

## CURRENT SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE<sup>57</sup>

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**Abstract:** The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began at the end of February 2022, confirmed the *de facto* impotence of the EU policy towards the Western Balkans. Only the reaffirmation of the United States of America and NATO's roles in the Western Balkans after 2017 had a significant impact on the situation in the region, as it had for the previous three decades. The importance of their roles was confirmed after the entry of Montenegro and North Macedonia into NATO and the achievement of the Prespa Agreement (2018). However, there are still essentially unresolved issues, such as the relations between Belgrade and Pristina (which are currently accelerating primarily due to the US), the internal reconfiguration of relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the gradual attempt to suppress the further growth of Russian influence in certain states of the region (it already has a strong influence in Serbia and the BiH entity, the Republic of Srpska).

In this sense, the author emphasises that only after the additional integration of the countries of the region with the European Union and NATO, which implies an accelerated continuation of the EU enlargement process but also a strengthened open-door policy, can NATO additionally ensure peace in the Western Balkans, where there are still significant and visible consequences of post-Yugoslav wars and numerous problems, such as a lack of the rule of law, an insufficient fight against corruption, and cross-border crime. Therefore, the current moment, characterised and determined by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, should ensure the acceleration of geopolitical responses related to the admission of the countries of the Western Balkans to the European Union and also empower the real and pro-European capacities of existing forms of regional cooperation. The author emphasises the necessity of accelerated integration of the remaining WB entities into NATO, which they have already pursued.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, security challenges, Ukraine, European Union, NATO.

### Introduction

The Western Balkans spent the last decade in the geopolitical shadow of far more significant global developments. In a certain way, after Croatia entered the European Union in the middle of 2013, it seemed that there was no clearer readiness to continue the process of further expansion of the Union and the geostrategic binding of the rest of the Western

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<sup>57</sup> This article is supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia [project "National Interests of the Republic of Serbia: from Contestation to Legitimation" – *National(S)* for the period 2022–2025].

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Balkan region to the West. (Đukanović, 2020: 69–72) In this sense, it was clear that some type of new “waiting rooms” were being created, where the Western Balkan nations would be confined until there was a potential acceleration of their integration into the Union. (*Telegraf*, 2012) The scepticism towards the EU integration of this part of Europe was only further deepened thanks to the fact that its previous administrations significantly deviated from the idea of enlargement, often talking only about the “European perspective” but not about full membership. On the other hand, during this decade, the process of expanding the North Atlantic Alliance in the Balkans continued with the entry of Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020). (Đukanović, 2020: 96–102) This very significant process was partially halted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Kosovo due to its undefined relations with Belgrade and the fact that four member countries of the alliance do not recognise its independence (Romania, Greece, Spain, and Slovakia). (Đukanović, 2019: 335–361)

On the other hand, all other pressing issues in the region were permanently put off. In fact, there was no clear focus to resolve them, except for significant progress in resolving relations between North Macedonia and Greece in accordance with the Prespa Agreement in 2018. (Prespa Agreement, 2018) The fact that the United States and the European Union have long displayed disunity over the aim to solve the outstanding issues, most notably the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina, has contributed to this. Also, after the failure of several initiatives to change the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 2000s, there was no clear and common intention of the EU and the US to eliminate the dysfunctionality of this country. (Miljuš, Đukanović, 2011: 199–232) All of this was accompanied by the regional countries’ bilateral relations becoming more complicated, particularly those between Serbia and Croatia and North Macedonia and Bulgaria. That was followed by the otherwise complex Balkan “labyrinth” of bad relations between many other countries in this part of Europe.

The political elites of the Western Balkan nations also made a consistent effort to identify other options for their countries’ positions. As the influence of Russia, Turkey, China, the United Arab Emirates, etc., grew cyclically, the leaders of these countries gradually softened their previously emphasised pro-European and pro-Euro-Atlantic efforts and began to diffuse their foreign policy efforts and activities. (Đukanović, 2021: 107–121) The Western Balkans, otherwise in a peripheral position, tried to take a different position towards Western integrations in which the US and the EU have a dominant role. But its efforts were gradually thwarted by the Russian Federation’s significant influence, first in the intelligence sphere and then in the media, education, culture, and other areas. This situation continued even after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, although it was expected that Russia’s influence would rapidly weaken in the Western Balkans but this did not happen. Therefore, it should be emphasised that leaving any possible, even minimal, space for other influences from the East will leave the Western Balkans on the European margin but still significantly conflicted within itself. It also seems that the return of the dominant role of the US after 2017, within which we can see particular phases of stronger and lesser influence, has left the possibility for certain regional problems to be solved. The fact that Russia’s aggression against Ukraine since the end of February 2022 has only more strongly homogenised both NATO and the European Union, i.e., all predominant Western forms of integration, gives an additional impetus to the role of the US. (Zięba, 2023: 119–137) Therefore, the US has revived and made explicit its new priority in the region, where Russia has historically had strong political influence.

