, Western partners were on Kosovo's side. Ahtisaari recommended independence for Kosovo to be initially supervised by the international community. The process of Kosovo's independence, eventually proclaimed in February 2008, was therefore fully coordinated with and supported by the international community. The support was conditional on the new state's capacity to strongly adhere to democratic values and build solid, modern and multi-ethnic institutions. Kosovo's constitution, which was drafted based on the Ahtisaari plan, is one of the most modern and democratic constitutions in Europe in terms of protecting freedoms and equality for all communities living in the state. The multi-ethnic nature of Kosovo is also represented in its state symbols – the stars in the Kosovo flag represent the six ethnic communities living in Kosovo and its national anthem is neutral. In 2012, the International Steering Group (ISG), the body in charge of supervising Kosovo's independence, formally announced the end of the supervision period, which further extended Kosovo's full sovereignty over its territory. With all this in mind, one could argue that Kosovo was truly becoming a successful project for contributing to peace and stability in the region.

³ [Letter from the Secretary-General](#) addressed to the President of the Security Council, *Security Council Report*, United Nations, 26 March 2007.

A decade later, in a global context that is very different from a decade ago, the situation in Kosovo is far from being a success story. Relations between Kosovo and Serbia have been deteriorating in recent years, and ethnic tensions are on the rise again. The triggers are both internal and external. The post-independence period in Kosovo was marked by a series of diplomatic clashes with Serbia, which categorically opposed Kosovo's independence and launched a diplomatic war against it. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence, Serbia deployed substantial resources to block Kosovo's international recognition and integration into international organisations. At the same time, a dialogue process between Pristina and Belgrade representatives was launched in 2011, with the aim of reaching agreement on some of the outstanding issues stemming from the new reality in Kosovo. This process initially focused on technical issues such as freedom of movement, recognition of diplomas, the issue of documentation and civil registries, and customs and border management among others. In 2013, a new phase of the dialogue began with higher-level representatives from both countries, with the aim of addressing issues of a more sensitive nature. An initial agreement called The First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, also known as Brussels Agreement, was reached. The agreement addressed the issue of the ASM, the integration of the Serbian parallel structures of Justice, Police and Civil Defence (in the northern municipalities) into the Kosovo system, as well as holding local elections in the four Serb-majority northern municipalities (North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić) under the jurisdiction of Kosovo. These agreements were partially implemented. They successfully allowed for the integration of the Serbian police and justice structures into the Kosovo institutions, and facilitated local elections in the northern municipalities. However, the Association of Serb Municipalities has never been implemented. The Kosovo government argues that it cannot implement it because of an

unfavourable ruling⁴ on the ASM issued by the Constitutional Court of Kosovo in 2015. This Court decision ruled that the ASM is not in line with the “spirit” of Kosovo’s constitution, because it provides for the creation of a mono-ethnic association in a constitutionally multi-ethnic state, with competences that go beyond what the constitution sets down for municipalities. Yet for Serbia the creation of some form of Association for Serb Municipalities was already envisaged in the Ahtisaari plan, and was given effect and included in the 2013 Brussels Agreement which both parties signed. For Serbia, its non-implementation is a violation of a legally binding international agreement. Kosovo, on the other hand, had a constitutional ruling which needed to be taken into account. The then-opposition party of Albin Kurti Vetevendosje was one of the most vocal opponents of the ASM, but it was not alone. The government, civil society and a large proportion of Kosovar Albanians believed that such an Association would lead to a dysfunctional state and give Serbia stronger leverage to undermine Kosovo’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the ASM’s unpopularity at that time there was little interest in taking concrete steps to review it and propose a new version that would respect Kosovo’s constitution. Moreover, Kosovo wanted Serbia to stop its aggressive diplomatic campaign against its recognition and stop supporting the remaining parallel structures. From that moment on, in an atmosphere dominated by hostility between the two countries, the dialogue process has become particularly difficult, and most of the few agreements reached in its early stage were eventually only partially or not implemented.

⁴ Judgment case no. Ko130/15 concerning the compatibility of the ASM with the spirit of the Constitution, Constitutional Court of Kosovo, 23 December 2015.

The Role of the West in the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue

Taking stock of the above, one can argue that the dialogue on normalisation of relations between the two countries led to positive results between 2011 and 2013 but took a downturn in 2015 and has produced limited or artificial results since. The causes for this cannot be attributed exclusively to internal struggles and disagreements between the parties. At that time, Western partners started turning their attention away from the Balkans, including from the still unresolved issues between Kosovo and Serbia. In Europe, this was more of a necessity than a choice. The continent was consumed with multiple internal crises and security threats – terrorism, migration waves, Brexit, street protests, and the rise of populism. EU enlargement policy was becoming less popular in the European Union, with member states blocking the accession processes of some candidate countries (notably North Macedonia and Albania) over political and nationalist claims. This created great frustration among Western Balkan leaders, who started losing patience and motivation to deliver on democratic reforms. In the case of Kosovo, the EU had a visa regime in place for Kosovo citizens, making it the only Western Balkan country to be isolated from the rest of Europe. Perceptions of the EU as a reliable partner started changing and affected the trust that Western Balkan partners placed in the EU's institutions and enlargement policy. In this context, it was difficult for the EU to inspire positive results in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The EU did play an important role in the first, technical phase of the dialogue process in 2011 through which the parties addressed issues aimed at improving the lives of citizens in Kosovo and Serbia in the new reality created after Kosovo's independence. However, until recently, it failed to come up with an acceptable proposal for a political solution in the second phase of the dialogue, which involved the highest level of representatives in both countries. By failing to deliver

on this matter, the EU also exposed its weakness in dealing with matters of peace and security.

The United States, on the other hand, had handed over responsibility for Western Balkan stability to the European Union, despite its military footprint in the region and the crucial role it played in ending the conflicts in the Balkans and in post-conflict reconstruction. Since all states in the Western Balkans were aspiring to join the EU, it was natural that the region should be a foreign policy priority for the EU, more so than for the US. However, the US, without taking the lead, always maintained a role in Western Balkan affairs and contributed to diplomatic efforts in the region together with EU partners. During the Obama administration, then vice-President Joe Biden visited the region twice (in 2009 and 2016) and played a more active role in terms of diplomatic engagement. In 2016, as part of a Western Balkans tour as vice-President, Joe Biden visited both Belgrade and Pristina⁵ and reiterated US interest in pushing forward the dialogue process which was already slowing down and yielding no results. More recently, in an effort to support the EU and reaffirm its presence in the region, the US appointed heavyweight ambassadors Christopher Hill to Serbia and Jeffrey M. Hovenier to Kosovo. Both diplomats are versed in Western Balkan issues and have played crucial roles in the Dayton and Rambouillet peace processes. US special representative for the Western Balkans Gabriel Escobar, who previously served as Deputy Chief of Mission in Serbia, has been very active since his appointment in September 2021, which confirms Biden's wish for a more energetic US role in the region. The lead in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, however, has remained with the EU as the principal facilitator of the process.

⁵ S. Dragajlo, "Biden to Push Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue on Farewell Tour", *The Balkan Insight*, 15 August 2016.

Russia's War in Ukraine and Its Implications for the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has challenged the post-Cold War European security architecture and forced policy makers to rethink their policies, including security policies for the EU's eastern and south-eastern neighbourhoods. The war in Ukraine has direct implications for the security of the Western Balkans. Peace in the region is fragile, the EU integration process and EU stabilisation efforts failed to bring wished results, and three out of six countries are not NATO members: Serbia, which opted for neutrality and does not seek NATO membership (as a sign of loyalty to Russia), Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which despite having openly expressed Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic objective are still far from becoming members of the alliance. In Bosnia, Russia maintains its influence through its nationalist proxy, Milorad Dodik, the president of the Serb-run entity, and uses him to block Bosnia's NATO membership process. Kosovo, which is not recognised by all members of the alliance, has little chance of obtaining the support needed to secure a unanimous vote. Since the start of the war, fears are mounting in Kosovo of possible aggression from Serbia – the only country in Europe other than Belarus not to have aligned with the West on sanctions against Russia. To understand Kosovo's concerns and its resistance towards a deal with Serbia, one needs to better understand Serbia's relations with Russia, especially Vučić's role in Russia's growing soft power in the region.

Since the rise to power of President Vučić, Serbia's political and military links⁶ with Russia have intensified, and his government has opened the way for increased Russian influence in the Balkans,⁷ especially by recycling Russian propaganda

⁶ [Pentagon Report: Serbia has intensified relations with Russia since 2012](#), European Western Balkans, 28 November 2019.

⁷ T. Kelmendi, [Past talker: How the EU should respond to the Serbian president's re-election](#), 6 April 2023.

through fake news channels operating from Serbia, such as Russia Today and Sputnik. These channels have been very active in recent flare-ups⁸ in Kosovo, spreading disinformation about the situation on the ground with the aim of inciting fear and panic⁹ among the public, which in the medium-to-long term intensifies ethnic divisions in Kosovo and blocks progress on normalisation of relations. Serbia uses Russian fake news channels to spread general disinformation about Kosovo's history and the legitimacy of its independence, supporting its efforts to prevent further international recognition of Kosovo. All of this has undermined the EU's interests and role in the region. It has also changed public perceptions of the EU from a trusted and reliable partner into one that is "divided and weak", thereby replicating Russian President Vladimir Putin's narratives about the EU in a region where the EU has invested billions of euros and whose countries are predominantly EU candidate countries. The security situation in the Western Balkans, and more specifically in Kosovo and Bosnia, has become fragile since the years preceding the war, mainly due to an increasingly aggressive Serbia and its pro-Russian nationalist leaders. Moreover, the EU should start dealing with the effects of Russia's soft power in Serbia, which have increased Russia's popularity to the detriment of support for EU integration. A poll¹⁰ conducted in June 2022 shows that 51% of participants were against EU integration, and 80% were against Serbia imposing sanctions on Russia.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the continuing peace and security challenges in the Western Balkans. It has also

⁸ "Mediat e kontrolluara nga pushteti në Serbi me lajme nxitëse dhe propagandë të shtuar për situatën në veri të Kosovës", ("Media controlled by the government in Serbia with inflammatory news and increased propaganda about the situation in the north of Kosovo"), *Telegrafi*, 27 December 2022.

⁹ X. Bami, "Social Media Disinformation Spreads Panic About Kosovo-Serbia 'War'", *The Balkan Insight*, 1 August 2022.

