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## **The Main Security Challenges and Threats in the Western Balkans and Possible Model for Solving Them in the Process of European Integration**

### **Abstract**

In a narrower sense, within the geo-political jargon of the European Union, the term “Western Balkans” is used alongside the term “Southeast Europe”. The Western Balkans encompasses the former Yugoslav countries of Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, excluding Slovenia but including Albania. After the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, objective reasons emerged that prompted the need for new forms of cooperation between the new and existing countries in order to promote reconciliation and stabilise the Western Balkans. NATO and the EU played a predominant role in this process, along with certain Member States of these international organisations. The aggression by Russia against Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, the situation in the Middle East, and the complexity of relations between China and the United States regarding Taiwan have compelled all European countries to recognise that these conflicts pose an immediate threat to European security. Analysing the foreign policy aspects and their impact on regional security, it is essential to highlight that the Western Balkans is characterised by weak governance, a fragile civil society, and geopolitical disputes. These internal and regional factors make the region highly susceptible to local and external disinformation campaigns. On the other hand, China represents a significant global partner for Serbia, and it is important to point out that since 2016, investments from China have been accelerating and also that in the period from 2016 to 2023, about 96% of the total investments were made, a total of 5.3 billion euros, and that in each of those years, China was among the five most important investors in Serbia (Politika, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2024).

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As the most influential state economically and politically in the Western Balkans, Serbia has the potential to influence other countries in the region toward alternative centres of power. The latest NATO Strategic Concept, adopted in Madrid in 2022, emphasises the strategic importance of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region for the Alliance, and NATO has expressed its readiness to continue supporting the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in these regions. The Berlin Process (BP) is an intergovernmental initiative aimed at connecting the Western Balkan countries (WB6) with the European Union and facilitating the development of mutual relations based on European values. The focus of the process lies in high-level cooperation between WB6 officials and their EU partners. It also involves EU institutions, international financial institutions, civil society, youth, and businesses in the region. One of the significant advantages of the Berlin Process is the financing of planned and assumed commitments from EU funds, unlike most other initiatives where states finance their participation from their own budgets.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, Russia, Disinformation, EU, NATO, US, Berlin Process

## **Introduction**

The aggression by Russia against Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022, the situation in the Middle East, and the complexity of relations between China and the United States regarding Taiwan have compelled all European countries to recognise that these conflicts pose an immediate threat to European security. The traditionally neutral countries of Finland and Sweden, both EU members, swiftly joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) due to the direct threat from Russia. Finland became the 31<sup>st</sup> NATO member on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2023, while Sweden formally became the 32<sup>nd</sup> member on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024. Furthermore, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has forced all European states to understand the risks associated with this conflict. Integration processes for EU enlargement have been intensified, driven by the expressed need for unified action in the face of emerging global changes. Shortly thereafter, on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2022, the European Union granted candidate status to both Ukraine and Moldova. This initiated a potentially multi-year process aimed at distancing war-affected Ukraine from Russian influence and strengthening its ties with the West. Just one year later, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023, EU leaders decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova through an expedited procedure. Simultaneously, Georgia was also granted candidate status for EU membership. This situation

compelled EU Member States to finally initiate the negotiation process with the Western Balkan countries of Albania and North Macedonia on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2022. Ursula von der Leyen confirmed on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2024 that the EC would recommend to the European Council the opening of accession negotiations between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additionally, Bosnia and Herzegovina received conditional candidate status for EU membership. During the Council meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina received the green light to begin negotiations with the EU, with the condition that the negotiation framework would be adopted only after the state fulfils the remaining 13 criteria as defined in October 2022 (it was originally 14, but Republika Srpska eventually conceded on the principle of not recognising joint property across the entire territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The democratic vulnerability of the region lends itself to Russia's activities. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States, Russia has launched an extensive disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans, a campaign whose goal is to undermine the values and perception of the EU and the US, thereby obstructing the ambitions of regional states on their path toward European and transatlantic integration. According to the latest report from the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Washington, which analysed nine countries including: Serbia; Montenegro; North Macedonia; and Bosnia and Herzegovina, China and Russia exploit deep divisions within the population and media to promote their agendas. They disseminate misinformation through ethnically divided media outlets and use propaganda spread by "pro-Serbian/pro-Russian/pro-government media" to highlight the Chinese/Russian alliance as a superior alternative to the liberal world order.

The most recent NATO Strategic Concept, adopted in Madrid in 2022, emphasises the strategic importance of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region for the Alliance. NATO expresses its readiness to continue supporting the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in these regions. As a key and potential model for resolving Balkan disputes, the German-led Berlin Process serves as a platform for high-level cooperation among state officials from the Western Balkans on their common path toward European integration. This initiative involves Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with a focus on creating a shared regional market of approximately 18 million people (Djurović, 2024).

## **The Main Security Challenges and Threats in the Western Balkans**

Multilateral regional cooperation was a significant trend in inter-state relations during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It spanned continents and closely followed the process of globalisation. Regionalisation, as an older phenomenon, was manifested in various ways over different periods, reflecting the nature of international relations (Minić, 2009). In the Balkans, that is, in Southeastern Europe, this trend arrived only after some delay, because, unfortunately, during the nineties of the last century, it was accompanied by the complex process of dismantling the former Yugoslavia, which significantly slowed down the prospects of a faster inclusion of the entire region in wider European integration (Fushe, 2000).

The definition of the Balkan region is not entirely simple in a geographical sense, and even less so in a geo-political sense. In the broadest geographical sense, the Balkan Peninsula (or SEE) encompasses twelve countries, namely, Albania, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and seven countries from the former Yugoslavia – Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Kosovo. However, authors of international relations often exclude Greece and Turkey from the Balkans due to their longer-standing integration in Euro-Atlantic (Greece and Turkey) and European political, economic, and military structures (Greece). Slovenia, both geographically and culturally, is also distinct from the typical Balkan context. In a narrower geopolitical sense within the European Union, the term “Western Balkans” refers to the former Yugoslav countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo), excluding Slovenia but including Albania (Kapetanović, Kulundzić, 2009).