Any disagreement between the US and the EU (i.e., its leading member states) has proven very ineffective, first of all, in the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. During the year 2020, there was a very noticeable American initiative related to the acceleration of the normalisation process (during the President Donald Trump administration). (Muharremi, 2021) However, there was also significant resistance, primarily from the Federal Republic of Germany but also from a few other EU member states. The key stumbling block was related to the attempt to change the borders of Kosovo, i.e., an attempt at “demarcation”, as stated in the statements of the actors involved in the normalisation process. (B92, 2018) In fact, the European partners believed that any issue of border redefinition in the Balkans could lead to a whole series of similar demands and, thus, complete instability in the Western Balkans.

On the other hand, the united activity of the United States and the EU in the process of normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and especially in the second half of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, contributed to their mutual position and resulted in a draft agreement about the further path of normalisation and pointed out the potential very serious consequences of its non-acceptance. (KoSSev, 2022) Thus, in this period, the efforts were precisely related to speeding up the normalisation process, which started in March 2011 under the mediation of the European Union. This key issue of regional security in the Balkans, which concerns the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina, is perceived by the West as a potential additional stronghold of Russia’s role, which is reflected primarily through an attempt to preserve the status quo but also through support for anti-European and more extreme right-wing political options in Serbia. Additionally, Serbia has abstained from imposing sanctions against the Russian Federation for a whole year. Based on the Kremlin’s initial, rather neutral reaction to the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on February 27, it appears that Russia values the avoidance of sanctions by Serbia more than the conclusion of normalisation between Belgrade and Pristina. (EEAS, 2023a; EEAS, 2023b)

### **The Key Challenges to Regional Stability in the Western Balkans: A Multitude of Unresolved Bilateral and Internal Problems**

Proceeding from the fact that the Western Balkans remain a vaguely defined area of essential interest to the West, there are still numerous ongoing interstate problems, primarily related to the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Wars and numerous inter-ethnic conflicts left drastic consequences that cannot be overcome or remedied even two and a half decades later. (Đukanović, 2020: 171–193) This situation is both directly and indirectly supported by certain external actors, not only through an attempt to redefine the post-Cold War situation in the Western Balkans but also by highlighting and encouraging these mutual animosities and tensions. In this, the Russian Federation is leading the way in an attempt to strengthen its role through the unilateral support of certain actors and encouragement of their mutual antagonisms. (Stronski, 2022) The long-encouraged pro-Russian sentiment in the public sphere in certain countries, particularly in Serbia, Montenegro, and a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, also plays a role. Stereotypes that the West wants to further weaken certain actors in the Balkans (primarily the “Serbian factor”) and that Russia

has a clear intention to stop this and assist in “solving” regional issues have been actively encouraged over the past 15 years.

The attempt to obstruct Montenegro and North Macedonia’s NATO membership during the second half of the last decade did not switch on the “safety lights” on how Russia’s influence may affect the Western Balkans’ situation.<sup>59</sup> The constant and almost decade-and-a-half-long stories about the Russian “malign influence” in the Balkans, and above all in the Western Balkans, were not followed by the appropriate activities of the EU and the US to essentially separate the local elites from Russia. That was confirmed by the case of Serbia, which concluded a strategic partnership agreement with Russia at the end of May 2013, during the tensions with Ukraine and immediately before the annexation of Crimea. (Đukanović, 2021: 116) Moreover, relations between Serbia and Russia have been expanding year by year in the economic and, especially, in the political sphere. In 2013, Serbia even became an observer in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, where the Russian Federation plays a dominant role. Moreover, this relationship was further deepened by the avoidance of the introduction of the EU restrictive measures towards Russia in the context of the Crimean crisis by Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia. However, even after the start of the aggression against Ukraine, Serbia did not join the EU restrictive measures for more than a year after its beginning. In addition, there are almost no real indications that the stated position of the official Belgrade will change in any way, despite the proclaimed pro-European foreign policy of the country. (Gočanin, 2023) Russia pays special attention to this and tries to marginalise and make meaningless any attempt at a public discussion on this topic.

