

## **The perspective of the Western Balkans in the shadow of global confrontation**

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The Western Balkans met the Russian aggression against Ukraine with a lot of open questions. The process of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is in the phase of intensive care, many are already predicting clinical death. Is that the correct diagnosis? We will try to analyze it in the following lines. The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina does not seem any better than before February 24, 2022. The assembly of North Macedonia adopted Macron's proposal, and we can say that North Macedonia has taken another significant step toward EU integration, where it has clearly demarcated whether to stay in the dilemmas of the 19th century as good excuses to hold back full Euro-Atlantic integration or wants to move forward. Montenegro is still recovering from perhaps the biggest crisis since its independence. The attempted coup d'état in 2016 seems like a slight cold if we look at the situation today. The country with half a million inhabitants has been under blockade for two years. Religious identity issues have become the main factor in political and social life. At the same time, it is carrying a great destructive potential to divide Montenegrin society completely. Serbia is the only country in Europe and the Western Balkans that has not imposed sanctions against the Russian Federation. Judging by the statements made public, the question arises as to whether Serbia will remain on such a course after the formation of the new government. Serbia, as the country with the most attracted foreign direct investments in the WB during 2021 and strong economic potential, is at the same time under the great burden of the past, at the most important crossroads. The development of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Kosovo and Montenegro, will depend on the choice made by Serbia. The unfavorable security situation created by the self-proclaimed independence of Kosovo has found its daily political counterpart in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its entity Republika Srpska. A rhetorically receptive but completely different situation is often presented as a system of merged plates. In the logic of observing the interdependence between Kosovo and Republika Srpska, several non-papers were presented to the public in 2021. Until now, it has not been fully clarified who their creators are. One of those non-papers was also attributed to Slovenian Prime Minister Janša. By a deeper analysis of the content of the presented ideas from the non-paper, we can conclude that they were written with the motivation that the problems would never be solved, but only those expectations would be raised.

In order to better understand where the Western Balkans can go, it is essential to understand the political, security, and economic processes. In the context of Serbia, we see that Serbia represents a sublimation of political, security, and economic processes that in many cases are incompatible and come into mutual collision. On the other hand, however, they provide certain results that reflect favorably on the economic standard of the citizens of Serbia.

The security perspective of the Western Balkans is rather colorful with several processes and tendencies. The first process is that the entire Western Balkans aims for full membership in the EU. The second process is full membership in NATO with the exception of Serbia and to some extent Bosnia and Herzegovina. The third process is the strengthening of regional economic cooperation, where we have the Open Balkan initiative, which the USA supports without reservation. The fourth process is the outcome of a comprehensive binding agreement on the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The fifth process, which unfortunately still continues, is reconciliation and trust, the most precise example of which is the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The above-mentioned processes have their own characteristics in that they are more or less dependent on external factors. The vision of the outcome of the end of these processes does not represent the unique foreign policy interest of all global players. And the realization of the EU's interests in the Western Balkans does not have the same consequences as if by any chance the Russian Federation prevails with its interests or the People's Republic of China. The latter two actors are directly striving to isolate this area, and their actions are causing certain long-term damage to the people of the ZB.

Retrograde policies based on strict ethnonational divisions and borders experienced their bloody demise during the 1990s. It remains quite unclear whether extreme and in reality not based policies come as a form of populism and cheap points gathering, or as a systematic and planned activity with possible violent outcomes that can be supported from outside. If we look at Bosnia and Herzegovina - Republika Srpska - Serbia - Kosovo, we will see strong ethnoreligious principles of division as an outcome that would guarantee "eternal" peace. This point of view does not represent the official policy of Serbia, on the contrary, through the initiative Open Balkans, Serbia, Albania,

and North Macedonia strive to remove bureaucratic barriers and give the economy a chance to connect peoples. According to US estimates, the Open Balkans in its full potential represents an economy of 100 billion dollars, and only because of the border crossings, do the countries of the Western Balkans lose 1 billion dollars each year.

The absence of normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, along with the refusal to fully implement what was agreed, leaves room for ominous scenarios. The flywheel of economic development and political optimism must clearly follow the progress in the normalization process. At this point, the process appears to be essentially at a standstill, while intrigues about potential outcomes build on one another. The steps that are taken and the agreements that are signed are presented as concessions or pressures, instead of as moves towards a better future and progress.