Over the past 30 years, most contemporary initiatives for multilateral cooperation in the Balkans have implicitly drawn inspiration from the European Union’s experiences and the theory of neofunctionalism in inter-state collaboration. The events in the former Yugoslavia served as lessons for both EU and NATO Member States. Unfortunately, it was also a training ground where the mechanisms for the transformation of both organisations were definitely established, as was an opportunity to establish new processes and forms of cooperation with and between the Balkan countries. Despite everything, the Western Balkans is still a very unstable area and there are numerous reasons that objectively encourage the need for new forms of relations and initiatives to ensure cooperation between both the new and old countries in the Balkans.

## **International Problems and the Complexity of Security and Political Circumstances in Europe and Beyond**

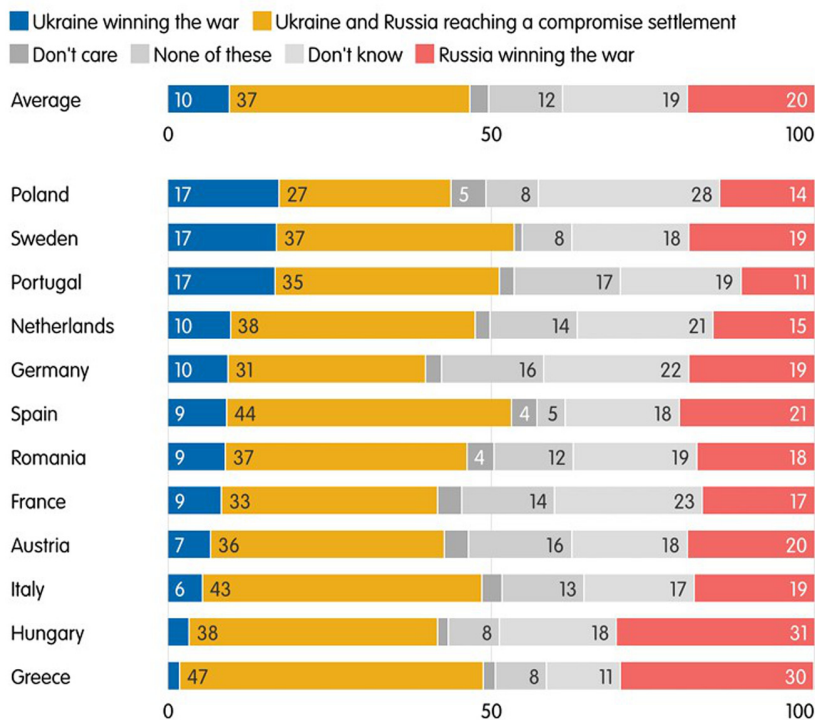
The Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, the situation in the Middle East, and the complexity of relations between China and the United States regarding Taiwan's status have compelled all European countries to recognise that these wars pose an immediate threat to European security. The traditionally-neutral EU Member States of Finland and Sweden swiftly joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) due to the direct threat from Russia. Finland became the 31<sup>st</sup> NATO member on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2023, while Sweden formally joined the alliance on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2024.

Research conducted by Chairman Ivan Krastev and Director Mark Leonard of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, Bulgaria, in late February 2024, entitled *Wars and Elections: How European Leaders Can Sustain Public Support for Ukraine*, sheds light on the current public sentiment in the EU regarding the conflict in Ukraine. The findings are summarised in Graph 1 below.

The findings reveal that Europeans appear pessimistic about Ukraine's chances of winning the war, with most believing it will ultimately end in some form of agreement. However, the majority of Europeans are not inclined to compromise. The research map of public opinion demonstrates that the Ukrainian war is of paramount importance to Europe, while other conflicts may be equally significant on a global scale. Moreover, many European citizens view the Ukrainian conflict as a European war, with Europeans largely responsible for its outcome.

A notable aspect of the study pertains to the approach toward the 2024 US elections. If Trump were to return and leave Kyiv in a precarious position, would the EU and its Member States be capable of supporting Ukraine independently? And would European public opinion stand behind them? These are pressing questions for European leaders. The research indicates that after a US withdrawal, only a minority of Europeans (averaging 20%, ranging from 7% in Greece to 43% in Sweden) would favour increased European support for Ukraine. In some countries, prevailing sentiment aligns with the US's approach, limiting aid to Ukraine and encouraging peaceful negotiations with Moscow. For instance, 54% of respondents in Hungary, 44% in Romania, and 42% of respondents in Austria and Greece share this perspective. Regardless of whomever the next US president will be, the preference in these countries remains for an agreement. As further confirmation, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated

**Which of the following, if any, do you think is the most likely outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war? In per cent**



Source: Survey conducted by YouGov and Datapraxis in January 2024, in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden.  
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**Graph 1. Ukraine’s Chances of Winning the War**

Source: Krastev, Leonard, 2024.

in an interview with state television broadcaste M1 on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024, following his meeting with Trump, that “Trump won’t give a penny, and that’s why the Ukrainian-Russian war will end” (Dnevne vijesti, 2024). Simultaneously, Pope Francis, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, stated in an interview with Swiss public broadcaster RSI that Ukraine should summon the courage to raise the “white flag” and negotiate a cessation of hostilities with Russia (Dnevne vijesti, 2024). On the other hand, Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, declared on the European External Action Service (EEAS) website, that the foundation of the first European Defence Industry

Strategy (EDIS) is for Europeans to “invest more” in arms production. He emphasised that the strategy encompasses a series of measures aimed at strengthening the EU’s defense industry and replenishing weapon stocks while continuing to provide military assistance to Ukraine (Dnevne vijesti, 2024).

Meanwhile, the president of Poland, Andrzej Duda, called on other NATO Member States to increase their national defense expenditures from the current two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to three percent. He highlighted that Russia has shifted toward a “war economy,” allocating nearly 30 percent of its annual budget to armament, and continues to wage war against Ukraine (Dnevne vijesti, 2024).

According to research by the International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies (IFIMES) – Ljubljana, published on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2024, since the beginning of the conflict, the EU and its Member States have provided Ukraine with \$96 billion in financial, military, and humanitarian aid (IFIMES, 2024).