¹⁰ S. Bjelotomić, Demostat survey: "80% of people in Serbia against sanctions imposed to Russia", *Serbian Monitor*, 30 June 2022.

exposed Europe's weak policies towards the region over a decade, which have left partner countries vulnerable to threats from external powers, including hybrid threats from Russia. But the war has also served as a wake-up call for the EU to review its neighbourhood policies, acknowledge its mistakes and take on a new, more robust approach by strengthening its presence and defending its interests and those of its partners in the region. This is also reflected in the facilitation process of the Kosovo and Serbia dialogue, with the EU stepping up its efforts to break through the stalemate. In recent months, the EU has intensified diplomatic initiatives to push through the latest EU proposal for the path towards normalisation of relations and ease tensions between the two countries. The EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue Miroslav Lajcak has doubled his efforts since the start of the war in Ukraine, travelling regularly to both countries and meeting with leaders and chief negotiators, advocating in favour of the new proposal on the table. The US has similarly increased its engagement in the Kosovo-Serbia issue, bringing its full support to the EU in the process and engaging directly with both countries in support of the most recent EU proposal. US special representative Gabriel Escobar visited Kosovo and Serbia together with EU Special representative Miroslav Lajcak in August 2022,¹¹ in October 2022,¹² and more recently in January 2023, calling for a rapid solution to the long overdue outstanding issues, making particular reference to the need for the immediate implementation of the 2013 agreement between the parties for the establishment of the ASM. A first attempt to get the parties to sign an agreement on the basis of the new proposal was made by EU High Representative Joseph Borrel in Brussels on 21 November 2022, but the meeting did not lead to

¹¹ S. Popović, "Visit of Escobar and Lajčák to Kosovo and Serbia: Part of crisis management", *European Western Balkans*, 26 August 2022.

¹² P. Isufi, "Kosovo-Serbia Talks May Advance 'in Weeks', US Diplomat Says", *The Balkan Insight*, 20 October 2022.

the desired results.¹³ Instead, another agreement was reached¹⁴ three days later on the issue of licence plates, which served to de-escalate the situation in the north. Diplomatic efforts continued from November onwards, with the West showing strong support and unity in favour of the latest EU proposal. The last visit of the five envoys from the US, the EU, France, Italy and Germany to Pristina and Belgrade in January 2023 demonstrated this. The most recent meeting of the leaders of Kosovo and Serbia in Brussels on 27 February was a second attempt to get the parties to sign the agreement, but despite an informal acceptance of the proposal, there is still no deal.

Conclusion

The EU proposal for the path towards normalisations of relations between Serbia and Kosovo has indeed raised hopes, for the first time in years, that a solution is still possible to solve the impasse in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. It has demonstrated the interest of the West in taking the matter seriously and engaging more robustly to solve outstanding issues between neighbours and avoid reigniting conflicts in the Balkans. While efforts to relaunch the dialogue predate the start of the war in Ukraine, Russia's unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine served as an alert for the EU to adapt its foreign policy to the new fragile security context in the continent, and especially on its immediate borders. This is no time for the EU to allow an escalation of violence in the Western Balkans. The post-invasion approach of the EU and the US has been firm and strategic, creating all the conditions for an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia to be reached. One of the main challenges however will be to

¹³ Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Press statement by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell after High-Level Meeting with President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti. EU in Serbia, 21 November 2022.

¹⁴ "Kosovo and Serbia reach deal on licence plate dispute – Borrell", *Euronews*, 24 November 2022.

persuade the two parties that the time is ripe for such a move and that this is the best proposal on the table since 2013. While the last meeting in Brussels is a positive step towards the formal acceptance of the agreement, the parties are still resisting on certain matters regarding its implementation. Kosovo now knows that it cannot escape the obligation to establish the ASM, but is pushing for delaying it. Serbia, on the other hand, wants the ASM to be created without any further delay. To avoid the parties clashing again over the implementation plan and losing time, continued and steady diplomatic efforts from the West are still needed. These have to be largely directed at Kosovo's leadership, as the key issue still remains the ASM. In fact, if Kurti has accepted the proposal as he claims to have done, then the issue of the ASM is settled. Insisting on the timeframe is only buying him extra time and serving him politically, as he wants to show his electorate that he did not betray them by accepting the ASM, and that he did everything in his power to avoid it. But one needs to understand the political motivation behind Kurti's insistence and take it into consideration. In this sense, the EU can offer some form of support to Kosovo that is visible to the public too. Visa liberalisation is a powerful tool in this respect, and the promise should now be kept so that Kosovars will be able to travel in the EU without visas in 2024. Additional support can take the form of greater advocacy in favour of Kosovo's EU membership application, by working with the five non-recognisers within the Union – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Spain and Slovakia – to convince them that it is time they changed their positions on this matter, for the sake of peace in the Balkans and in their own continent. Moreover, their recognition of Kosovo's independence will open Kosovo's path to joining other Western Balkan countries in becoming an EU candidate member.

With regard to Serbia, the difficulty stands equally with the lack of public backing of a "deal" with Kosovo. In fact, an agreement that involves any form of recognition of Kosovo will face strong resistance from nationalist and ultranationalist parties

and groups in Serbia. Hence Vučić's insistence on prioritising the establishment of the ASM so that he has a winning act for Serbia and for the Serbs of Kosovo to communicate to the public and justify the concessions he needs to make as part of the deal. While it is evident that the ASM should be established without further ado as it will benefit Kosovo Serbs and lead to stability in Kosovo, it should be clear to Serbia that any action to use it against Kosovo's legitimate institutions and sovereignty should be condemned.

If the parties were to sign the agreement and its annexes, diplomatic efforts should then be oriented towards proper supervision of the implementation phase. In fact, considering the challenges encountered with previous agreements, the EU and the US should sustain their high-level engagement in the dialogue process and supervise its implementation if they are truly committed to a successful mediation of this conflict. Their political efforts to accompany Kosovo and Serbia towards full normalisation of relations should also be supported by projects that enhance the understanding and benefits of the normalisation of relations at the societal level in both countries.

Finally, the West's recent intensive diplomatic efforts in the Kosovo-Serbia dispute come at a time when Europe and the US are consumed with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is shaping up to be a long war. Considering the context, there is no guarantee that the current Western engagement and support is going to continue indefinitely. Whether these diplomatic efforts will lead to the desired results in the upcoming meeting of the two countries' leaders in March will now solely depend on their willingness to take that one last step, which is to sign everything that is on the table. And time is running out.

5. Is Kosovo a Fuse for the Balkan Powder Keg?

Bojan Elek, Maja Bjeloš

With the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine many experts started talking about the potential spillover effects of this conflict into other regions, the Balkans being one of them. The increasingly unstable situation between Serbia and Kosovo came to the forefront and international news headlines were filled with questions of whether this is where Russia could start a new war.¹ These fears, coupled with the heightened tensions between Belgrade and Pristina over licence plates that led to increased hostilities in North Kosovo,² left many wondering whether this is the proverbial pot that Russia could stir in order to cause more troubles and draw attention away from what has been going on in Ukraine. This chapter analyses the merits of these claims and discusses Russia's trouble-making potential over the Kosovo issue within the changed geopolitical context.

¹ For example, see: A. Lumezi, “[In Kosovo, fears that Russia could inspire a new Serbian offensive](#)”, *Euronews*, 17 March 2022; O. Dragaš, “[Russia is seeking new wars and Kosovo could be the next one](#)”, *Euractive*, 5 August 2022; A. Nuqi, “[Kosovo: Russia's war in Ukraine has a ripple effect](#)”, *DW.com* 29 November 2022.

² A. Kluth, “[Don't Let License Plates Start a New War](#)”, Bloomberg, 4 August 2022.

Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue: A Permanent Crisis

The long process of so-called normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, mediated by the European Union, seems to have reached an impasse despite some initial successes. Most prominently, in 2013 the two parties reached the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, colloquially referred to as the Brussels Agreement, which provided for the dissolution of the Serbian state and security institutions in North Kosovo while offering a framework for their integration into the Kosovo system. While the dialogue itself has since hit many obstacles, it entered a radically new phase with the recent developments on the ground that seem to have been prompted by a proposal presented through the joint efforts of France and Germany to resolve the longstanding disputes.³ Although up until recently veiled in mystery, the proposal seems to provide a framework for a substantial normalisation of relations between the two parties based on the model of “two Germanys” and what could potentially be regarded as the deal that could make real progress on the ground after a long impasse.

However, following a series of unilateral actions by Pristina authorities over licence plates and their refusal to establish the long-awaited Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities, the Serbs from North Kosovo decided to boycott Kosovo institutions by resigning *en masse* from their posts in the parliament, local municipalities, the police and the judiciary. Most recently, barricades were set up in the North, effectively cutting off this part of Kosovo from the rest of the country. Despite the intensive shuttle diplomacy by the EU’s Special Envoy Miroslav Lajčák and various Western diplomats that has ensued, there is a permanent crisis on the ground and it seems highly unlikely that under these circumstances the two parties can be brought to the negotiating table.

³ A. Brzozowski, A. Taylor, and G. Gotev, “LEAK: Franco-German plan to resolve the Kosovo-Serbia dispute”, *Euractiv*, 9 November 2022.

With the Serbs boycotting Kosovo's institutions and thus effectively suspending the Brussels Agreement, which was declared "dead", coupled with the official request by Serbia for its security personnel to return to Kosovo under the UN SC Resolution 1244, which was later refused,⁴ there is a bigger game at play. In this way, by effectively undermining the rules-based order that rests upon agreements reached in the dialogue process and demonstrating that Resolution 1244 is no longer relevant, one can question the need to reach a further agreement that would only remain yet another irrelevant piece of paper. While the apparent end-game of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue seems to be approaching, many ask whether Russia will sit idly by and watch its influence being eroded before its very eyes or act as a spoiler to prevent this from happening. In order to provide a meaningful answer to these concerns one has to look at the way in which Russian influence operates in Serbia and Kosovo and what is at stake.

Understanding the Role of Russia in the Kosovo-Serbia Conflict

Perceptions of Russian influence in Serbia are often misguided as a result of equating it with the strong pro-Russian sentiments of the Serbian population and general foreign policy alignment between the two countries. It is difficult to estimate Russia's actual power in Serbia since there is little societal and political resistance to its presence. The Serbian Government takes no active measures to counter Russian influence, which is why it is almost impossible to assess what Russia's real strength is, and what could actually be achieved if there were any opposition to Russian meddling.

To better understand the relationship between Serbia and Russia it is more useful to think of it as a marriage of interests

⁴ M. Stojanović, "Serbia Officially Asks for Security Personnel to Return to Kosovo", *Balkan Insight*, 16 December 2022.

rather than a warm brotherly embrace, the latter being a very prominent trope in Western media.⁵ Russia has very little strategic interest in Serbia, apart from using Serbia's trouble-making potential in its relations with the West. Serbia, on the other hand, has a clear interest in obtaining Russian support for its foreign policy, particularly with regard to the Kosovo issue. This support of course comes with a price tag, namely concessions from which Russia benefits materially, most prominently through Gazprom's ownership of Serbia's oil industry.⁶ In addition, maintaining friendly ties with Russia works well with the Serbian electorate, which is why being close to Putin wins votes and the incumbent Serbian President has used his frequent visits to Moscow with great success.