Additionally, the influx of numerous Russian diplomats who left EU member states for intelligence work in Serbia demonstrates a genuine reluctance to establish a clear distancing of Belgrade from Moscow. (Živanović, Gočanin, Aljas, et al., 2023; Živanović, 2023) The complementarity of certain activities of Serbia and Russia towards Montenegro, particularly during and after 2020 through the activities of the Serbian Orthodox Church, confirmed that the influence of official Moscow is still strong in the region. (Serwer, 2023) That was also stated *a posteriori* by the European Union, but only when the facts became completely clear and when the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church on political events in Montenegro became so great that it also influenced the appointment of certain officials in the government at that time. (EWB, 2022) This continued through certain attempts by Russia to influence the March 2023 elections for the President of Montenegro and especially became obvious in the changed “pro-European” rhetoric of some openly pro-Russian candidates. Even though they emphasised the necessity of Montenegro’s entry into the European Union and numerous advantages in this regard, these candidates essentially had as their goal a change in the Euro-Atlantic course of the country and a gradual turn towards the Russian Federation. (Vijesti, 2023)

There is also an extremely strong Russian influence on certain politicians in the Western Balkans region. In addition to the unequivocally strong ties that exist between the authorities in Belgrade and Moscow, it is clear that Milorad Dodik and other Serbian politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina have even stronger ties with the Kremlin, which are more than noticeable in certain segments. (Al Jazeera, 2023a) In this sense, the announcement of the termination of the relations of the Republic of Srpska entity with the diplomats of the US and

<sup>59</sup> The coup attempts in Montenegro on October 16, 2016; the break into the Macedonian Assembly on April 27, 2017.

Great Britain should be viewed, as should the announcement of the law that will criminalise defamation, affect the work of the non-governmental sector, and worsen the otherwise poor status of the LGBT+ population. (RSE, 2023a) Also, there is an almost open attack by the authorities of the Republic of Srpska on the non-governmental sector in this entity, modelled on almost identical measures that have already been implemented in the Russian Federation. (Milojević, 2023) The awarding of one of the official orders of the Republic of Srpska entity to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the beginning of this year further confirmed the extent of the connection between the authorities in Banja Luka and the Kremlin. (S. D., 2023)

At the same time, through the once pro-Western VMRO-DPMNE, pro-Russian influence is increasingly penetrating North Macedonia, as reflected in the non-recognition of the Prespa Agreement and the blocking of attempts to amend the Constitution of North Macedonia in order to speed up the country's European integration.<sup>60</sup> (Vit, 2020) All this can be seen in the connections of its former leader Nikola Gruevski with Viktor Orbán and the current Hungarian government, which has repeatedly attempted to sabotage the unity of the EU in regards to the sanctions against the Russian Federation and, particularly, in connection with military assistance to Ukraine. (I. Š. M., 2018) Parallel to this, a certain kind of scepticism towards the already achieved NATO membership is gradually growing in North Macedonia. (Raičević, 2023) However, in the coming period, it remains to be seen how the narrative of rather strong criticism of the EU and NATO by the leading opposition VMRO-DPMNE will be reflected in the foreign policy position and the international position of North Macedonia. VMRO-DPMNE does not manage to build its ideological profile as a modern European Christian Democratic party. In fact, the influence of non-EU actors on it is becoming increasingly noticeable. On the wave of Macedonian nationalism and latent Russophilia, VMRO-DPMNE is constantly trying to challenge the adoption of constitutional changes, which are a prerequisite for the actual start of North Macedonia's EU membership negotiations. (RSE, 2022)

Relations in the Western Balkans are also severely impacted by Chinese influence. At this stage, this influence is predominantly related to the economy. However, there is no doubt that it will soon be strengthened and transferred to the political level, especially in those countries and societies of the Western Balkans located on the imaginary "Silk Belt and Road". (Đukanović, 2020: 51–54) China's indifferent attitude towards Russian aggression against Ukraine leaves the possibility that Russia's influence in the Western Balkans will be further consolidated. Long-term political risks could also be associated with Serbia and Montenegro's growing economic dependency on China. (Milić, 2021) The numerous loans from China that these two Western Balkan nations have received have the potential to seriously endanger their economies and monetary systems, indirectly increasing the likelihood that Montenegro and Serbia's governments will become more dependent on China. Based on the global race between the US and China, it is certain that the West will not allow the implementation of the "Belt and Road" project so easily because it would strengthen the role of Beijing in the wider European context. On the other hand, China is already trying to strengthen its position in the Balkans and exert a wider security influence in Europe through its new technologies.