European leaders agreed, on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024, to allocate up to \$54 billion to support Ukraine’s recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation efforts, as well as its reforms in the context of EU accession by 2027. Thus, the EU’s cumulative commitments exceed \$150 billion (EU, 2024). The United Kingdom has pledged over \$15 billion to Ukraine since 2022, while the United States has spent \$66 billion, with an additional \$60 billion planned.

Following the unexplained death of a prominent opposition figure known for challenging Vladimir Putin by the name of Alexei Navalny in the Polar Wolf penal colony near the Arctic, some 1,900 km from Moscow on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2024, Russia witnessed numerous demonstrations. Just a month later, on March 17<sup>th</sup>, presidential elections were held in Russia, where Putin secured a convincing victory with 87.8% of the vote, commencing his new six-year term. This achievement allows him to surpass Joseph Stalin’s length of rule and become the Russian leader with the longest tenure in the last 200 years. A few days after the elections, a terrorist attack occurred at the Krokus City Hall concert venue in Moscow, resulting in 133 fatalities and 150 injured civilians, including 3 children. Subsequently, 10 seriously injured individuals died in hospitals, bringing the total civilian death toll to 143. The responsibility for this terrorist act was claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS). Immediately after the attack, the FSB arrested 4 terrorists and 7 of their associates, all originating from Tajikistan. However, despite this evidence, Putin accused Ukraine of orchestrating the attack and intensified strikes on Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv, Lviv, and energy facilities (Dnevne vijesti, 2024).

The newly-elected Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, stated in an interview with several European media outlets, including the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, that the situation in Europe is the worst it has been since the end of World War II. He appealed to Europeans to recognise that war is not a concept of the past, and they are living in a pre-war state where any scenario is possible *and* that significant changes are expected in the next two years compared to the previous state of affairs in Europe (Politika RS, 2024).

All the mentioned research and the negative events unfolding indicate a significant deterioration in the political security situation in Europe and the world, which undoubtedly impacts current and future developments in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has compelled all European states to understand the dangers posed by this conflict. Again, integration processes for EU enlargement have intensified due to the expressed need for unified action in the face of global changes.

Not long after, on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2022, the European Union granted candidate status to both Ukraine and Moldova. This initiated a potentially multi-year process that could distance war affected Ukraine from Russian influence and strengthen its ties with the West. Just a year later, on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023, EU leaders decided to expedite accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, while simultaneously granting candidate status to Georgia.

### **Key External and Internal Challenges and Threats in the Western Balkans**

Given the highly complex global situation and the specific context of Europe and the Western Balkans region, it is crucial to identify key security challenges that jeopardise the safety and stability of Western Balkan countries. In a time of significant geopolitical shifts, small states like those in the Western Balkans are influenced by the geostrategic goals of the major powers and their interests in specific areas. Additionally, a state's ability to adapt adequately to these changes is essential for preserving its stability and ability to pursue national interests.

Analysing the external and internal aspects that impact regional security, it is important to highlight that the Western Balkans region is characterised by weak governance, fragile civil society, and geopolitical disputes. These factors make it highly susceptible to both local and external disinformation campaigns (Tahirović, 2023b).

The vulnerability of the region's democratic institutions facilitates Russia's activities. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the

subsequent sanctions imposed by the EU and the US, Russia has launched an extensive disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans. Its aim is to undermine the perception of EU and US values and obstruct the ambitions of regional states on their path toward European and transatlantic integration (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2024). On the other hand, China is a significant global partner for Serbia. As, economically and politically speaking, most influential state in the Western Balkans, Serbia has the potential to steer other regional countries toward alternative centres of power. Notably, Serbia's trade relations with China were liberalised through the Free Trade Agreement signed in October 2023, a privilege not shared by the EU, the US, or Russia. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Europe from 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> May 2024, and included stops in Paris and Budapest. His visit to Serbia on May 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024 marked the first time a Chinese president had visited Belgrade since 2016. Xi's visit to Serbia, coinciding with the anniversary of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on 7<sup>th</sup> May, indirectly signals a strategic partnership between the two countries in relation to the West. Furthermore, during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, six Chinese Y-20 military aircraft landed in Belgrade on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2022, delivering Chinese FK-3 anti-aircraft missile systems. The Associated Press reported that the missile systems were delivered "semi-secretly," raising concerns about arms accumulation in the Western Balkans during the Ukrainian war. Serbia is now the first European country to possess such Chinese missiles. The Chinese Ministry of Defense clarified that this was part of their annual cooperation plan, not directed against any third party and unrelated to the current situation. Serbia has been developing military and defense cooperation with China, and China leads in foreign direct investments in Serbia, a stance contrary to risk aversion during the EU integration process. Serbia is also part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and Chinese companies have acquired the Mining and Smelting Basin Bor and the Smederevo Ironworks, and participate in infrastructure projects such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway. Additionally, China is set to build Serbia's National Stadium.

According to the latest report from the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Washington, which analysed nine countries (including: Serbia; Montenegro; North Macedonia; and Bosnia and Herzegovina), China and Russia exploit deep divisions within the population and media to promote their agendas. They disseminate misinformation through ethnically divided media outlets and use propaganda spread by "pro-Serbian/pro-Russian/pro-government" media to highlight the Chinese-Russian alliance as a superior alternative to the liberal world order (IRI, 2024).

In a report published by the Atlantic Council of Montenegro from September 2022, it is emphasised that this extensive campaign involves several narratives through which the Kremlin attempts to achieve its political goals in the region. These narratives are disseminated not only through political parties but also through organisations and representatives who are not affiliated with political parties. Within this network, there are numerous non-governmental organisations, associations, and fraternities closely aligned with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC). Additionally, media outlets directly propagate disinformation and Kremlin-controlled propaganda (Atlantic Council of Montenegro, 2022).

In a Digital Forensic Center (DFC) study from December 2023, entitled *Russian Hybrid Activities in the Western Balkans: A Shadow Game*, Russia's influence in the region is evident through the actions of pro-Serbian political entities. These actors base their activities on narratives emphasising historical and unbreakable ties with Russia (Digital Forensic Centre, 2023). Furthermore, a recent DFC study from March 2024 by the name of *Indissoluble Connections or Geopolitical Strategy: Serbia's Influence in Montenegro* highlights Serbia's National Security Strategy, adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on 27<sup>th</sup> December 2019. This strategy emphasises the preservation and protection of the Serbian people wherever they reside, particularly in the region. Interestingly, this strategy appears to align with Putin's 2009 strategy. According to Serbia's approach, influencing Montenegro, especially regarding constitutional changes and the formation of a nation-state, follows a Macedonian model which effectively dismantles the civic state (Digital Forensic Center, 2024).