With the onset of the Russian war in Ukraine it seemed at first that little had changed. The Serbian public continued to view Russia favourably from the very start of the invasion, frequently invoking the case of Kosovo as a justification for Russia's actions and comparing the Ukraine war to Serbia's experiences with NATO in 1999. However, as early as September 2022 various experts started claiming that Russia had suffered a "strategic defeat" in Ukraine.⁷ With the Russian army withdrawing from several areas of Ukraine and the military campaign not going according to plan, it is reasonable to assume that Putin's attention has been focused mostly on the war efforts. Perhaps even more importantly, significant efforts and resources have to be diverted towards quelling internal dissatisfaction and dissent within Russia. By extension, and contrary to some predictions,

⁵ V. Vuksanović, "Serbs Are Not 'Little Russians'", *The American Interest*, 26 July 2018.

⁶ M. Stojanović, "Serbia Mulls 'Taking Over' Mainly Russian-owned Oil Company", *Balkan Insight*, 14 July 2022.

⁷ J. Haltiwanger, "The army Putin spent 2 decades building has been largely destroyed in Ukraine, and Russia's 'strategic defeat' could threaten his grip on power", *Business Insider*, 14 September 2022. More recently, also: J. Garamone, "Russia Suffers 'Catastrophic Strategic Disaster' in Ukraine", US Department of Defense, 9 November 2022; and B. Cole, "Russia Has Suffered 'Strategic Defeat' As War Nears 10th Month: Igor Girkin", *Newsweek*, 17 December 2022.

the role of Russia in the Balkans is now more passive and there are several reasons why all is quiet on this front.⁸

Russia relies primarily on local actors that are cooperative towards Moscow, most significantly Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, as well as some pro-Russian Montenegrin politicians. While these actors are a key vehicle of Russian influence, they also, to the extent their own agendas go against that of Moscow, moderate its influence and pose certain limits to Russian ambitions. Whereas these agendas overlap in their desire to prevent pro-European reforms and to capitalise on the resentment against the West, there is growing list of issues on which they might disagree.⁹ Another limiting factor to Moscow's influence is the fact that it has no military presence in the region, with the surrounding NATO countries providing a buffer zone against its potential incursions. This became evident in June 2022 when Russia's Foreign Minister had to cancel his plans to visit Serbia after the countries around it decided to close their airspace, which helped Serbia to save face but was also seen as a humiliating blow to Moscow.¹⁰

Moscow's actions in Serbia take place within a friendly environment and there is little societal resistance to them. The environment is so friendly that, in addition to the already present *Sputnik* news portal, the international broadcaster *Russia Today* has also launched a channel for Serbian audiences despite facing an EU ban. This carefully curated pro-Russian atmosphere helps to explain why, despite the ongoing war, the positive public perception of Russia in Serbia has not changed to any significant extent.¹¹ According to a 2022 public opinion

⁸ M. Samorukov, "Why is all quiet on Russia's Western Balkan front?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 December 2022.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ S. Dragojlo, "Russia Voices Fury About Cancelling of Lavrov Visit to Serbia", *Balkan Insight*, 6 June 2022.

¹¹ V. Vuksanović, L. Sterić, and M. Bjeloš, "Public Perception of Serbian Foreign Policy in the Midst of the War in Ukraine", Belgrade Center for Security Policy,

survey conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, two-thirds of the population consider Russia a friend of Serbia, while half of Serbian citizens see Russia as Serbia's closest foreign policy ally.¹² Extremely positive perceptions of Russia are a product of recent Serbian history but also of the radical pro-Russian narrative that was pushed for years in the pro-government media and tabloids. This is vividly illustrated by the front pages of the pro-government tabloid *Informer* published ahead of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022, whose main headline read "Ukraine attacked Russia", while another headline in the same tabloid issue stated that "America is pushing the world into chaos".¹³ This is why the Serbian public largely subscribes to the Russian point of view on the Ukraine war, with the majority blaming NATO and the US for its outbreak, and only 12% of Serbs believing that Russia is responsible for the war. The majority of the Serbian public is opposed to introducing sanctions against Russia, most of them on the grounds that Serbia experienced sanctions in the 1990s, demonstrating that Serbian perceptions of Russia are frequently based on historical experiences from the 1990s.

Strong government control over the media with national coverage as the main source of information will ensure continued pro-Russian sentiments in Serbian public opinion. The majority of the population who sympathise with Russia and its perspective on the war in Ukraine most often cite Serbia's national broadcaster RTS as their main source of information, and occasionally the powerful privately-owned pro-government network TV Pink. Moreover, people who expressed pro-Russian attitudes are those who fully support the policies of the incumbent President Aleksandar Vučić. Therefore, careful political messaging about Russia and the West spread by Serbia's

December 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A. Ivković, "Rooting for Russia, then blaming the West: Evolution of Serbian tabloids' reporting on the war in Ukraine", *European Western Balkans*, 20 May 2022.

media and politicians has had a greater impact on the perception of the Serbian public than *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* combined. As a result of this approach, Russia's popularity in Serbia is so high that no government can pursue a policy that goes against Russia's interest without attracting significant hostility from the electorate.¹⁴

In the absence of objective information and critical media, a significant percentage of Serbian citizens (45%) have a rather naive and unrealistic expectation that Russia, and not the US or China, will be the dominant power in the XXI century.

Somewhat counterintuitively, due to its international isolation, Moscow is more lenient towards Belgrade. For Russia it is important to project itself as a world power that has allies in Europe and, for the sake of preserving this image, Belgrade has significant leeway.¹⁵ Moreover, Putin has used Kosovo's bid for independence to justify referendums organised in eastern Ukraine, a move that angered many Serbian nationalists.¹⁶ Despite maintaining a strong position of not introducing sanctions against Russia, faced with deep dissatisfaction among the Western partners Vučić has also managed to distance himself and Serbia from the Kremlin to some extent.¹⁷ For these reasons, Russia appears to be sidelined, engaging in low-cost actions to maintain a friendly environment, such as providing unwavering support to Serbia on the Kosovo issue and inviting Dodik to Moscow as a way of assisting in his re-election as President of Republika Srpska.

As for Russia's influence in Kosovo, Kosovo Serbs remain its main gatekeepers, primarily those in the four municipalities

¹⁴ Vuksanović, Šterić, and Bjeloš (2022).

¹⁵ V. Vuksanović, S. Cvijić, and M. Samorukov, "Beyond Sputnik and RT. How Does Russian Soft Power in Serbia Really Work?", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), December 2022,

¹⁶ J. McBride. "Russia's Influence in the Balkans", Council on Foreign Relations, 2 December 2022.

¹⁷ M. Samorukov, "Last Friend in Europe: How Far Will Russia Go to Preserve Its Alliance With Serbia?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 June 2022.

with a Serb majority in North Kosovo. Due to their hostile sentiments towards the Pristina authorities, which became particularly strong after the incumbent Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti came to power, Russia is seen as a natural ally and protector of their interests.¹⁸ However, owing to the territorial concentration of Serbs in the northern part of Kosovo and their recent exit from local institutions, Russian sway over Kosovo's internal affairs is both limited and isolated. Kosovo's Albanian population remains extremely anti-Russian and there is thus significant societal resistance to Russian influence. As a rule, Russia is almost universally perceived as a hostile country with a harmful influence on Kosovo, and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo are "impenetrable" to Russian courting.¹⁹ Russia itself has very little interest in Kosovo but rather sees it as a bargaining chip in its relationship with Serbia. This is why it can be said that Russian influence in Kosovo has nothing to do with Kosovo itself but has everything to do with Serbia.

With Moscow's inability to engage in active foreign policy on multiple fronts and Russian President Vladimir Putin consumed by the invasion of Ukraine, lower levels of the establishment "prefer to play safe and follow tried and tested instructions, no matter how outdated the latter may look" over trying out new tools in the Balkans.²⁰ This means that, instead of actively engaging in destabilising or stirring conflict, Russia will be more prone to using opportunities when they present themselves, such as local instabilities in North Kosovo and elsewhere, in order to push its agenda. Therefore, one should be on the lookout for critical moments or junctures that Russia may seek to exploit, most likely acting as a spoiler attempting to prevent positive changes. The first thing that comes to mind is the Franco-German proposal: given its potential to set the stage

¹⁸ "Trend Analysis 2022: Attitude of the Serbian Community in Kosovo", NGO Aktiv, November 2022.

¹⁹ E. Vlasi, "Russian Influence in Kosovo: In the Shadows of Myth and Reality", Kosovar Center for Security Studies, 2020.

²⁰ M. Samorukov, "Why is all quiet on Russia's Western Balkan front?...", cit.

for a resolution of outstanding disputes between Belgrade and Pristina, Russia might seek to actively undermine it.²¹

This is consistent with the toolbox that Russia has already shown its readiness to deploy in the Balkans in order to use opportunities to destabilise and prevent positive changes during critical moments. In 2016, two Russian agents, together with several Serbian citizens, attempted what was later described as a “coup plot” to overthrow the Montenegrin Government, and both were later sentenced on charges of terrorism and creating a criminal organisation.²² Moscow has also been accused of having helped fuel the expression of popular discontent with the Prespa Agreement in Greece and North Macedonia.²³ With Russia’s increased isolation and its designation as a terrorist state by the European Parliament,²⁴ coupled with its earlier expulsion from the Council of Europe, nothing is off the table and it seems that Russia will not refrain from using any means that suit its ends.

Another important factor to consider is the role of Western powers in the Balkans, primarily that of the US and EU countries. With the West’s increased geostrategic interest in the region as a result of the Russian war in Ukraine, a united front that has little patience with those perceived to be Putin’s allies seems to have emerged. Serbia’s authoritarian President has thus far managed to manoeuvre his way surprisingly well, carefully juggling his country’s European aspirations, non-alignment with the sanctions regime and keeping a friendly attitude towards Russia. Sooner or later this balancing act will have to stop, and the single most important factor that can determine exactly when this will occur seems to be the outcome of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

²¹ Brzozowski, Taylor, and Gotev (2022).

²² S. Walker, “Alleged Russian spies sentenced to jail over Montenegro ‘coup plot’”, *The Guardian*, 9 May 2019.

²³ N. Leontopoulos, “Who’s been meddling in Macedonia? Not only who you think”, *Investigate Europe*, 14 December 2018.

