

WESTERN BALKANS 6 STRATEGY GROUP

# POSITION PAPER ON WB6



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## Western Balkans Political Horizons

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has a direct and substantial impact on the Western Balkans. From the security point of view, the Kremlin has designated four of the six WB countries as “non-friendly” entities towards Russia<sup>1</sup> after all of them supported the sanctions against the Putin regime. The exception was Serbia, which did not align with the sanctions, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The lack of consistent and convincing EU perspective and US dedication to the region opened space for other actors and scenarios, including those on re-composition of the Western Balkans, which fueled radicalization, based on ethno-nationalism and related identity issues, and regression tendencies in the entire region. That has seriously challenged everything accomplished over the past several decades in the field of democratization and Europeanisation of the Western Balkans. The war from the recent and still not adequately faced past in the Western Balkans reminds us that such scenarios are not possible without grave consequences, such as conflicts and displacement of people, with personal, social and political wounds to be cured a long time afterwards. All this underlines the need to re-visit the engagement of the EU and the US in the region to build a liberal-democratic order. That encompasses different concepts of addressing long-lasting open questions, such as the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, but also state of affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and most recently Montenegro, in order to have the region meaningfully moving forward.

The case of Ukraine has put on the international agenda again multiple debates about the necessity for a strategic geopolitical vision of the European Union towards the WB, as well as the importance of a favorable value framework. This conflict has highlighted the instability, vulnerability and exposure of WB countries. There is a legitimate concern and fear that, consumed by the crisis, the EU will put the region once again on the back burner.

The narrative about a “strong Russia” as energy, military and nuclear superpower, which is on Serbia's side in the UN and other international institutions, has dominated in Serbian pro-government media outlets, since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This atmosphere was built by President Vučić, hence additionally feeding the expectations and hopes of the Serbian structures close to him that the historic moment has come for the realization of the “Serbian World”, which means unification with the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro and Northern Kosovo. This project is justified by the thesis of discrimination against Serbs in neighboring countries, what is compatible to the Russian propaganda about the endangerment of Russians in Ukraine.

Another challenge for the liberal democracy and the EU integration process is disinformation and fake news. The illiberal political parties and groups are one of the main sources of the spread of disinformation and fake news. These narratives are disseminated through regional proxies – Belgrade or Orban’s media in Skopje, with spin-offs in Montenegro and other countries in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-adopts-list-of-enemy-countries-to-which-it-will-pay-its-debts-in-rubles/>

## Recommendations from the group:

- **The EU should, soberly and honestly, rethink its fatigue and skepticism-ridden approach and consequently renew the consensus for enlargement when it comes to the WB region.** In particular, this should lead to the opening of the immediate accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, more content based support of Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement priorities from the EC Opinion from 2019, and energetic *stick and carrot* approach towards Montenegro and Serbia when it comes to undertaken commitments, as well as providing Kosovo visa-free travel.
- **Create a common policy of EU countries towards the Western Balkans which should realistically anticipate the Balkans' membership in the EU.** That policy should have "zero tolerance" for policies based on the nationalistic program of the 1990s and its recycled projects such as the "Serbian World".
- **The EU needs to be a strong geopolitical power and a factor in resolving such a major crisis,** however, it cannot project this power and resolve issues if it does not position as such in the region, and there is enormous potential for this, especially given the geographical and historical proximity, as well as views of citizens of the region.
- In this context, the **EU should invest much more in fighting disinformation through**
  - **short term initiatives** – following up on the WB countries' compliance with shutting down media that disseminate Russian propaganda and urging on prevention/stopping the disinformation spread by public media; and investing in countering direct relevant disinformation about Ukraine invasion through partnerships with civil society and independent media;
  - **in the medium/long term plans** - investing in media literacy development and increase of overall social resilience towards disinformation coming from systemic rivals (Russia, China, Iran, etc.);
- In the framework of the economy, the price hikes will affect the already feeble economies in the region, as these are in oil and gas prices but also in essential food items. Hence, **the region needs assistance from the EU to cope with the external pressures,** sometimes coming through controversial investments from non-democratic countries, which might prove too much for the citizens to handle as recent protests have shown.
- Finally, **regional cooperation should be supported by the EU, but those initiatives that are dubious, such as *Open Balkans*, should be taken with reserve,** as many actors are not convinced that it neither provided inclusivity on equal footing nor that the public declaration of its founders are sincere.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina witnessed rising nationalism, a gloomy premonition of conflict and disbelief that war would actually happen. Today, 30 years later, almost the same sentiments fill the political, social and media discourse. The context has changed somewhat - but for the worse, producing limited opportunities at regional, EU and global levels. BiH is once again facing a fit of nationalism and separatism, this time as vulnerable on the inside as it is on the outside.