The intensification of media activities under Kremlin control occurred immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The situation on the ground remains concerning, with the region particularly vulnerable to fake news and disinformation. In the 11<sup>th</sup> package of sanctions against Russia, the European Union included measures to ban the broadcasting of Russia Today in the Serbian language. However, Serbia has not implemented any measures against Russia since the start of the aggression against Ukraine, despite calls from Brussels. As an EU candidate country, Serbia is expected to align its foreign policy with EU policies (Tahirović, 2023a).

According to the study *Enlargement and the Future of Europe – Views from the Capitals*, which was supported by the European Commission in 2023, the relationship between the EU and Serbia today can be described as unambitious and insincere. Such a description also refers to the motivation of domestic elites to fulfil the conditions for membership and

to the EU's interest in seeing Serbia as a Member State. Consequently, according to the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), in 2022, 41% of Serbs believe that membership will never happen, while a traditional survey by the Serbian Ministry for European Integration puts current support for membership at 43%, which is close to the previous low of 41% (European Commission, 2023). In the comprehensive analysis, it becomes evident that some of the key internal political and security challenges for regional stability persist in the Western Balkans, while others have surfaced due to the assistance of EUROPOL and INTERPOL through the Berlin Process initiative. Many long-standing issues that were previously overlooked have now come to the fore, particularly in terms of internal security and public awareness:

- identity polarisation, competitiveness, and mutual distrust,
- the strong influence of religious communities in the political life of the region's states,
- disregard for constitutions and law enforcement by political parties, which should be champions of democratic transformation and the rule of law,
- high political interference in security sectors, despite depoliticisation being a key requirement for the integration of Western Balkan countries into NATO and the EU,
- a very low rule of law, primarily manifested through high levels of corruption within judicial and prosecutorial authorities, as well as inefficiency in delivering judgements, especially in cases of high-level corruption,
- a significant involvement of police and security-intelligence services in organised crime, particularly in cigarette and drug smuggling, where the Western Balkans ranks among the highest in Europe,
- insufficient institutional development, functionality, and cooperation in all security structures of the regional states,
- inadequate protection against hybrid actions and cyber attacks,
- limited crisis management systems and disaster response capabilities,
- Montenegro, along with Serbia, leads Europe in terms of civilian gun ownership per capita,
- inadequate border protection, illegal migration, and cross-border crime,
- after 34 years, the delineation between newly-created states following the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia remains unresolved,
- very low levels of open and honest communication between regional states.

This concise overview highlights the most significant internal security challenges and issues faced by the Western Balkans. Given the pronounced crises affecting the EU, NATO, and the global context, regional governments must significantly shift their approach to internal security challenges. Establishing systems, procedures, and legal frameworks for seamless security operations, free from political and religious influence, is crucial. This alignment should follow established, functioning rules within EU Member States, particularly through the Berlin Process. Additionally, Serbia's ambitions in the region, especially regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, are prominently highlighted. On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution officially designating 11<sup>th</sup> July as the "International Day of Reflection on the Genocide in Srebrenica 1995". The resolution condemns genocide denial and the glorification of war crimes. Germany and Rwanda initiated the resolution, with sponsorship from 30 countries, including the Quint countries and all former Yugoslav republics except Montenegro, which supported the resolution (Dnevne novine vijesti, 2024). Furthermore, on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2024, during a joint session of the Serbian and Republika Srpska governments in Belgrade, the Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People was unanimously adopted. This declaration is part of the so-called "All-Serbian Assembly" currently taking place in Belgrade under the theme "One People, One Assembly – Serbia and Srpska." Serbian Prime Minister Miloš Vučević emphasised its significance for the Serbian people (Sputnik, 2024).

During the joint session of the Serbian and Republika Srpska (RS) governments, as well as the All-Serbian Assembly, the president of the Montenegrin Parliament, Andrija Mandić, and the president of the Democratic People's Party of Montenegro, Milan Knežević, were in attendance. Additionally, Ivan Stoilković, a representative of Serbs from North Macedonia, participated (Dnevne vijesti, 2024). On this occasion, Mandić stated that "it can be expected that Montenegro will soon become part of this Serbian Assembly" (Agencija MINA, 2024). This indicates that Serbia's ambitions extend not only toward Bosnia and Herzegovina but also toward Montenegro and North Macedonia.

The U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) issued a statement on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2024, asserting that the conclusions adopted at the All-Serbian Assembly in Belgrade constitute an attack on the Dayton Peace Agreement and BiH's state institutions. According to the embassy, these conclusions do not defend the Dayton Peace Agreement, as claimed by their authors, but intentionally target the agreement and BiH's state institutions. The

embassy emphasised that neither the Dayton Agreement nor the BiH Constitution grants entities or any other sub-state bodies the right to secession, “disassociation,” or any other clumsy synonym for secession invented by RS officials. They further clarified that RS is not a state and can exist only within BiH. The plans and actions of RS leader Milorad Dodik endanger the peaceful, democratic, and prosperous future within Euro-Atlantic institutions that the citizens of BiH, including those in RS, desire and deserve (Dnevne novine vijesti, U.S. Embassy in BiH, 2024).

### **Negative Aspects of the Open Balkans Initiative on Western Balkans Stability**

Based on the preceding information, a crucial question arises: Are the reasons behind the Open Balkans regional initiative primarily economic or related to political security? The answer lies in analysing the circumstances that led to the initiative’s inception.