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<sup>60</sup> With these constitutional changes, Bulgarians, Montenegrins, Croats, and possibly Jews would be declared national minorities in North Macedonia. The pressure in this regard mainly comes from Bulgaria, related to the opening of some clusters in the process of European integration of North Macedonia. (*Telegraf*, 2023)

(Standish, 2022) At the same time, China is trying to do this by investing in a large number of projects labelled as scientific research but with the aim of promoting its interests in the Balkans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China promoted itself as a significant donor of humanitarian aid, although this was basically not realistic considering that the states of the region have largely repaid that aid. (Šterić, Bjeloš, 2020: 5–15) The leaders of some Western Balkans countries often spoke about the impotence of the non-solidarity European Union and the West in general, but also about the great and selfless solidarity of China with this part of Europe. (*Ibidem*: 13)

The simmering and ongoing tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina contribute to the instability of the Western Balkans region. It appears that the West's interests in Belgrade-Pristina relations will eventually shift back to the "unfinished" issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The failure of the initiative to reach an agreement on changes to the electoral legislation in BiH between Bosniaks and Croats in Neum at the beginning of 2022 under the dominant role of the US, on the eve of the elections in this country, contributed to the crumbling of the until then undisputed authority of this world superpower. (*Istraga.ba*, 2022) This was also confirmed in the later period. Moreover, the participation of certain actors who are on the "black list" of the US or are close to certain actors who are on the same list in the newly formed BiH government leaves a kind of uncertainty as to how to proceed. (Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2022) In fact, neither the European Union nor the United States can provide a real alternative to ethno-national parties and leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The very attempt at political marginalisation of the leading Bosniak party, the Party of Democratic Action, was only a reflection of the hard-set actions of its leader, Bakir Izetbegović, during the Neum unsuccessful initiative, which was one of the priorities of the newly established administration of President Joseph Biden. (*Oslobođenje*, 2023) On the other hand, in such a context, an exception is made when it comes to a clearer distance towards the other leaders of the constituent nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have no less destructive influence on the political life there.

In addition to the internal level of relations, there have been open and repeated declarations of secessionism of some parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have so far only prompted stern diplomatic responses from the US and EU. The latent aspirations of BiH Croats for a certain form of territorial autonomy (a third entity) contribute to additional internal instability. (Đukanović, 2015: 127–150) The official Zagreb's attempts to support similar plans and garner as much support inside the European Union as possible appear to be a problem. (European Parliament Resolution, 2017) It is also obvious that the influence of Zagreb and Belgrade on the internal situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina will require additional redefinition and harmonisation with the EU and the US, but this will be unequivocally related to the fundamental principles of the Dayton Agreement, such as the constitutionality of the three nations and the existing two-entity structure of the country.

It is, therefore, expected that plans, such as the April Package from 2006 or the Butmir Package from 2009, will be revived in a certain way and to a certain extent, as well as initiatives to implement a whole series of judgements of the European Court of Human Rights related to the status of communities that do not belong to the constituent nations.<sup>61</sup> (Miljuš,

<sup>61</sup> There are four judgements of the European Court of Human Rights in which discrimination is found against members of non-dominant communities, i.e., ethnic minorities, due to the impossibility of participating in the candidature for certain positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Implementation of



Đukanović, 2011: 241–284) This will certainly cause significant resistance within Bosnia and Herzegovina. The potential acceleration of the Euro-Atlantic integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e., the submission of an application for NATO membership, will simultaneously cause new tensions. In this sense, the representatives of the Serbian people, as well as some Croatian officials, are trying to delay or put completely *ad acta* this issue. (Đukanović, 2019: 335–361) The decisions of the entity authorities of the Republic of Srpska to suspend all contact with the diplomats of the United Kingdom and the US only confirm the deeply anti-Western attitude, and it can be expected that this will indirectly affect the relationship with the European Union, i.e., the complete blocking of European integration.