There is an unfounded scenario at the WB about some kind of exchange of territories based on ethnic principles, the principle of historical fairness, and national affirmation. In practice, this would mean an irreversible, anti-civilizational, and very risky precedent that could not be supported by any democratic state of the EU or the United States. Let's not go too far. Let's imagine a situation where the Albanian minority in the majority municipalities in the south of Serbia should be annexed to Kosovo and the north of Kosovo and the Serbian majority municipalities to Serbia. Who can, on behalf of the Albanian citizens of the Republic of Serbia, deny them visa liberalization and freedom of travel throughout Europe, which they enjoy as citizens of Serbia. Who can stand behind such an agreement and what would it look like in practice? Would such a solution ensure lasting peace and normalization of relations and Kosovo's membership in the UN? There is every chance that it wouldn't. Similar is the issue of Republika Srpska, which was created as an entity thanks to American efforts in defining the Dayton Agreement. There are many more examples throughout Europe, but also in the Balkans, where the process of exchanging territories according to the national key would lead to unsustainability. It seems complicated, but we already have valid solutions implemented by European countries after the Second World War. Only Germany and France have had three devastating and bloody wars behind them in the last 150 years, they had both a lot of unresolved issues and only one solution. A solution by connecting through the same values, interests, and economic development. Today, these principles have created the most inclusive form of cooperation embodied in the European Union. It is certain that both Slovakia

and Hungary can open mutual national issues, as well as Germany and Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands, Romania, and Hungary, Hungary and Serbia, Serbia and Bulgaria, and Spain and France, so these issues are not opened because the outcome is well known to everyone, even too well known on the European continent. Dialogue and inclusion, mutual improvement of standards, and respect for basic human rights and freedoms should always be on the table. However, these questions can also end up under the table or at a table where not all interested participants are sitting.

Thanks to the ethnocentric approach of the political elite, Bosnia and Herzegovina have easily slipped into a playground for the confrontation of global powers. In July 2021, we had the first major confrontation regarding the election of the High Representative for the implementation of peace in accordance with the Dayton Agreement. Contrary to the rules and regulations of the Peace Implementation Council of the Russian Federation opposed the appointment of Christiana Schmidt, and has tried to instrumentalize the whole case before the UN Security Council. In the whole mess, for the first time in the Western Balkans, the People's Republic of China got involved. The result of this involvement of Russia and China gave false encouragement to the leaders of Republika Srpska, who, using emotional manipulations, turned this whole situation into some kind of foreign policy point and additionally affirmed the story of the Eastern alternative. At the same time, due to the duet with Russia in challenging the international order in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska is facing the denial of financial aid by Germany. The citizens of Republika Srpska were deprived of 120 million euros of aid through donations. The political leadership of Republika Srpska is under US sanctions, and Germany stands firm in the position that the sanctions will be met by the EU as well. The key question that arises is the effect of such sanctions and whether they can lead to a solution to the political crisis. Especially in terms of how the Serbs who are living in Republika Srpska will identify themselves with those sanctions. The proliferation of disinformation and the promotion of nationalistic narratives make the situation even harder. The political elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina tie their personal destiny to the people from which they come from, and due to the successful control of the main narratives, it works for them for now, while at the same time they are leading the country into increasing isolation, which is most felt in the absence of foreign direct investments. The question arises as to how the national interest can

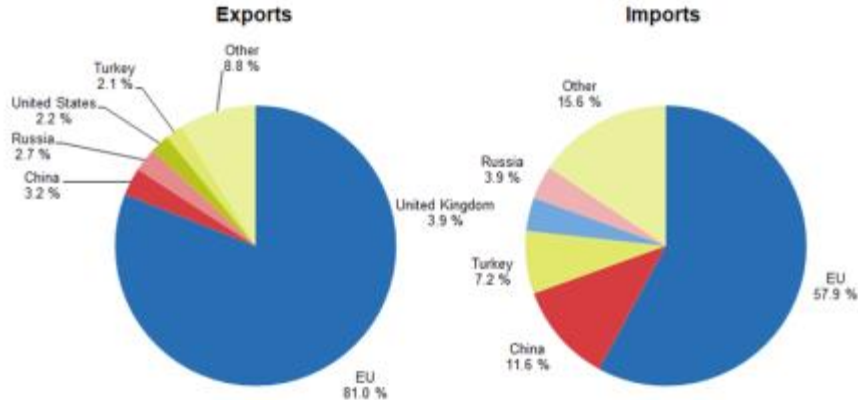
be represented if a political dialogue with Western decision-making centers cannot be conducted. All this resulted in the chronic emigration of the population of all nationalities.

The role of the Russian Federation has not changed and does not represent a new approach compared to earlier approaches to the Western Balkans, i.e. the Balkans during the 19th century. It skillfully plays on publicly and secretly supports different, often opposing nationalisms. Today's goal of these actions is directly related to foreign policy goals, which is the creation of a belt of neutral countries in the Western Balkans. How extensive is the Russian approach we can see in the statements of Russian Ambassador Kalabuhov, who said that in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership in NATO, Russia must take defensive steps and that this would be an anti-Russian move. Therefore, statements like these, which have no basis in reality, neither security nor political, refer us to the possible consequences of choosing a certain path. Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a blocked country, there is no talk of investments, nor are they coming. States that pass themselves off as supporters of certain options do not support such an outcome economically.