Firstly, the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the EU’s enlargement policy for several Member States, particularly regarding the future membership of the Western Balkan countries. This delay affected the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia (which had become a candidate in 2005) and Albania (which had gained candidate status in 2014), as well as the acceptance of visa facilitation for Kosovo. Simultaneously, in Montenegro during 2019 and the first half of 2020, massive street protests known as *litije* (religious processions), organised by the Serbian Orthodox Church completely halted the EU integration process for that smallest of Western Balkan countries, which had previously opened all negotiation chapters. Secondly, from a political security perspective in the Western Balkans, the foundation for devising and launching the Open Balkans initiative rests on two key initial priorities out of a total of four defined during the establishment of the Berlin Process. This initiative was initiated by Germany’s then-Chancellor Angela Merkel on 28<sup>th</sup> August 2014 in Berlin, and was based around:

- resolving open bilateral and internal issues,
- and achieving reconciliation within and between societies in the region.

However, these priorities did not receive unequivocal support from the largest Western Balkan countries of Serbia and Albania. The unresolved relations between Serbia and Kosovo – specifically Serbia’s non-recognition of Kosovo as a former autonomous province within its territorial framework – remain at a standstill at the time of this writing.

Kosovo's stance toward Albania leans toward future unification. Troubling relations persist in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where the leadership of one entity, Republika Srpska, openly advocates for secession from BiH and eventual unification with Serbia. Finally, the long-standing bilateral issue between Greece and North Macedonia regarding the name of the Republic of Macedonia, which was finally regulated by the Prespa Agreement on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2018, was immediately followed by a problem with Bulgaria concerning identity issues. The third immediate reason is the Berlin Process summit in London on July 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup>, 2018. During the Berlin Process Summit for the Western Balkans, economic topics were not dominant – instead, security and political agendas took precedence. Several important measures were adopted during the meeting, with particular significance being given to those measures related to security, including a number of obligations: responsibility of the Western Balkans Six (WB6) for the rule of law and human rights protection; emphasis on good governance and the importance of refraining from populist and nationalist rhetoric; and progress in monitoring the results of the Berlin Process. The first meetings of the Steering Group for security policy commitments presented three joint declarations related to neighbourly relations, war crimes, and the issue of missing persons during the wars in the former Yugoslavia (London, 2018). Naturally, these declarations directly affected Serbia, which has never officially acknowledged any involvement in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, nor the genocide committed in Srebrenica in 1995. This approach to implementing the goals of the Berlin Process in the Western Balkans, along with the EU's passive enlargement policy, provided fertile ground for two authoritarian leaders, Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić and Albania's Edi Rama, to come to the same table.

Pressured by the EU and the US to recognise Kosovo, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić had to find a way out for the public. The most suitable approach was to negotiate indirectly with the government of the Republic of Kosovo through the prime minister of the Republic of Albania. To achieve their hidden foreign policy goals and ambitions, they needed an initiative as a starting framework. The opportunity to launch this initiative arose due to EU integration stalling along with a mutual agreement on a comprehensive resolution of Serbian and Albanian national issues. North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zaev joined the initiative due to pressure from Greece to change the country's name and Bulgaria's concerns about identity issues, as well as obligations stemming from the Ohrid Agreement of 2001 with Albanians in Macedonia, the violation of which could further destabilise the already-fragile situation in North Macedonia.

Ultimately, the key reason was bypassing EU procedures due to internal problems and the inability to fulfil obligations from the EU's integration agenda. In response, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, and North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev found a valid reason for indirect pressure on the EU, citing, "If you don't want us in your structure, we will organise ourselves into a similar organisation that will facilitate prosperity through a common market and other economic benefits". This distancing from EU integration, with a tendency to revert to the 1990s, has been exacerbated by various activities of state, formal, and informal actors who contribute to misinformation and the spread of nationalist policies in the Western Balkans.

A notable example is the so-titled "Non Paper" by the former prime minister of Slovenia, Janez Janša, from April 2021, and was published by the Slovenian portal *necenzurisano.si* on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2021 (Janković, Belgrade, 2021). The central issue it addresses as regards the Western Balkans region pertains to whose EU membership is guaranteed once all countries meet the conditions set by the European Council in Thessaloniki back in 2003. The unresolved national questions of Serbs, Albanians, and Croats take centre stage in the document. Although the former Prime Minister of Slovenia later denied any involvement in its creation, it was accessible to the entire European public. The document clearly outlines new maps for the Balkans, implying Kosovo's connection to Albania, Republika Srpska's alignment with Serbia, and Herzegovina's association with Croatia. Those proposals subsequently fuelled nationalism and ambitious state projects in those countries. Conversely, among Montenegrins, Bosniaks, and Macedonians, whose interests would be affected by this project, there is heightened panic and a fear of new conflicts akin to those of the 1990s. The ultimate conclusion is that territorial and national issues must be resolved before EU integration.

The Open Balkans Initiative undoubtedly opens the door to more influence from third parties in the Western Balkans, particularly Russia. Additionally, Serbia, as the most economically and politically influential state in the region, has the potential to steer other countries toward alternative power centres. Notably, Serbia's announced liberalisation of trade relations with China through a Free Trade Agreement sets it apart from the European Union, the United States, and Russia. However, the Region Without Borders initiative carries significant risks, especially concerning the rule of law and illicit drug trade (European Drug Report, 2023). Human trafficking and illegal migration are also pressing concerns. Frontex reports that irregular border crossings into the EU reached their highest level since 2016, with approximately 380,000 incidents in 2023

– an increase of 17% compared to 2022. These crossings, 26% of which occurred along the so-called ‘Balkan route’, challenge EU integration requirements. Furthermore, food safety inspections at the border fall short of EU standards for free trade zones.

The vision of a region without borders aligns with the creation of a Balkan (customs) Union (CU). However, not all countries are prepared for such integration. Ultimately, the Open Balkans Initiative, unlike previous regional integration efforts, has divided rather than united the region on its path toward EU accession. Surprisingly, the initiative does not address critical political and security issues specific to the Western Balkans.

Comparing it to EU Member States from the Balkan region and beyond, one might argue that a more fitting name for this initiative would be the Closed Balkans initiative. If they wish to manage their relationships independently without adhering to established EU standards, historical experiences suggest that regional initiatives often end in misunderstandings and hostilities. The Balkans have been labelled with derogatory terms such as “a powder keg” or with “Balkanisation”, symbolising instability.