The full implementation of the Agreement on the path to normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo from Brussels on February 27 and its Implementation Annex from Ohrid on March 18, 2023, will face numerous challenges. (EEAS 2023a; EEAS 2023b) This can be concluded based on many experiences from the regional context related to multi-year problems in the implementation of numerous earlier agreements.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, the evident climate of mistrust that has persisted throughout the otherwise difficult and arduous normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristina since the beginning of this process in 2011 contributes to this situation. In this sense, the US will play an important role, although indirectly, and the EU will play an important facilitating role through the work of the Joint Monitoring Committee. (EEAS, 2023c) This body, in charge of monitoring and implementing all previous and recently accepted agreements on the path to normalisation, will be very important in the coming period. Undoubtedly, the course of the potential acceleration of the European integration of Serbia and Kosovo will depend on the implementation of this agreement and the broader stabilisation of conditions in the southeast of Europe.

The third regional challenge, more political than security-related, is the improvement of relations between Serbia and Croatia and the beginning of solving numerous open issues. (Đukanović, 2020: 179–181) This should strengthen the cooperation of these two Danube countries and often neglected component of Serbia's Central European orientation, which is otherwise constantly oriented towards the permanent solution of the "Serbian question" in the Balkans. Croatia's membership in the European Union and its entry into the Schengen Agreement and the Eurozone (from the beginning of 2023) should be an additional incentive for neighbouring Serbia to develop better relations with this country. Also, as a member of NATO and the European Union, Croatia successfully realised almost all of its foreign policy goals defined in the early 2000s. (*Ibidem*: 130–133) In this sense, Croatia's experiences from 2000 to 2013 can be very useful for Serbia's European integration process.

The relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia also generally affect relations in the Balkan Peninsula. The Bulgarian denial of all identity determinants of Macedonians only causes additional frustrations in neighbouring North Macedonia and affects its EU integration process. (Vukadinović, 2022) Particular announcements of a broader compromise by Bulgaria on this issue do not seem realistic. Neither do the attempts to amend the Constitution of North Macedonia and actually recognise the Bulgarian minority. (Noyan, 2023)

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these judgements of the European Court of Human Rights is one of the conditions for speeding up the European integration of BiH. (Sejdić-Finci vs BiH – 2009; Zornić vs BiH – 2014; Pilav vs BiH – 2016; Pudarić vs BiH – 2020)

<sup>62</sup> The Erdut Agreement (1995), the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), the Ohrid Agreement (2001), etc.

Unequivocal and strong Russian influence in Montenegro can represent an additional problem for the Western Balkans. It is generally transposed to Serbian-Montenegrin relations due to the evident closeness of the authorities in Belgrade and Moscow. (RSE, 2023b) For a long time, the US and the EU did not notice the gradual internal changes in the previously very clear European and emphasised Euro-Atlantic efforts of Montenegro, especially in the period after the change of government in this country in 2020. Moreover, the US and the EU actually supported the removal of the former government of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, which had been implementing a strong Euro-Atlantic agenda on foreign policy since 1997. Political attempts to raise the issue of the October 2008 decision on the recognition of Kosovo and the introduction of a whole series of sanctions against Russia from 2014 until today represent a very significant agenda of pro-Russian options. (M. S., 2023) In this, they are largely supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which, in a certain way, appears as a transmitter of the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Namely, the Russian Church is deeply tied to the authorities in the Kremlin and does not recognise the decisions of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In this regard, the accelerated process of recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in May 2022 by the Serbian Orthodox Church, with the intention of the Russian Orthodox Church to pre-empt a similar decision by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which was announced on several occasions, was evident and underscored. (Gočanin, 2022)

The regional perspective of relations in the Western Balkans must rest on a credible framework of intensive multilateral cooperation. The Berlin Process, therefore, gains importance in terms of networking all six actors in the Western Balkans and maintaining a long-term connection with the EU and, above all, with the EU Single Market. Through the creation of the Common Regional Market, a realistic basis for this will be ensured. (Chair's Conclusions, 2022) Incentives to the countries of the Western Balkans region within the framework of the Berlin Process are also related to easier border crossing, that is, facilitating the movement of services and goods. This should be accompanied by the inevitable continuation of reforms and the creation of conditions for additional connection and sectoral integration of the Western Balkans Six with the European Union. Regardless of how long the Western Balkans' political structure has been in place as a reflection of the EU and the US's dominance in this region of Europe after the Cold War, it still has a lot of issues to deal with. In addition to the already mentioned influences of actors beyond the global West, the most significant are several potential problems that can prevent the complete integration of this part of Europe into the transatlantic space, i.e., into the Euro-Atlantic community.