²⁴ “European Parliament declares Russia a state sponsor of terrorism”, *Reuters*, 23 November 2022.

Russia as the Main Bogeyman

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the latest licence plate incident came at a time of particular concern. Numerous diplomats, journalists, scholars and policy analysts were already discussing the possibility of a new war in the Balkans amid the political and institutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia's invasion heightened these concerns and placed the Western Balkans higher on the political agenda of the European Union. The fear is that the war in Ukraine may have a spillover effect, which could lead to the breakup of Bosnia and Herzegovina or to an open conflict in Kosovo. Many worry that Russia will trigger a new conflict in the Balkans through its proxies, including Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, the Serbian Orthodox Church or other far-right movements.

Events on the ground have played into these fears. Serbia's reluctance to join sanctions against Russia further strengthened the image of Serbia as a Russian proxy. On the other side, high-level officials in Kosovo were eager to convince international and domestic audiences that "Russia's war against Ukraine could embolden Serbia to act militarily against Kosovo".²⁵ A few weeks prior to the crisis, Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani warned that "Putin's aim is to expand the conflict to other parts of the world. Since his aim has constantly been to destabilise Europe, we can expect that one of his targets might be the Western Balkans".²⁶ Later on, Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti warned domestic and international audiences that Russia was fuelling tensions between Kosovo and Serbia due to the faltering war in Ukraine.²⁷

²⁵ T. Lazaroff, "Russian-Ukrainian war could spill over into the Balkans, Kosovo FM warns", *The Jerusalem Post*, 10 May 2022.

²⁶ I. Tharoor, "Russia's war in Ukraine finds echoes in the Balkans", *The Washington Post*, 1 August 2022.

²⁷ D. Boffey, "Kosovo PM says Russia is inflaming Serbia tensions as Ukraine war falters", *Europ.Info*, 20 December 2022.

Social media, too, amplified the Russian angle on the most recent crisis. There was a stark difference between what appeared to be a controlled crisis on the ground and social media speculation about an impending Serbian invasion. Indeed, when social media users pointed out that Russian and pro-Russian social media channels were taking an intense and seemingly orchestrated interest in Kosovo, it created a self-perpetuating cycle of alarm.²⁸ In fact, some Russian accounts were happy to play into this narrative, but that does not mean they should be taken at face value. Russian MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova gave a statement in which she almost reiterated the words of the Serbian President – that “the decision of the ‘authorities’ in Pristina [...] is another step towards expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo”.²⁹ A *Kyiv Post* special correspondent tweeted that Russian social media went overboard with “our Serb brothers” rhetoric, promising that Moscow would support them.³⁰ Western journalists reported that users of several Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels were spreading disinformation and even encouraging violence against Albanians.³¹ On 1 August 2022, the Wagner Group’s official Telegram channel shared the following message: “Kosovo is Serbia. Denazification is inevitable”. A high-ranking Serbian politician from the ruling party echoed this on social media,³² while some Serbian ultranationalists even claimed that ties with Russia’s private military company might help the country in an eventual war in Kosovo.³³

²⁸ A. Pavicević, “Kosovo Tensions ‘Escalated’ Again but This Time, Russian Telegram Channels Were Involved”, *Impakter*, 2 August, 2022.

²⁹ https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1553864361202130945

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/officejsmart/status/1554074825676783616>

³¹ Pavicević (2022).

³² S. Janković, “Najava za ‘denazifikaciju Balkana’ preko Twittera (“Announcement for the ‘denazification of the Balkans’ via Twitter”), *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 1 August 2022.

³³ D. Komarcević, “Serbian Right-Winger Says Wagner Ties Could Help If There’s ‘Conflict In Kosovo’”, *Radio Free Europe*, 6 December 2022.

In reality, however, Russia appears to be an unwanted guest in these mini-crises, such as the one that developed in July 2022 after Kosovo announced it will start issuing special certificates to Serbian citizens when entering Kosovo.³⁴ Local journalist Una Hajdari stressed that “this incident was entirely tied to a decision of the Kosovo government that was announced ages ago, and the fact that Serbia is unhappy about it”.³⁵ The belief that Russia “has a finger in every pie” is not only misleading, but also ignores the fact that local political leaders tend to pursue their own agendas, which have nothing to do with Putin and Russia. As a journalist of the online news outlet IMPARKTER correctly noted, “tensions in Kosovo will keep rising and “escalating” as long as the leaders (on both sides) keep benefiting from them”.³⁶

In the spirit of never letting a good crisis go to waste, various local and international politicians and public officials have now instrumentalised the Russian angle on the latest blow-up to push their own agendas. For example, Kosovo officials used it to advocate for Kosovo’s accelerated accession to NATO and the EU,³⁷ while certain Western diplomats, Europarliamentarians and opinion-makers argued that the EU should cut funds intended for Serbia or terminate accession talks because of Belgrade’s attitude toward Russia. EU and NATO officials have also expressed their desire to reinforce the EULEX policing mission and increase NATO troops in Kosovo. The Russian ambassador to Belgrade exploited the crisis to blame the West and Pristina for the “intimidation and oppression of Serbs in Kosovo”.³⁸

³⁴ “Kosovo starts issuing extra documents to Serbian citizens as protesters block roads”, *Euractiv*, 1 August 2022.

³⁵ <https://twitter.com/UnaHajdari/status/1553834345353420800>

³⁶ A. Pavicević (2022).

³⁷ P. Isufi, “Kosovo Leaders Sign EU Candidacy Application”, *Balkan Insight*, 14 December 2022.

³⁸ “Bocan-Harčenko: Priština nastavlja se kampanja zastrašivanja i ugnjetavanja Srba na KiM” (“Bocan-Harchenko: Pristina’s campaign of intimidation and oppression of Serbs in Kosovo and Kosovo continues”), *Politika*, 19 December

The importance of Kosovo in Serbian domestic politics and public opinion makes Russia a necessity for the Serbian foreign policy elite.³⁹ Kosovo continues to dominate the foreign policy agenda, as the majority of Serbian citizens still perceive the status of Kosovo as very important for the country's foreign policy. At the same time, more than half of Serbian citizens do not think that Serbia should recognise Kosovo.⁴⁰ Given Russia's support for Serbia's stance on Kosovo and President Putin's image as a protector of Serbs, the Serbian government is expected to maintain this relationship with Russia primarily to avoid alienating potential voters.

Maintaining peace and stability was important part of the West's approach towards the Balkans. Following this strategy, "Western countries have backed officials in Belgrade and Pristina who promised to settle their disputes through dialogue and choose European integration over alignment with Russia. In return, these stabilocrats were granted international legitimacy and a free hand in running their countries. This has led to real progress, such as the integration of predominantly Serb-majority living in northern Kosovo into the country's legal and political system. However, leaders in Belgrade and Pristina have also instrumentalized this progress to consolidate their power within the country as well as their international image as peacemakers and escape criticism for undemocratic behavior".⁴¹ The price of supporting stability and stabilocrats over democracy is that progress on the integration of Serbs is short-lived and depends on the political whims of autocrats, as evidenced by the concerted exit of all of northern Kosovo's Serbs from the Kosovo institutions.

2022.

³⁹ V. Vuksanović, "Russia Remains the Trump Card of Serbian Politics", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 June 2020.

⁴⁰ Vuksanović, Šterić and Bjeloš (2022).

⁴¹ M. Bjeloš, "Only Democracy can Bring Stability to the Balkans", *War on the Rocks*, 15 September 2022.

In this context, local elites in Serbia profited from the spread of pro-Russian narratives and used Russia's popularity in Serbia to deter the West from criticising the country's democratic backsliding.⁴² In words of Serbian foreign policy analyst Vuk Vuksanović, the "popularity of Russia [among] the Serbian public is not based on what Russia is, but what it isn't – the West. It is perceived as a counterweight to the West".⁴³ The war in Ukraine prompted the West to increase pressure on local politicians and apply quick solutions to the Balkan conflicts to eliminate Russia from the region. Serbian President Vučić eventually had to accept personal documents issued by Kosovo and stop issuing Serbian licence plates. Since any such agreement with Pristina is considered political suicide,⁴⁴ news about Russia's direct involvement in the Kosovo crisis often serves as a smokescreen and helps the Serbian political leadership save face and secure political support. Despite his eagerness to boost Russia's visibility and influence in the country, Serbian President Vučić fears direct Russian interference and the possibility that Putin could sabotage any hypothetical agreement he might negotiate regarding Kosovo.

Conclusion

With the barricades in North Kosovo which brought the lives of local Serbs to a standstill in December 2022, following their exit from Kosovo institutions, it seems that reaching any kind sustainable solution of the crisis through an EU-mediated dialogue is highly unlikely to happen anytime soon. The Franco-German proposal that was recently presented

⁴² V. Vuksanović, "Belgrade's new game: Scapegoating Russia and courting the EU", *War on the Rocks*, 28 August 2020.

⁴³ "After the beginning of a war in Ukraine, citizens of Serbia still have positive attitudes towards Russia", Meeting at Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 15 December 2022.

⁴⁴ Bjeloš (2022).

in Brussels within the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, without discussing its merits at length, might potentially serve as a turning point that will provide a sustainable framework for normalisation of relations between the two parties.⁴⁵ This is a critical moment where Russia can step in in order to spoil the chances of reaching the deal. If some kind of deal is reached, it would significantly reduce the leverage that Russia has over Serbia and, by extension, undermine Russia's influence in the Balkans. This is something that Russia cannot afford and since the stakes are high it is important to take preventive measures to mitigate the risks. These measures must address the possibility of misinterpreting the outcome of the dialogue by controlling the narrative surrounding the process, which is why transparency and inclusiveness are key. If Kosovo is indeed a potential fuse for the proverbial Balkan powder keg, toxic narratives and disinformation could provide the spark that sets it off. This is why it is important to deescalate tensions in North Kosovo in the short term, return to the negotiating table in the medium term and, lastly, reach the deal that could provide a framework for functioning relations in the long term.

⁴⁵ EEAS Press Team, [Agreement on the Path to Normalization between Kosovo and Serbia](#), 27 February 2023.

6. Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Geopolitical Mission for the EU

Samir Beharić

With its three presidents, 14 parliaments and 136 ministers, Bosnia and Herzegovina is considered one of the most complicated political systems in the world. Due to its complex structure, Bosnia's political landscape has been plagued by internal disputes, political instabilities and malign foreign influence. Besides the "usual suspect", Serbia, the country that has directly contributed to the political turmoil in Bosnia and Herzegovina is neighbouring Croatia, an EU member state, which has often been accused of colluding with political forces aiming to weaken and cause the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, in the recent years, the entity that has most notably expanded its influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Russian Federation. Russia has been actively empowering its proxies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sabotaging the country's EU path and threatening its leaders with a Ukraine-style invasion if the country joins NATO.¹

Moscow's efforts to destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as a number of other countries in the region, have been rather poorly addressed by the European Union from the start. The fact that certain European leaders have engaged in appeasing populists responsible for democratic backsliding, erosion of the rule of law and a skyrocketing brain drain has

¹ "Russia claims Bosnia could suffer the same fate as Ukraine if it decides to join Nato", *Independent*, 17 March 2022.

not helped the EU to adequately respond to Russia's meddling in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In order to advance its interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Russian regime has not only relied on its partners within the country, but has also used a wide array of tactics and strategies ranging from social media campaigns to covert financial support for anti-Western actors such as the Bosnian Serb strongman Milorad Dodik.² This has led to the rise of pro-Russian political movements in the country, which is probably the most visible manifestation of Russian influence not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but across the region. However, particularly in the Serb-majority Republika Srpska entity, the mushrooming of pro-Russian NGOs often working under the banner of "humanitarian organisations" has been extremely worrying not only from a political but also from a security point of view. Members of some of those organisations have openly voiced their support for Russian aggression against Ukraine.³ Groups such as the "Night Wolves of Republika Srpska" have direct ties with the "Night Wolves", Russia's largest motorcycle gang also known as "Putin's Angels". They are widely feared as "agents of meddling and mayhem" beyond Russia's borders.⁴ Such groups have capitalised on deep ethnic rifts in Bosnia's society, which have brought them popularity from across the Republika Srpska entity and scorn from the rest of the country. The members of this bike group have been recognized as Kremlin's tool for spreading anti-Western propaganda and promoting Russia's national interests not only throughout the Balkans, but internationally.⁵ In 2018, the Night Wolves'

² "SAD: Rusija tajno finansirala DF u Crnoj Gori i Dodika u BiH" ("USA: Russia secretly financed DF in Montenegro and Dodika in BiH"), *Voice of America* (Glasamerike), 13 September 2022

³ S. Mujkic, "Support for Russia among Some Pro-Russian Bosnian Groups, but Not All", *Balkan Insight*, 7 March 2022.

⁴ A. Higgins, "Russia's Feared 'Night Wolves' Bike Gang Came to Bosnia. Bosnia Giggled", *The New York Times*, 31 March 2018.

⁵ J. Kleiner, M. Gregor, and P. Mlejnková, "The Night Wolves: Evidence of Russian Sharp Power and Propaganda from the Victory Roads' Itinerary",

leader Alexander Zaldostanov, known by the nickname of “the Surgeon”, and Saša Savić, the leader of the club’s branch in Serbia, were banned from entering Bosnia and Herzegovina, being considered a national security threat.⁶ The “humanitarian work” of the Night Wolves group is usually promoted by media outlets in Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity, including the public broadcaster Radio-Television Republika Srpska, RTRS, creating a positive media framing for the group.

Another important tool of the Kremlin’s influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been Russian state-owned media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. As outlined in a US Department of State’s Global Engagement Center report, RT and Sputnik are “using the guise of conventional international media outlets to provide disinformation and propaganda support for the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives”.⁷ Even though neither of the two media outlets have their offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, their fake news, disinformation and conspiracy theories are penetrating the Bosnian media scene through neighbouring Serbia.

Belgrade already hosts a Serbian-language Sputnik radio and website. Months after the EU suspended the broadcasting activities of some Russian state-backed media, including RT, reports of this TV giant opening its office in Serbia soon emerged. In November 2022, RT launched its website in Serbian language, dubbed RT Balkan, announcing that they would need two additional years to launch TV broadcasting services. The executive editor of RT Balkan is Jelena Milinčić, the daughter of Ljubinka Milinčić, the editor-in-chief of the Serbian edition of Sputnik’s news website.⁸ As underlined by

Problems of Post-Communism, 2023, pp. 1-11.

⁶ “Bosnia denies entry to leaders of Russian biker club: report”, *Reuters*, 15 March 2018.

⁷ State Department, Report: *RT and Sputnik’s Role in Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, United States Department of State, 20 January 2022.

⁸ “Russia Today launches website in Serbian, defying EU sanctions”, *N1*, 15 November 2022.

numerous analysts and experts, RT entered the media landscape in the Balkans with the aim of targeting audiences in Serbia and the Republika Srpska entity.⁹ This type of media influence will undoubtedly have a significant malign influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, too. Fake news and disinformation coming from both Russian state-owned media and obscure pro-Kremlin websites are often republished by Republika Srpska's official news agency SRNA and public broadcaster RTRS, making their way to media consumers in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰

The use of social media has proved a useful tool for the dissemination of Russian misinformation. The Facebook profile of the Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina regularly shares the Russian Ambassador's statements, often based on disinformation and fake news. Most recently, the Russian embassy's official Facebook page published a series of posts by the Russian Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Igor Kalabuhov, and the "Young Diplomats of the Russian Embassy" openly threatening Bosnia and Herzegovina if the country decides to join NATO. In a Facebook post designed to correct myths about the "Russian threats against Bosnia", Ambassador Kalabuhov stated that Russia has the right to a "proportionate response" should Bosnia and Herzegovina join NATO or any entity unfriendly to Moscow.¹¹ The EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina swiftly responded through its own Facebook page using a series of posts signed by the "Young Diplomats of the EU". This unconventional exchange soon escalated into a social media showdown between the two diplomatic missions, which arguably contributed to even greater confusion among ordinary social media users in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹²

⁹ T. Wesolowsky, "Barred In EU, Could Russia's RT Find A Home In Serbia?", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 21 July 2022.

¹⁰ M. Obrenović, "How Fake News Spreads: Mainstream Media Republish Suspect Sites' Stories", *Balkan Insight*, 31 August 2020.

¹¹ "Russian envoy makes veiled threats if Bosnia joins NATO", *Euractiv*, 8 February 2023.

¹² I. Pekmez, "Prijetnje Rusije prema BiH pokrenule raspravu sa EU na

However, this was not the first time that Kalabuhov openly threatened Bosnia and Herzegovina and its leaders if the country joins NATO. The Russian envoy did that several times in the past, including in March 2022, less than a month after Russia launched its invasion against Ukraine. Back then, in an interview for the public broadcaster of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina FTV, Kalabuhov stated that if Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to become a member of any alliance, that would be an internal matter, but added that Russia's response would be a different matter and that Ukraine's example shows what Russia expects: if it posed a threat Russia would respond.¹³

In order to counter such serious threats, it is important for the international community and the EU in particular to remain vigilant against the Kremlin's attempts to undermine Bosnia's stability and security. By doing so, the EU would invest in preserving the peace and stability not only of Bosnia and Herzegovina itself but of the wider region too. To counter Russian influence in the country, the West needs to be more proactive in supporting the country's democratic institutions and its integration into NATO. This requires not only providing financial and technical assistance to promote good governance and the rule of law and strengthen state institutions, but also investing in education and media literacy programs to help inoculate people in Bosnia and Herzegovina against fake news, disinformation and propaganda. However, unless the EU clearly sanctions those pro-Russian actors who undermine the very foundations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its stability, risking a new conflict in the country, these measures will only have a limited effect. Not only has the EU failed to sanction these politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but some European leaders have appeased nationalists in the

[društvenim mrežama](#)” (“Russia’s threats against Bosnia and Herzegovina started a discussion with the EU on social networks”), *Detektor*, 14 February 2023.

¹³ “Kalabuhov: U Ukrajini nema rata. Sigurnost u BiH je zagarantovana, ali...” (“Kalabuhov: There is no war in Ukraine. Security in BiH is guaranteed, but...”), *Federalna TV*, 15 March 2022.

country, including those with direct links to Vladimir Putin.¹⁴

By turning a blind eye to and often supporting Russian proxies in the Western Balkans, the EU has already helped many of them to stay in office for years. Some of the staunchest Putin supporters in the Balkans, those representing Bosnian Serbs, have remained in power even while visiting Putin in Moscow and openly supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁵ Analysts warn that the international community's failed policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is strengthening country's autocrats and empowers pro-Putin separatists, which could backfire by opening another Russian front aimed at destabilising Europe.¹⁶ Bosnia and Herzegovina is prone to Russian influence not only due to the resources Russia is devoting to destabilising the region, but also because of the EU's inability to recognise the threat, sanction Putin's allies in the region, and offer a set of viable policy solutions. Some of the pro-Russian nationalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina who should have been under strict and uniform EU sanctions, similar to those imposed by the US and UK, have been winning elections that they have been accused of rigging. Such an outcome enables Kremlin-backed stakeholders to actively promote Russia's interests in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One of the most vocal supporters of Vladimir Putin not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but in the whole of the Western Balkans is the ultra-nationalist Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik.¹⁷ During this year's celebration of "the day of Republika Srpska," which has been declared illegal by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dodik awarded the Russian President with Republika Srpska's highest medal of honour "for his patriotic concern and love

¹⁴ S. Beharić, "The EU must stop appeasing 'Putin's puppets' in Bosnia", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 28 March 2022.

¹⁵ "Putin meets Bosnian Serb separatist leader, praises Serbia", *Associated Press*, 20 September 2022.

¹⁶ M. Kraske, "Misguided Balkans policy. Dangerous appeasement", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 15 February 2023.

¹⁷ H. Karčić, "Putin's Most Loyal Balkan Client", *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2022.

for Republika Srpska”.¹⁸ Infamous for his genocide denial and divisive rhetoric, Dodik has undermined the country’s stability through constant calls for Bosnia’s Republika Srpska entity to secede and join neighbouring Serbia. However, Dodik has not been using secessionist rhetoric alone in order to achieve his plans. In December 2021, he orchestrated the Republika Srpska National Assembly’s vote on withdrawing from Bosnia’s joint military, secret service, tax administration and highest judiciary body. Barely two months later, in February 2022, MPs in the Republika Srpska entity enacted a draft legislation establishing a parallel institution challenging the authority of the Bosnian state’s top judicial body. At the time that this law was approved, the authorities of the Republika Srpska entity had established an entity-level agency for medicinal products and medical devices, challenging the authority of the state Agency for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices. These political developments led to the country’s worst crisis since the end of the Bosnian war.

The attempt to cripple Bosnia’s state institutions and block the country from functioning just months before the general elections produced negative reactions from both the domestic judiciary institutions and international actors in the country. The strongest condemnation came from several Members of the European Parliament, who called for sanctions against Dodik. Austrian Green MEP Thomas Waitz called on the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina Christian Schmidt to dismiss Milorad Dodik from office.¹⁹

However, Dodik was not alone in contributing to the country’s worst political crisis since 1995. Dragan Čović, the Bosnian Croat leader and President of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH), heavily lobbied

¹⁸ U. Hajdari, “EU, US slam Bosnian Serb leader for awarding Putin highest honor”, *Politico*, 9 January 2023.