### **Why Aren’t NATO, the EU, and the US Acting Preventively in the Western Balkans?**

One of the prominent issues revolves around the undefined or insufficiently clear stance of the EU and the US concerning the Open Balkans Initiative and other challenges faced by the Western Balkans. Through this research, it could be concluded that it is a question of gaining time so that Serbia, as the largest and most powerful country in the Western Balkans, would definitely turn towards the West and prevent it from falling under the influence of Russia, which would probably further complicate the security situation in this part of Europe and significantly help Russia achieve its war goals in Ukraine and beyond in Europe. Whether this approach by the EU and the US is well-conceived and balanced within the current global context remains an unanswered question.

Additionally, the Financial Times reported on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2024 that Serbia has indirectly exported munitions worth 800 million euros to Ukraine via third-party countries since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022. President Aleksandar Vučić has since confirmed the accuracy of this figure. Remarkably, Serbia discreetly bolstered arms sales to the West, ultimately contributing to Ukraine’s defense. Notably, Serbia is one

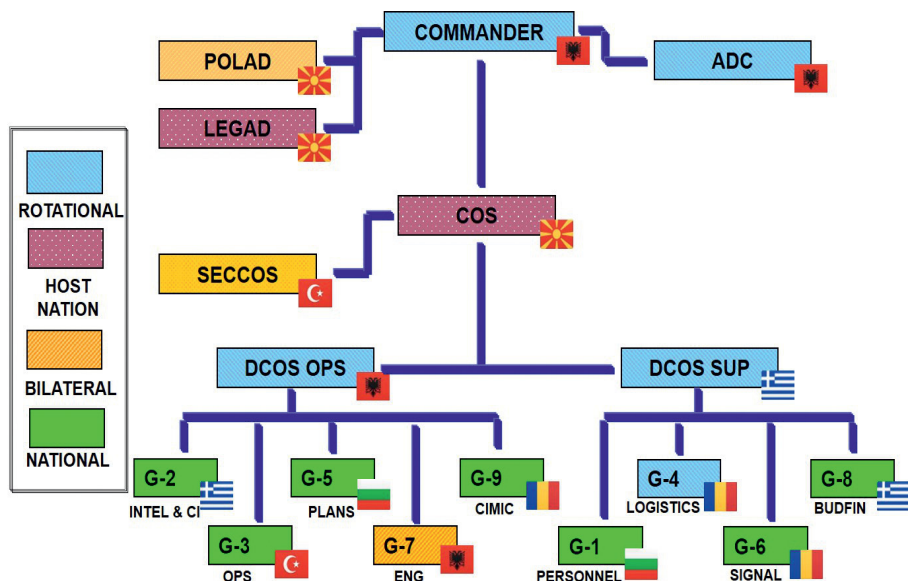
of only two European countries that have not joined Western sanctions against Russia. In an interview with the Financial Times, President Vučić stated, “This is part of our economic revival and is essential for us. Yes, we export our munitions. We cannot export to Ukraine or Russia directly, but we have had numerous contracts with the Americans, Spaniards, Czechs, and others. What they do with it in the end is their business”. Meanwhile, European and American efforts over the years have aimed to distance Vučić from Putin. An unnamed Western diplomat emphasised the key role of the American ambassador Christopher Hill, who is one of the best experts on US diplomacy in the Balkans, and who arrived in Belgrade a month after the invasion’s beginning.

It seems as though the lessons from the period of wars during the disintegration of the SFRY have not been learned. With the aim of stabilisation and reconciliation in the region, NATO, the EU, and the USA have launched a series of initiatives in various fields, especially in the security and defense sectors. In the meantime, however, many of them have become dysfunctional in relation to contemporary security challenges or have even stopped working, despite the fact that huge amounts of money have been spent on their implementation while very few problems have been solved in the Balkans.

One crucial ongoing initiative with a significant security and defense role in modern conditions is the Southeastern Europe Defense Ministerial Process (SEDM). Proposed by the United States in 1996, SEDM aims to enhance cooperation between the countries of the Western Balkans and the US in defense matters. Its fundamental goal is to intensify understanding and political/military collaboration in the region, thereby strengthening stability and security. SEDM member countries include the U.S., Greece, Italy, Turkey, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Georgia, and Serbia. Moldova, previously an observer, became a full member during the latest SEDM meeting held in Ankara from November 21<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023.

In accordance with a Multinational Peace Forces of Southeastern Europe (MPFSEE) Agreement, the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) was established and activated by seven participating nations, on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1999 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. SEEBRIG is a brigade sized force of about 5000 troops in units allocated to SEEBRIG.

One of the assets of the command and control structure which is also the most important tool for the commander is the headquarters. According to the structure, SEEBRIG HQ has functional sections starting from G1 to G9. The Political Advisor and Legal Advisor are crucial assistants to the commander in the making of correct and immediate decisions.



**Graph 2. SEEBRIG Headquarters' Structure**

Source: SEEBRIG, 2024b.

The key question is: Why, in such complex international circumstances, was SEEBRIG not activated, and why is the budget for 2024 only €275,000? Additionally, why was no decision made during the last SEDM meeting in Ankara regarding the participation of other Member States with their forces in SEEBRIG? The primary purpose of SEEBRIG, established in 1999, was defined as the provision of preventive action in the event that stability and security in the SEE (South-eastern Europe) region were threatened (SEEBRIG, 2024a).

The latest NATO Strategic Concept, adopted in Madrid in 2022, emphasises that the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region are strategically important for the Alliance. NATO expresses its readiness to continue supporting the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in those regions. The Strategic Concept also commits to strengthening capabilities to address various threats and challenges, enhancing resilience against destructive interference and third-party coercion. However, what indicators are there that demonstrate that NATO's actions align with this commitment in reality?

During a spring meeting in Sofia on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly adopted a relevant Declaration with the motto "With Ukraine to Victory". In this declaration, NATO urges its member states to allow Kyiv to use Western weapons against Russia. Germany

had previously opposed this stance, but Chancellor Baerbock went on to announce €60 billion in German aid to Ukraine. NATO's call for lifting restrictions on the use of supplied weapons indicates a shift in approach. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasised this during the Sofia meeting. He also outlined three themes for the upcoming NATO summit in Washington in July 2024: enhancing defense capacities of member states; supporting Ukraine; and global partnerships with a focus on the Asia-Pacific region (Dnevne novine vijesti, 2024).