The possibility of applying the system of joint plates of Kosovo - Bosnia and Herzegovina past 30 years ago. International processes today in 2022 are not nearly the same as they were in 1989. The parameters from the nineties are no longer applicable. Today's frameworks are significantly different and require full integration, which comes as a platform for dialogue and problem-solving. The support of Russia and the People's Republic of China is without substance, it is limited to a small part of their foreign policy mosaic, which has devastating consequences for the actors who decide to be part of it. In terms of trade, Eurostat data show a clear development dependence of the Western Balkans exclusively on partners from the EU.

### Western Balkan countries trade with main partners, 2021

%



Source: Eurostat (online data code: Comext data code : DS-056697)

eurostat

Russia and the People's Republic of China are insignificant partners in the amount of 2.7% and 3.2% respectively of Western Balkan exports. While the People's Republic of China participates with 11.6% of total imports in the Western Balkans, with a dominant transfer of its workforce and products, distorting competitiveness and endangering environmental protection.

Russia's role in the Western Balkans has so far not resulted in a single constructive, sustainable and prosperous solution. It has always had a limited role with the aim of creating a new "Berlin Wall" from the Serbian living space, using the Serbian people as contemporary "border guards" towards the West. There are several empirical phenomena that convince us that such synchronization of action would be dangerous and harmful.

Imposing of the Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia in 2007, in point 6 it states "the declaration of military neutrality in relation to existing military alliances until the eventual calling of a referendum", with this move Serbia directly excluded itself from Euro-Atlantic integration, and it satisfied exclusively the Russian interest, even the wording about the referendum is the wording used by Russian propaganda when it tries to return the setting of the security architecture to 1997. The direction of politics in the direction of not joining military alliances manifested its direct consequence soon in February 2008, when Kosovo declared unilateral independence. This

showed that political balancing and satisfying the interests of the Russian Federation directly deprives Serbia of the opportunity to conduct a dialogue about its national interests as an equal member of the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

From the Ohrid and Prespa Agreements, as well as the latest resolution of the situation in the relationship between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, we see that it is possible to reach a compromise within the same value club, in the company of allies. One should not be an idealist, disputes, and problems will not disappear, but it is much easier to solve them within the same political-defense community. It is important to articulate your open issues within the alliance and avoid a scenario where open political issues leave space for global confrontation. And on the example of Belgrade-Pristina, we see that it is very difficult to find solutions if there are opposing positions. The geopolitical influence in overcoming contradictions and integrating the region was also expressed when was voting for Ahtisaari's plan, which Russia was against, not because of Serbia, but because of its own interests in Abkhazia and South Ossetia at that time. The argumentation used by President Putin regarding the occupation of Ukrainian territory clearly shows us that Russia has cultivated the unresolved status of Kosovo, waiting for a suitable opportunity to instrumentalize it to its advantage.

The region of the Western Balkans is in economic and strategic interdependence with the Euro-Atlantic Community, which is clearly shown by the parameters of donations, investments, and foreign trade exchange. All six members of the ZB have a strategic goal of membership in the EU. All of them, except Serbia, are in direct security dependence on the Euro-Atlantic Community and form their security policy in this regard. Security dilemmas remain quite pronounced and undermine the common vision of the future. Serbian people and other peoples meet at all contact points. It is clear from afar that the state of latent and frozen conflict produces isolation and potential economic decline in the long run. Initiatives such as the Open Balkans are initial steps for much broader political integration. It is unfortunate that Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina still do not accede to this conciliatory initiative. The presence of international forces cannot reconcile the historical legacy of the Western Balkans, but a clear economic interest and interdependence must do it.

The Western Balkans largely has their own internal dynamics, which are often the result of daily politics when it comes to defining mutual relations, while external actors serve as amplifiers of existing contradictions.

The redrawing of borders in the Western Balkans will probably never happen, while those who advocate such tendencies will only cause their own isolation. When it comes to the People's Republic of China, we see tendencies of negative implications of global relations, but also of the political approach and system itself. It is to be expected that relations with the People's Republic of China in the near future may become a burden for the process of European integration, as well as for economic development. The fact that the Chinese-made 5G network is marked as a security risk, its implementation would be directly counterproductive to economic development and wider political integration. Issues that sooner or later will require clear decisions on distancing from the PRC may be compromised by interdependencies regarding key levers of influence through strategic industry ownership and credit obligations stemming from the now defunct Belt and Road initiative. In this regard, in order to stop the negative tendencies regarding the Western Balkans, it is necessary to present clear economic incentives, to strengthen the region with fresh investments that will be conditioned by clear foreign policy decisions. Projects such as the diversification of gas supply represent a good example in the direction of reducing Russian influence by creating an environment of fair market competition.

Today's isolation of Russia represents an excellent opportunity for a strong EU offensive. It is necessary to initiate an open dialogue through the creation of a ministerial council of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece plus WB6. This unique platform should enable the demonstration of clear political inclusion, the exchange of experience in the EU integration process, and the identification of common security priorities. To begin with, through the *creation of the Balkan Center for Emergency Situations*, which would be a replacement for the compromised and dysfunctional Russian humanitarian center in Nis. Decisive steps enriched by the statesmanship of regional leaders are needed.