¹⁹ A. Wölfel, “EU-Abgeordneter zu Republika Srpska: ‘Es gibt ausreichend Gründe, Dodik zu entlassen’” (“MEP on Republika Srpska: ‘There are sufficient reasons to sack Dodik’”), *DerStandard*, 13 December 2021.

the High Representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina Christian Schmidt to amend Bosnia and Herzegovina's Electoral Law without implementing the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgments. The Chairman of the Delegation of the European Parliament for Cooperation with Bosnia and Kosovo, Romeo Franz, criticised this proposal, slamming the EU's appeasement policy towards Dodik and Čović. It is important to note that Čović threatened to boycott the 2 October 2022 general elections if the Electoral Law was not amended without implementing the ECHR judgements. The most serious political crisis in post-Dayton history of Bosnia and Herzegovina did not culminate in Dragan Čović and the Croat parties boycotting the elections but in the general elections that took place on 2 October.

Last October, more than 3.3 million voters went to the polls for the ninth time since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, which ended an almost four-year long war marked by 100,000 dead, two million refugees and the Srebrenica genocide. The 2 October general elections were held at a turning point for the country, which is aspiring to become an EU member while at the same time being hampered by ethnic division, systemic corruption and malign foreign influence.

A Failing Electoral System

Since the first independently organised elections in 2006, Bosnians have been voting in general elections every four years, adding a further complicating element to the country's complex and overly expensive state apparatus. Out of 3.3 million Bosnians registered to vote, only 51% of them decided to cast their ballots in the 2 October elections, considered "the most important elections in the country since the war".²⁰

²⁰ "What you need to know about Bosnia's general election", *Al Jazeera*, 30 September 2023.

Depending on their place of residence, voters had the opportunity to participate in up to four electoral contests. These include a contest for the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14 parliaments at the national, entity, and cantonal levels within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), as well as a directly elected President of the Republika Srpska entity. Probably the most important representative post directly elected by the voters is the tripartite Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a rotating interethnic body representing the so-called constituent peoples: Bosniak Muslims, Catholic Croats and Orthodox Christian Serbs.

Additionally, at the state level, voters also elected 42 members to the lower chamber of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the predominantly Bosniak and Croat entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, voters elected a total of 98 MPs to the House of Representatives of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and an additional 289 representatives in 10 cantonal assemblies. Those residing in the Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska elected the President of this entity, as well as 83 MPs to the National Assembly of Republika Srpska.

According to the Central Electoral Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a total of 7,257 candidates ran for office as members of one of 127 parties and coalitions. Close to 70,000 Bosnian citizens voted from abroad, sending their ballots by post, which is around 6,000 less than in 2018.

How To Vote?

Voters with their permanent residence address in the Central Bosnia Canton of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity, for example, could pick from among 596 candidates and 61 parties and coalitions. At the polling station, they would receive four lengthy ballots to elect their representatives at the cantonal, entity and state level.

First, the voters had to choose their representatives at the cantonal level. The cantonal assembly ballot featured 16 different political parties and 349 candidates. They could only vote for candidates within one party. Voting outside of one political party or coalition would make the ballot invalid.

Moving on to the second ballot, it is important to note that the Central Bosnian Canton is one of the 10 cantons of the Bosniak-Croat majority Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, voters in this entity also elected MPs for the 98-member House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is the upper house of the entity's parliament. This particular ballot in this voting unit featured 16 different parties and 127 candidates in total.

At the state level, a total of 42 lawmakers were elected to the House of Representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is one of the two chambers of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the other being the House of Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In total, 28 members are elected from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the remaining 14 from the Republika Srpska entity. From the third ballot, on which the voters could pick their candidates for the state-level parliament, they could choose from among 24 political parties and 115 candidates.

Finally, the fourth ballot was reserved for the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a three-member body that replaces a single president. Voters in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity could pick between the Bosniak and Croat candidates – five in total. Those in Republika Srpska had the option to vote for one of the five candidates for the Serb member of the tripartite Presidency.

It is important to note that numerous groups are not eligible to run for the Presidency and several other high-ranking posts due to the discriminatory Dayton constitution. Based on their ethnicity and residency, only Bosniak and Croat candidates from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina are qualified to run for the Bosniak and Croat member of the Presidency. At

the same time, only Serb candidates from the Republika Srpska entity are allowed to run for the Serb member of the Presidency. In other words, Bosniaks and Croats residing in Republika Srpska, as well as Serbs living in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina are prevented from running for the highest post.

However, the discrimination does not stop there. Bosnia's numerous ethnic minorities, including Roma and Jews are not eligible to run for the position of state president either. Furthermore, the constitution also bans people who do not wish to declare their ethnic identity or who simply identify as "Bosnians" or "citizens" from running for the highest office. An estimated 400,000 citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which constitute around 12% of the total population, cannot run for president because of their religion, ethnicity or place of residence. In several instances, the ECHR found that the Dayton constitution violates citizens' rights to run for public office, urging Bosnia and Herzegovina to amend its constitution and electoral law. None of the court judgements, including the famous Sejdić-Finci and Zornić cases, have been implemented yet.

Election Night

Due to a lack of political willingness to implement the ECHR judgements, there is a broad expectation that the Office of the High Representative (OHR) will put an end to electoral discrimination by amending the electoral law. In this respect, not only is the OHR certainly regarded as the most prominent international body, but it is also an integral part of Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system. The OHR was established with a mandate to oversee the implementation of civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement, and as such has considerable powers to pass legislation and dismiss elected officials, which has been done in the past.

The current High Representative is Christian Schmidt, a former German official who decided to intervene in the electoral law in the middle of election night. Minutes after

the polling stations closed at 7 p.m., Christian Schmidt imposed the so-called Functionality Package, a set of measures amending the Electoral Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Constitution of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to Schmidt, the aim of this decree was to improve the functionality of political institutions in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as to establish mechanisms to unblock the implementation of the election results and increase the transparency and integrity of the electoral process. Even though Schmidt's intent and the effects of his decision are beneficial, its timing could not have been worse. Despite the fact that the reforms imposed by Schmidt had no effect on direct votes, his decision did set new regulations and time constraints for the formation of indirectly elected bodies in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Pro-Bosnian parties saw such intervention in the legislature as a push benefitting the Croat nationalist parties led by the HDZ BiH. They argued that the enacted reform package helps the HDZ BiH and its coalition partners in two key respects. The first is that it increases the number of representatives in the House of Peoples of the Parliament of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 58 to 80 delegates, and the second, even more important aspect, is that it gives more power and influence to delegates nominated to the upper house of the Parliament of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Croat-dominated cantons. Since the laws need to be passed by both houses of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Schmidt's decree gave the HDZ BiH and its affiliates considerable manoeuvring space for potential blocking actions.

Hours after Schmidt imposed his Functionality Package, the first election results for the Presidency trio were announced. Voters in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina elected Denis Bećirović, a high-ranking official of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as the Bosniak member of the Presidency. His candidacy was supported not only by Bećirović's SDP but

also by an alliance of 11 opposition parties endorsing his campaign against the President of the Bosniak nationalist Party of Democratic Action (SDA) Bakir Izetbegović. By defeating Bakir Izetbegović, the son of the late Alija Izetbegović, the first President of the independent Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina Denis Bećirović became the first social democrat serving as the Bosniak member of the three-headed Presidency.

On the Croat side, Željko Komšić, the civic-oriented President of the Democratic Front (DF), was re-elected as the Croat member of the Presidency. Komšić gained more votes than Borjana Krišto, the candidate of the HDZ BiH. Komšić's victory has caused additional frustration among Croat nationalists claiming that he does not represent the Croat people, threatening to block the government formation and calling for a more rigid election law reform.

In the Republika Srpska entity, voters elected pro-Russian candidate Željka Cvijanović as the Serb member of the Presidency, which made her the first woman ever elected to the Presidency. At the same time, she has been a long-serving official of the Serb nationalist Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and a close aid of the Bosnian Serb separatist Milorad Dodik. Considering her track record, close ties with Dodik and friendly relations with Putin, combined with the overall political context in Republika Srpska, it would be highly unrealistic to expect any change in the course that the new Serb member of the Presidency will take during her mandate.

In parallel with electing their member of the Presidency, the voters in Republika Srpska also voted for the President of the Republika Srpska entity, an event marked by drama and controversy. Hours after the polls were closed, Jelena Trivić, the candidate of the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP), announced she had become the new President of the Republika Srpska entity, defeating Bosnian Serb strongman Milorad Dodik. The following morning, the Central Electoral Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina announced that

the new President of Republika Srpska was the former Serb member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Milorad Dodik. Jelena Trivić, a Bosnian Serb ultra-nationalist herself, filed complaints citing irregularities and voter fraud, but the result remained unchanged even after the recount.

Old Winners, New Coalitions

With the results being announced, it was evident that over the next four years the Presidency would be composed of two pro-Bosnia oriented politicians and a Bosnian Serb nationalist. This raised hopes that the results for the state- and entity-level parliamentary elections would mirror the Presidency results. However, it was the nationalist-oriented parties that won the biggest share of mandates in the state and entity parliaments as well as in the cantonal assemblies of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity. For many, this was a sign that the political blocking tactics from the previous mandate will continue, deepening the stalemate in the reform process, cementing ethnocratic clientelism and potentially causing even greater depopulation.

However, just days after the elections, the opposition parties from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina promptly agreed to form a coalition which would effectively exclude the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) from power. Individually, the SDA won more votes than any other party in this entity, but the new umbrella opposition bloc consisting of eight parties, dubbed the “Eight”, had more MPs in the state-level and entity parliaments. In mid-December, after a series of negotiations, the eight opposition parties led by the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP BiH), the People and Justice Party (NiP) and Our Party (Naša stranka), joined by the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH), Movement of Democratic Action (PDA), People’s European Alliance (NES), Party for the New Generations, and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Initiative – Fuad Kasumović, signed a coalition agreement with the

Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ BiH) and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), paving the way for a new majority without the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) in both the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the legislature. The coalition partners announced a swift transition of power that will ensure a prompt implementation of the laws necessary for enhancing the EU integration process. Topics such as NATO accession were not on the table as Dodik and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) vehemently oppose Bosnia and Herzegovina joining this military alliance.²¹ The new coalition will soon be put to the test as the HDZ BiH will step up its demands for reform of the election law, which would further strengthen its position, and Dodik's SNSD will work towards Bosnia and Herzegovina staying out of NATO.