**Graph 3. NATO's Eastern Flank**

Source: Rigert, 2023.

In contrast, as seen in Graph 3, the entire Black Sea and Baltic regions are covered by NATO forces. However, on the Western Balkans, which is considered a vulnerable area influenced by Russia and marked by nationalism and tensions among states, there are the limited forces of KFOR in Kosovo, and EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Based on this analysis, the author of this text lacks any tangible evidence of a secret plan between Serbia, Albania, Croatia, and any major powers or the EU regarding a potential reconfiguration of maps in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, the passive stance of the EU, NATO, and the US raises suspicions that an ongoing, creeping politico-security process in the Western Balkans may lead to inevitable changes, potentially disadvantaging Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

## **The Berlin Process as a Model for Addressing Traditional Balkan Disputes and Successful European Integration in the Region**

The Berlin Process (BP) is an intergovernmental initiative aimed at connecting the Western Balkan countries (WB6) with the European Union (EU) and facilitating mutual relations based on European values. It focuses on high-level cooperation between WB6 officials and their EU partners. The process also involves EU institutions, international financial institutions, civil society, youth, and businesses in the region. The BP was launched with the goal of better utilising the potential and resources of regional cooperation in the Western Balkans (Berlin Process, 2014). Similar to other regional initiatives in Southeastern Europe, which were primarily initiated by some EU Member States or directly by NATO and the EU, this initiative for the Western Balkan countries was launched by Germany's former chancellor Angela Merkel, and was established during the Berlin Summit on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014. During that summit, key priorities of the initiative were defined, with the first two primarily related to security:

- resolving open bilateral and internal issues,
- achieving reconciliation within and between societies in the region,
- strengthening regional economic cooperation,
- and laying the groundwork for sustainable growth.

The BP serves as a platform for high-level cooperation among state officials from the Western Balkans. The focus is on creating a common regional market, encompassing approximately 18 million people. Initially planned to last four years, the Berlin Process received an additional billion euros in grants to support European bank loans for specific projects. However, it continued beyond the Berlin Summit in 2014, with subsequent summits held in Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017), London (2018), and online during the pandemic. The number of EU Member States participating in the process has increased over the years, with Poland hosting the summit in 2019, and Bulgaria, along with North Macedonia, hosting it in 2020. The 2021 summit took place online in Berlin, and the process was effectively reset after the COVID-19 pandemic, with the most recent summit being held in Tirana on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2023. The 10th anniversary summit is scheduled for 2024, once again in Berlin. These summits occur annually. During the Berlin Summit in November 2023, all Western Balkan countries signed identical agreements and committed to their ratification. The Berlin Process continues to play a crucial role in fostering regional cooperation and advancing the European integration aspirations of the Western Balkans.

The BP Summit in London on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> July 2018 was particularly significant from a security perspective. Unlike previous summits that had primarily focused on economic matters, that event emphasised security and political agendas under the title *Security First, Everything Else Later*. Led by Britain's then-Prime Minister Theresa May, the summit resulted in several important measures:

- A Digital Agenda: An agreement on a digital agenda, with €30 million allocated for the development of broadband access in the Western Balkans.
- Transport Links: An agreement on 9 transport connections and 2 technical assistance projects.
- Rule of Law and Human Rights: Increased responsibility of the Western Balkans Six (WB6) for upholding the rule of law and protecting human rights.
- Governance and Rhetoric: Emphasis on good governance and the importance of avoiding populist and nationalist rhetoric.
- Engagement Forums: The establishment of forums for civil society organisations, businesses, and youth.
- Monitoring Progress: Progress in monitoring the results of the Berlin Process, including joint declarations related to neighbourly relations, war crimes, and missing persons during the wars in the former Yugoslavia (Berlin Process Summit in London, 2018).

The most recent Berlin Process summit was held in Tirana, Albania, on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023. Notably, this was the first time the summit had taken place in a country outside the EU. Alongside leaders from the Western Balkans, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz attended the summit (Berlin Process Summit in Tirana, 2023).

All regional initiatives in the Western Balkans, initiated primarily by the EU and NATO or by a Member State of those organisations at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which have foreign policy, defense-security, economic, cultural and other facets, are, in their functioning, oriented to a certain specific social area, and in addition to the countries of the Western Balkans, other interested countries also participate in those initiatives. In the long period of those states' functioning, there was a certain form of fatigue and insufficient functionality in achieving their set goals. Many states aimed to help and support NATO membership and for three of them, namely, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, this need was overcome because they became NATO members in the meantime.

Unlike other regional initiatives, the Berlin Process exclusively involves the six Western Balkan countries and focuses on fulfilling

the EU integration agenda. One of its significant advantages is the EU funding provided for commitments both planned and undertaken. While most other initiatives rely on national budgets for participation, the Berlin Process allocates substantial financial support. Specifically, a total of €6 billion (€2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans) is planned for the period from 2024 to 2027. This represents a substantial increase (over 40%) in funding for the Western Balkans compared to previous allocations (including Turkey) (Djurović, 2024).

During the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Brussels on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023, a joint Declaration was adopted, highlighting the increasingly complex geopolitical environment dominated by Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine and crises in the Middle East. The declaration emphasised the need for rapid and continuous progress toward alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (Berlin Process Declaration, Brussels, 2023). In the Declaration, the importance of deepening cooperation with partners is emphasised, urging them to make swift and continuous progress toward full alignment with the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including adherence to restrictive EU measures. Partners in the Western Balkans which have already demonstrated their strategic commitment to full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy are commended, while encouragement is given to those who have yet to achieve alignment. The effective implementation of restrictive measures and prevention of circumvention are underscored. Notably, Montenegro has fulfilled all obligations and has fully aligned its foreign and security policy with the EU, including compliance with the 11 packages of EU sanctions against Russia, while the 12<sup>th</sup> package is in the process of ratification.

The EU remains resolute in strengthening cooperation with the Western Balkans concerning fundamental security and defense matters at the operational level. The EU welcomes the commitment of partners to the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), including their contributions to EU crisis management missions and operations. The EU continues its commitment to regional security by maintaining the EUFOR Althea operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EULEX mission in Kosovo.