According to the assessments of the Berlin Process, there are constant security problems, such as the potential emergence of terrorism, a new wave of migrants heading to the European Union via the Western Balkans, and the strengthening of cross-border crimes. (*Ibidem*) Also, insufficient suppression of corruption and organised crime, in general, represents a significant challenge for all countries of this region, both within the Western Balkans countries and at the level of the Berlin Process as the dominant multilateral form of cooperation. In addition to the afore-mentioned activities, there is also the suppression of money laundering and the necessity of strengthening cyber security and finding rational responses to realistic and everyday hybrid threats to security. (*Ibidem*) The Western Balkans countries' energy security challenges must also be swiftly resolved through increased cooperation platforms, most notably the Berlin Process. (*Ibidem*)



On the other hand, there is significant resistance among the political elites of certain Western Balkans countries to join the Open Balkans Project, which has not been inclusive since its inception in 2019, i.e., not all six Western Balkan actors are involved in its work. (Đukanović, 2022) Within the Open Balkans, not all current member states have ratified the acts resulting from the work of this initiative in their national parliaments. It follows logically that the Open Balkans will, to the greatest extent possible, become increasingly integrated into and linked to the Regional Cooperation Council and the Berlin Process.

## Conclusion

The security problems that characterise the Western Balkans in the post-Yugoslav paradigm have not yet been adequately resolved. On the contrary, numerous mutual problems in the region can still be considered primarily a product of the disintegration of the former common state, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Therefore, mutual misunderstanding and real mistrust prevail between the majority of actors here, which can be overcome only and exclusively due to the strengthened influence of the United States and, to some extent, the European Union.

That is why the prerequisites for improving the stability of the Western Balkans, as well as the integration of countries into Euro-Atlantic integration, are related to:

1. Prior and *complete harmonisation of positions between the transatlantic partners, the US and the European Union*, on the most important regional problems in the Western Balkans; Joint action towards local political elites can only lead to results that may concern the complete integration of the Western Balkans into European and Euro-Atlantic integration;

In this sense, it is quite important to accelerate the process of enlargement of the European Union and NATO to the remaining countries of the Western Balkans with full respect for the necessary internal political and economic reforms, with an emphasis on respect for the rule of law;

2. *More significant financial support from the US and the European Union related to the alternative energy supply*, which is difficult in the conditions of the war in Ukraine but with the necessary long-term diversification of the energy supply, represents the basis for the reconfiguration of Russia's influence in the Western Balkans; Additional internal infrastructure networking and parallel connections with neighbouring EU countries; The long-term suppression of China's influence will also be an additional problem when it comes to the stabilisation of the Western Balkans due to the enormous potential of this country to have a substantial long-term effect on the opportunities between actors in the Western Balkans;

3. *Support for the Berlin Process, primarily related to the realisation of the creation of the Common Regional Market and the full coordination of its activities with the Regional Cooperation Council*; Also, additional support for the Berlin Process is necessary regarding the coordination of a whole series of activities related to security issues: illegal migration, energy security, and regional security; Multilateral integration in the Western Balkans should, first of all, be in accordance with the *acquis Communautaire* of the EU.

4. *Insisting on solving open bilateral issues in the Western Balkans in a relatively short period of time* and in accordance with EU documents (the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993, commitments taken from the Stabilisation and Association Process, "A Credible EU Enlargement Strategy" from 2018, etc.). In this sense, the influence of the EU and the US has to be more significant

and noticeable, with a special emphasis on the time limitation for reaching the necessary compromises on many bilateral issues in the Western Balkans.

Only after the fulfilment of the previously mentioned conditions could regional stability be further strengthened and a guarantor of peace in the Western Balkans be created. Political elites, which are often motivated by Russia to activate the Balkans as a "new" security problem and divert attention from this country's current aggression against Ukraine, also contribute to the internal instability of the Western Balkans. This is particularly evident in the activities of the leadership of the Republic of Srpska related to the insistence on their own (self) isolation in relations with the US and the United Kingdom, but also in the announcement of the adoption of a whole series of restrictive laws that will threaten freedom of expression in this entity. Therefore, Russia's focus on the creation of regional instability in the Western Balkans is shifting to this entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. (*Al Jazeera*, 2023b) It remains to be seen whether the West will be able to quickly come up with solutions for the country where the effects of the conflict fought from 1992 to 1995 can still be observed.

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