On 15 December, the same day as the new state-level coalition agreement was signed, EU leaders unanimously decided to grant EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The candidate status came with an invitation for political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement the long-overdue reforms and move the country towards the EU before its citizens do so – without Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, the political situation in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina looks more complicated as there are ambiguities caused by the amendments to the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Constitution of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina imposed by the High Representative on election night. The Bosniak, Croat and Serb caucus of the House of Peoples of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina chose three candidates for the leadership positions of this entity: one president and two vice-presidents. Once they are elected, they will nominate the President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In line with the election

²¹ Al Jazeera, “‘Osmorka’, HDZ BiH i SNSD potpisali ‘historijski’ sporazum”, 15 December 2022.

results, since the SDA has a majority in the Bosniak caucus of the House of Peoples of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it picked a candidate from its own party for one of the three leadership positions of the entity. The other two candidates are HDZ and SDP cadres. Since the “Eight” and HDZ sidelined them during the coalition talks, this gives SDA a more than comfortable position to block the process of appointing the entity’s president. Since the President of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina appoints the entity government, the SDA will be able to block the formation of the government – all thanks to the new amendments imposed by Christian Schmidt on election night. As a result, several of the “Eight” leaders anticipate that the High Representative will impose yet further amendments, neutralising any attempt by the SDA to block the formation of an entity government.

If the “Eight” and HDZ are successful in their goal of forming the government of the FBiH, we may expect a large purge of SDA staff in public institutions across the Federation entity. If this happens, there is likely to be massive opposition from the SDA cadres who are spread across the institutions of the FBiH and have held power for more than two decades.

Conclusion

In recent years Russia has been accused of supporting nationalist political parties and secessionist leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Using its media outlets, Moscow has engaged in spreading disinformation and fake news and promoting anti-Western narratives. Moreover, the Kremlin has been accused of using its influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina to block the country’s membership of NATO and the EU, as part of its broader strategy to undermine Western influence in the Balkans. This has been particularly evident in Republika Srpska, where Russia has provided economic and political support to Bosnian Serb separatists led by Milorad Dodik.

Russia's malign influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina poses a significant threat to the country's stability and security, as well as to the broader European and transatlantic community. The EU has offered little in terms of curbing the Russian threat and holding accountable Bosnian decision-makers who side with Russia and engage in undermining the state institutions. Instead, some EU officials have been appeasing pro-Russian nationalists without offering a viable policy solution aimed at integrating Bosnia and Herzegovina into NATO and the EU.

At the same time, post-election developments have shown that Bosnia and Herzegovina, now an EU candidate country, will remain prone to political instabilities and institutional paralysis for the next four years, which will only obstructs economic development, encourage endemic corruption, and accelerate youth emigration.

7. The War in Ukraine: A Chance to Reduce the Western Balkans' Energy-Dependence on Russia

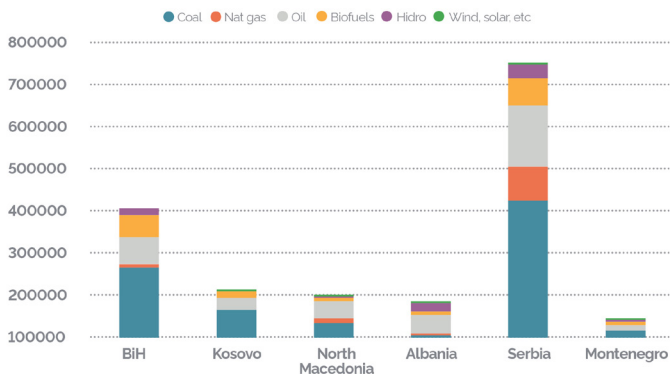
Agata Łoskot-Strachota

Although the countries of the Western Balkans consume relatively little energy (natural gas included) they are all strongly affected by the ongoing energy crisis. Western Balkan countries, which are relatively poor and insufficiently diversified in terms of energy sources, are among the most vulnerable in Europe. High and highly volatile prices, the still unfinished EU integration process, the continuing challenges to regional integration and the heavy dependence of some countries in the region – above all Serbia, the largest Balkan energy consumer – on ties with Russia, highlight the structural energy problems facing the Western Balkans. This is clearly visible in the natural gas sector. Although Serbia has not joined the EU sanctions and continues to import gas from Russia, it has, in parallel, started to look more intensively for options to diversify its sources and guarantee itself stable and affordable supplies in the future. This shows that the war, the crisis and the intensification of Balkan energy problems may, with stronger EU involvement, also offer an opportunity to reduce Balkan energy dependence both on Russia and, in the longer term, on hydrocarbons.

Sources of Energy in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkan states are among Europe's smallest energy consumers. All six countries consumed the equivalent of less than 2.5% of the EU's total energy consumption in 2020, with Serbia alone accounting for just over half of this percentage. In most Balkan countries, coal plays the most important role in the energy mix, and it is used for both electricity and heat generation. Oil also has an important role in all Balkan primary energy mixes, being the most important source in Albania and North Macedonia. Natural gas has traditionally been used to a smaller extent in the Western Balkans, with a more pronounced – although still low compared to the EU average – share in the energy mixes of Serbia (12.5%) and North Macedonia (11.7%).

FIG. 7.1 - TOTAL ENERGY SUPPLY IN WESTERN BALKANS, 2020, TJ

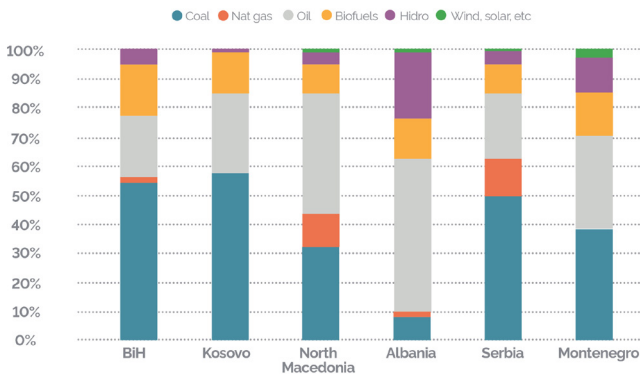


Source: IEA

Coal accounts for the smallest share in Albania (7.7% of total primary energy consumption), which relies almost entirely on hydroelectricity. However, the Balkan countries that rely more heavily on coal also generate a substantial part of their electricity through hydropower. In 2020 hydroelectric power plants accounted for over 40% of the share of electricity generation

in Montenegro, over a third in Bosnia and Herzegovina, over a quarter in Serbia and 15% in North Macedonia. For heating purposes in the Western Balkans, according to official data, fossil fuels, primarily natural gas and coal, continue to dominate the mix.¹ At the same time, according to many sources, biomass has a significant share in household heating, which is usually underestimated and invisible in the official statistics.²

FIG. 7.2 - WESTERN BALKANS¹ PRIMARY ENERGY MIXES, 2020



Source: IEA

Regional Dependence on Energy Resource Imports from Russia

The Western Balkan countries are largely self-sufficient in coal. Lignite has been produced in nearly all countries, and regional production has grown by almost a quarter since the early 1990s.³ Only Albania, which uses the smallest amount

¹ M. Kambovska, “Heating in the Western Balkans Overview and recommendations for clean solutions”, CEE Bankwatch Network, May 2021.

² *Western Balkans: Directions for the Energy Sector*, Final Report, The World Bank, June 2018.

³ “Production of lignite in the Western Balkans – statistics”, Eurostat, August

of this fuel in the region, remains heavily dependent on coal imports (over 51% in 2020⁴), about two thirds of which came from Russia. The rest of the Western Balkan countries rely on domestic production.

The situation in the oil and gas sectors is quite different. The Western Balkan countries remain heavily dependent on oil and gas imports, with Russia being one of the most important sources. They import de facto 100% of regional consumption of oil and petroleum products and almost 82% of natural gas. In all the Balkan countries, Russia has been the sole supplier of natural gas. Serbia remains the largest regional importer of gas, accounting for approximately 80% of both regional consumption and imports of this fuel. By contrast, in the case of oil and petroleum products, Russia is directly responsible for just over 12% of regional supplies. Also here, the largest consumer of Russian oil in the region is Serbia, which is also the most heavily dependent on Russian supplies, which cover almost 25% of Serbian needs.⁵

Consequently, the region's energy dependence on Russia is at its highest in the relatively small natural gas market, and among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia remains the most heavily dependent on Russia for its energy imports.

Serbian Dependence on Russian Natural Gas

Serbia's dependence on Russian natural gas is multi-dimensional. As mentioned above, Russia is the sole supplier of over 80% of the natural gas consumed in the country. All gas pipelines supplying the Serbian market come from Russia. For decades, Serbia has been supplied with gas via a single route

2021.

⁴ Own calculations based on Eurostat, "Imports of solid fossil fuels by partner country".

⁵ Own calculations based on Eurostat, "Imports of oil and petroleum products by partner country".

– the one running through Ukraine and Hungary. In recent years the situation has changed. Since 2020, Russian crude has been reaching Serbia via the European leg of the TurkStream pipeline.⁶ The TurkStream was a strategic Russian gas export project built to diversify away from Ukrainian transit routes. The Serbian section of TurkStream is to some extent controlled by Russia's Gazprom. It was exempted from competition rules (the obligation to guarantee third-party access, TPA rule),⁷ and the 51% Gazprom-controlled company Gastrans (Gazprom is an indirect shareholder in Gastrans – through its Swiss-registered subsidiary South Stream AG) was responsible for the construction of the pipeline and was certified as an independent route operator.⁸

The case of Gastrans highlights another dimension of Serbian-Russian ties and energy-dependence, namely the high degree of formal and informal influence of Russia and Russian companies in the Serbian energy and natural gas sectors. This is illustrated by the fact that Dušan Bajatović, the head of Srbijagas – Serbia's state-owned gas company, which co-owns Gastrans (49%) – has been seen as an advocate of Russian interests in the country and in the Serbian energy sector⁹ for many years. Mr Bajatović is also an important Serbian politician and his actions have contributed, among other things, to hindering progress in strategic areas for the Serbian gas sector for many years, including market liberalisation or diversification (e.g. by blocking EU-backed projects such as the Dimitrovgrad-Niš

⁶ A. Łoskot-Strachota, M. Seroka, and M. Szpala, "TurkStream on the diversifying south-eastern European gas market", OSW, April 2021.

⁷ Which was criticized inter alia by EU's Energy Community see "Serbia's TurkStream branch to impede competition -EU watchdog", *Reuters*, 7 March 2019.

⁸ For more see Łoskot-Strachota, Seroka, and Szpala (2021) and Energy Community Secretariat, Opinion 1/2019 on the exemption of the Gastrans natural gas pipeline project from certain requirements under Directive 2009/73/EC by the Energy Agency of the Republic of Serbia.