Regarding the security aspects of the Berlin Process, a key advantage and obligation both lie in aligning the national policies of Western Balkan countries with the European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The implementation of the Berlin Process agenda involves the adoption of a joint Declaration that outlines 35 key objectives and obligations for Western Balkan states across political, economic, and

security dimensions. Among these, the following security challenges faced by Western Balkan countries are highlighted, along with guidelines for addressing them collaboratively.

- **Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime:** The Tirana Declaration of October 2023 emphasises the need for sustained efforts in combating corruption and organised crime. It also calls for increased support for good governance, human rights, gender equality, and minority rights.
- **Alignment with CFSP:** Continuous progress toward full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including adherence to restrictive EU measures if actions are not in line with it.
- **Inclusive Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations:** Encouragement for Western Balkan partners to commit to inclusive regional cooperation and strengthen relations with EU Member States.
- **Ministerial Forums:** Recent ministerial meetings in November 2023 intensified cooperation in the field of CFSP, while the ministerial forum in Skopje in October 2023 focused on justice and internal affairs collaboration.
- **Operational Security Cooperation:** The EU remains committed to enhancing cooperation with the Western Balkans on fundamental security and defense issues, including activities at the operational level. This includes addressing hybrid and cyber threats, space-related matters, and military mobility.
- **Countering Disinformation and Foreign Interference:** The EU will continue supporting the Western Balkans in countering the foreign manipulation of information, including disinformation and other hybrid threats that undermine regional stability, democratic processes, and EU prospects.
- **Cybersecurity Collaboration:** The EU will strengthen collective cybersecurity in collaboration with the Western Balkans, including coordinated operational and technical support. A cybersecurity center will be established in the Western Balkans (in Montenegro) to promote regional resilience against cyber threats.
- **Migration Management:** Migration remains a critical shared challenge and responsibility, and both the EU and the Western Balkans are committed to fully implementing the EU's Action Plan, which includes combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Additionally, efforts are being directed toward ensuring access to international protection for those in need. In this context, Western Balkan partners are encouraged to strengthen their participation in the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), the

EU's leading instrument for combating serious and organised crime. Substantial financial support from the EU's dedicated programs will enable partners to enhance asylum and reception systems, strengthen border protection, combat organised criminal groups (especially those involved in migrant smuggling), and increase returns from the Western Balkans to countries of origin.

- Visa-Free Travel: Since the beginning of 2024, citizens from across the Western Balkans can travel to the Schengen area without a visa. Additional financial and technical assistance provided by the EU through Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, headquartered in Warsaw, Poland) aims to improve cooperation with countries of origin regarding returns and re-admission. The EU welcomes the signing and conclusion of new Frontex agreements on border management and control with some partners and encourages others to do so promptly. Furthermore, intensified collaboration with the European Union Agency for Asylum and Europol is recommended (Dnevne vijesti, 2024).
- Counterterrorism and Extremism: The EU calls for increased cooperation in combating terrorism and addressing violent extremism in all its forms, including the prevention of radicalisation and terrorist financing. Decisive action against serious and organised crime such as money laundering, high-level corruption, drug production, and trafficking, is emphasised through enhanced cooperation in law enforcement and customs, facilitated by EUROPOL's EMPACT.
- Firearm Control: The Western Balkan partners' commitment to eradicating the illicit trade and proliferation of small arms and light weapons is commendable. High levels of cooperation in combating firearms trafficking within the EMPACT framework are crucial. The extended plan beyond 2024 serves as an internationally-recognised example of successful regional collaboration to enhance the control of small firearms.
- European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO): The EU encourages Western Balkan partners to establish and maintain cooperative relations with the EPPO in the field of mutual legal assistance in criminal cases. Existing working arrangements between the EPPO and some Western Balkan partners are welcomed, and other partners are encouraged to engage in similar cooperation as soon as possible.

As is evident from the joint Declaration of the EU and the Western Balkans, out of the 35 of its points, 13 relate to security guidelines. This focus on security is a key advantage compared to other regional security initiatives. By concentrating these measures into one package

involving all six Western Balkan aspirants for EU membership, the Berlin Process ensures measurable progress toward the set goals and fosters joint participation and coordination in addressing security challenges throughout the process.

## Conclusions

In analysing the foreign policy aspects and their impact on regional security, it is essential to emphasise that the Western Balkans is a region characterised by weak governance, fragile civil society, geopolitical disputes, and internal and regional factors that make it highly susceptible to local and external disinformation campaigns (Tahirović, 2023b). Indeed, the democratic vulnerability of the region favours Russia's activities, and since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent sanctions imposed by the EU and the US, Russia has launched an extensive disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans. The goal is to undermine the values and perceptions of the EU and the US and obstruct the ambitions of regional states on their path toward European and transatlantic integration.

Given the pronounced crises affecting the EU, NATO, and the global landscape, the governments of the region must significantly alter their approach to internal security challenges. They should adapt and build security institutions in line with new security realities. Establishing systems, procedures, and legal frameworks for their smooth functioning is crucial. These efforts should be free from political and religious influence, aligning with established operating rules within EU Member States, particularly through the Berlin Process.

The latest NATO Strategic Concept, adopted in Madrid in 2022, underscores the strategic importance of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region for the Alliance. It expresses readiness to continue supporting the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in these regions. However, a notable challenge lies in the undefined or insufficiently clear stance of the EU and the US regarding the problems faced by the Western Balkans. This research suggests that the focus is on gaining time. Serbia, as the largest and most powerful state in the Western Balkans, needs to definitively orient itself toward the West and prevent itself from falling under Russia's influence. Such a shift would likely complicate the security situation in this part of Europe and significantly aid Russia in achieving its war objectives in Ukraine and beyond.

As evident from the joint EU/Western Balkans Declaration of 13<sup>th</sup> December 2023 in Brussels, out of the 35 points, 13 pertain to security guidelines. This approach represents a key advantage and an appropriate

model for addressing traditional Balkan disagreements compared to other regional security initiatives. By comprehensively concentrating these guidelines into a single package involving all six Western Balkan aspirants for EU membership, the Berlin Process ensures measurable progress toward the set goals. It also fosters joint participation and mutual coordination in tackling security challenges throughout this process.

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