⁹ See European Platform for Democratic Elections <https://www.fakeobservers.org/biased-observation-database/details/bajatovic-dusan.html>

link with Bulgaria). Finally, Russian companies also hold significant stakes in key sectors of the Serbian economy, as exemplified by Gazpromneft's control (and Gazprom's stake) in the energy company NIS (Naftna Industrija Srbije), an important exporter and one of the most profitable companies in the country, which includes Serbia's only refinery¹⁰ (some 20-25% of the oil consumed in the country also comes from Russia). Gazpromneft acquired a 51% majority stake in NIS in a controversial 2008 "package" of energy agreements between Serbia and the Russian Federation. It is believed to have ensured its dominant position in the Serbian energy sector by giving preference to Russia and paying low prices for its assets. As a result of this deal, Russian companies took control of Serbia's fuel sector, gas supply and storage (there was also an agreement on building the Serbian section of South Stream and a gas storage unit), and were given exclusive rights to explore for oil and gas on Serbian territory.¹¹

Another result of the aforementioned deal is that Gazprom still holds a 51% stake in Banatski Dvor, Serbia's only gas storage facility.

Cooperation with Moscow in relation to natural gas also brings tangible benefits to Belgrade. Thanks to the construction and launch of the TurkStream pipeline, Serbia has become a transit country – gas flows through its territory to Hungary and other countries, thus bringing in transit revenues for the Serbian state budget. TurkStream also resulted in Serbia paying relatively lower prices for Russian gas supplies (due to lower transportation costs). Since the outbreak of the Russian war against Ukraine, Serbia has remained one of the two European countries – the other is Belarus – that are not implementing sanctions against Russia, and has continued its existing trade cooperation with Russia, as far as possible. It is therefore also

¹⁰ See Łoskot-Strachota, Seroka, and Szpala (2021).

¹¹ See M. Szpala, "Serbia: polityczne gry wokół prywatyzacji koncernu energetycznego" ("Serbia: political games around the privatization of an energy company"), OSW, August 2014.

one of the few European countries whose imports of Russian natural gas have remained largely unchanged. What is more, at the end of May 2022, a new three-year contract was signed with Gazprom for the import of 2.2 bcm of gas per year, at prices 100% tied to oil prices – a mechanism designed to guarantee their relatively low level and stability in the face of uncertainty, dynamic change and crisis in the markets.¹²

And Serbia's Quest for Diversification

Despite the above does, Belgrade is still looking to diversify its gas and oil supplies. On the one hand, the war and the energy crisis in Europe and around the world highlight the risks of unilateral dependence and of the strategic Serbian gas sector's strong links with the aggressor state. Russia has been openly weaponising its gas supplies in its relations with other European states and remains in an energy war with the Western countries. Furthermore, the future of its gas and oil exports, as well as its internal gas and oil sectors, remains unpredictable. For Serbia, the war also poses a dilemma that requires it to strike a balance between Russia, with which it has strong ties precisely in the gas sector, and the European Union and the US. Belgrade has been striving for years for integration with the EU, its key economic and political partner.

Serbia itself has become concerned about the stability and security of its gas supply from Russia. This concern stems from the suspension of Russian supplies to neighbouring countries through which gas flows to the Serbian market (including Bulgaria), as well as from the implementation of Western sanctions against Russia. These, among other things, have somehow affected the functioning of the company responsible

¹² According to Serbia's President these prices were expected to be at the range of 310-408USD/1000 m3, *Argus Media*, "Serbia signs new gas supply contract with Gazprom", 30 May 2022.

for operating the offshore part of TurkStream.¹³ Serbia's oil sector has also been directly affected by Western sanctions. The entry into force in December 2022 of EU sanctions introducing an embargo on seaborne crude oil imports from Russia to the EU countries made it impossible to supply and transfer Russian oil from and through Croatian territory, which used to be the most important route supplying the Serbian market, including the NIS-owned refinery, to date.¹⁴

On the other hand, the crisis and the war are accelerating the pace of change in the region's gas markets and have been creating new opportunities, also for Serbia. LNG terminals are expanding their capacity (terminal in Croatia¹⁵) and new terminals are due to open soon (in Greece in 2023 at Alexandroupolis¹⁶). The integration of the regions gas markets and networks is also increasing, thanks in part to the new interconnectors (including the Bulgarian-Greek one which has been booked for almost 100% in December 2022,¹⁷ and the acceleration of works on the Bulgarian-Serbian one¹⁸) and regulatory upgrades enabling the use of the Trans-Balkan route.¹⁹ There are emerging opportunities for increasing gas imports from Azerbaijan by the entire South and East European market: Azeri exports to Europe reportedly rose by

¹³ S&P Global, "TurkStream gas link operation 'secured' after Dutch permit return: Hungary", 19 October 2022.

¹⁴ M. Szpala and A. Sadecki, "Serbia: the forced abandonment of Russian oil", OSW, October 2022.

¹⁵ "Croatia plans to expand LNG terminal on Krk island", *Balkan Green Energy News*, 23 August 2022.

¹⁶ "Launch of works on Alexandroupolis LNG terminal in Greece", *Balkan Green Energy News*, 3 May 2022.

¹⁷ "Bulgaria-Greece gas link capacity booked at 94% in Dec", *SeeNews*, 11 January 2023.

¹⁸ "Bulgaria begins work on Serbia gas link, sees operations by year-end", *Reuters*, 1 February 2023.

¹⁹ Including for example in Moldova, see "Moldova Allows Using Virtual Reverse of Natural Gas through Ukraine to All Interested Companies - GTS Operator of Ukraine", *Ukrainian News*, 13 January 2023.

18% year-on-year to 11.4 bcm in 2022.²⁰ This potential will increase further with both investments in Azeri production and in the planned increase of the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor, including the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas (TANAP) Pipeline.²¹ According to its political announcements, at least, Serbia seems to be interested in importing Azeri gas via a future link with Bulgaria,²² which is currently under construction. An alternative option would be to import gas from Croatia via the planned interconnector: from the LNG terminal in Omisalj or via the Croatian gas pipeline network from Austria, Slovenia or Italy.²³ Lastly, Turkey's ambition to use the current crisis to speed up the creation of its own gas hub in Thrace, which has been under planning for two decades, also presents an opportunity to attract additional gas volumes for both Serbia and other South and East European countries. Turkey's hub ambitions are supported by concrete measures to increase its gas import capacities,²⁴ and to give European countries and companies access to Turkey's import and transport infrastructure (including five LNG terminals). This has been signalled by the agreement signed with Bulgaria²⁵ and comments on possible similar deals with other South and East European countries.²⁶

²⁰ "Minister: Azerbaijan exports 11.4 bcm of gas to Europe in 2022", *Azərbaycan*, 13 January 2023.

²¹ "Türkiye, Azerbaycan to double TANAP gas pipeline capacity", *Daily Sabah*, 7 October 2022.

²² "Serbia in talks with Azerbaijan to buy gas for next year", *Reuters*, 12 July 2022.

²³ Gas Interconnector Serbia – Croatia, Energy Community.

²⁴ See "Türkiye signs 10-year natural gas deal with Oman: Energy chief", *Daily Sabah*, 30 January 2023.

²⁵ L. Kobeszko, A. Łoskot-Strachota, and A. Michalski, "Bulgaria steps up its gas cooperation with Turkey", OSW, 11 January 2023.

²⁶ See tweet by Ragıp Soylu, Turkey Bureau Chief for Middle East Eye, https://twitter.com/ragipsoylu/status/1619969523888840704?s=20&t=EJrmVigf1nrXFQ_7Fjm_MA

Energy and the Process of Western Balkan Integration with the EU

The changing geopolitical situation is reshaping Russia's influence in the Balkans. The gradual reduction of its role in regional energy sectors, including the reduction of Serbia's gas dependence on Russia, has also been supported by EU activities, such as financial support to combat the negative effects of the energy crisis. The Western Balkans is perhaps the most vulnerable region in Europe to the effects of the current crisis, including to the high and dynamically changing electricity prices.²⁷ This is due to relatively limited options for diversification of energy sources and fuel switching and a high degree of dependence on electricity imports. In November 2022, the European Commission announced a €1 billion package, half of which is to be used for immediate assistance (planned to be launched in January 2023) and to protect households and small and medium-sized enterprises from the negative effects of the energy crisis and price increases. The remaining €500 million was to be made available in the short-to-medium term in order to accelerate diversification of the supply, renewable energy generation, enhancement of energy efficiency and progress with the energy transition.²⁸ Projects co-financed by EU funds in the short term would help to diversify the Western Balkan electricity mix by enabling an increased role for gas, including LNG. A key condition for EU support appears to include a conditionality clause which would ensure, among other things, that gas imported within the framework of EU-co-funded projects and investments should not come from Russia. Although all Western Balkan states except Serbia²⁹ have

²⁷ "Energy crisis in the Western Balkans: Measures undertaken amid energy price shocks", Balkan Green Foundation, September 2022.

²⁸ "Berlin Process Summit: EU announces €1 billion energy support package for the Western Balkans and welcomes new agreements to strengthen the Common Regional Market", European Commission, 3 November 2022.

²⁹ "Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted sanctions, but never implemented them",

joined the EU sanctions against Russia, the natural gas trade has not yet been subject to sanctions. In the medium term, the EU support package aims to increase the role of renewable energy in the region. The Western Balkan region has quite high potential for the development of solar and wind energy sources which could, in the longer term, not only reduce dependence on hydrocarbons and imports, but also reduce costs and price volatility and improve energy availability in the region.³⁰ It seems important to ensure that investment in green energy generation capacities goes hand in hand with investment in the development of electricity grids and the integration of regional markets.

For the success of the EU initiatives in the Western Balkans, it seems important to maintain the political weight attached to the processes initiated – inter alia, through initiatives of the EU Commission, but also those by the individual Member States – and not to disappoint the hopes of countries in the region for the acceleration of the process of integration with the EU. It is also important to turn the current activities and momentum into concrete projects involving regional actors and stakeholders on a binding basis. The EU-funded Energy Community can and should play an important role in navigating and managing the processes of diversification and implementation of the Western Balkans energy transition and linking it to the process of EU integration in the field of energy. The key issue here, however, would be to strengthen this institution, which currently remains heavily involved in coordinating EU energy assistance to Ukraine and Moldova and processes of adapting Ukrainian laws, regulations and institutions to the EU's requirements.

European Western Balkan, 4 June 2022.

³⁰ G. Cretti, A.A. Imeri, and S. Ristovski, “A Berlin Process for the energy Clingendael Alert security of the Western Balkans”, Clingendael, November 2022.

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