There has been an escalation of incitement to ethnic hatred in BiH in recent years. Convicted war crimes, including facts established in criminal proceedings, are openly denied - primarily at the highest political levels, including historical revisionism supported by neighboring countries Serbia and Croatia. Apart from the continuous denial of the Srebrenica genocide, it has become completely normal to celebrate Herceg-Bosna, paint murals of war criminals (like Praljak and Mladić), name public spaces after war criminals and the war of the 90s and World War II. This open fascism and nationalism have no purpose other than to intimidate ethnic minorities, keep alive the idea of a new war and the superiority of one ethnic group, and in the long run - strengthening their own position and creating conditions for (re)shaping territorial administration according to ethnic principles. Despite initiatives to introduce a legal ban on denying and glorifying war crimes, political authorities have shown unwillingness to regulate the matter, ending the challenge to the only element of transitional justice that has made significant progress so far - war crimes trials. Namely, challenging these verdicts not only disturbs the fragile peace, but also challenges the victims' minimum satisfaction - acknowledging that the crimes committed against them are exactly that - crimes, and that society is ready to provide a guarantee of their non-repetition. However, the victims, their families, and new generations live in a society that challenges their suffering and glorifies those who committed it. This has consequences that are long lasting - it creates fear, mistrust, and revives the feeling of 1992, when nationalism laid the foundations of conflict and division. Furthermore, this is very successfully reflected in the functioning of the state in which everything is divided and ethnically conflicted. This position opens the door wide to the separatist tensions of neighboring Serbia and Croatia, which for years have supported and fuelled the ethno-nationalist movement within BiH.

All of the above is the context in which the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina [imposed changes to the BiH Criminal Code in 2021](#), which prohibits publicly condones, denies, grossly trivializes or tries to justify a crime of genocide, crimes against humanity or a war crime, but also prohibiting glorification of convicted war criminals. This landmark decision is perhaps the most important step made in building peace in BiH in the last five years. By implementing the principle of individual responsibility, which is established in criminal trials, these amendments to the Criminal Code open the possibility of freeing entire ethnic groups from the imposed interpretive and politically instrumentalized collective responsibility that has been so successfully maintained for 30 years. Furthermore, these changes have a potential to free up public space of inflammatory, war-inciting rhetoric that has been used skillfully and only for the particular interests of ethno-nationalist political elites.

However, this decision was abused by Milorad Dodik and his political party to initiate a series of unconstitutional and harmful actions that brought BiH back to a state of paralysis. These Dodik's

actions, including the silence or mild reactions of the Office of the High Representative, the Delegation of the European Union to BiH, and the EU's united stance, only allowed nationalist instead of democratic values to take over BiH's political and state space at this sensitive time. Deciding that representatives from the Republic of Srpska will not participate in the work of institutions, Dodik paralyzed the work of the state for more than half a year. At the same time, the announcements and decisions on the establishment of parallel institutions at the entity level are, to say the least, unconstitutional, and in the social view of the situation, extremely dangerous and undermine the state order of BiH. It is also necessary to point out Dodik's announcements of withdrawing the army, restructuring the armed forces, relying on the support of Serbia, and the decision at the level of the Republic of Srpska for non-implementation of changes to the state Criminal Code imposed by the High Representative.

This situation of instability has been successfully exploited to resume blackmail on the Election Law by nationalist Croatian representatives, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Dragan Covic. In a situation where political responsibility and determination in preserving the peace and stability of the country is necessary, the second wave of fragmentation of democracy and the introduction of additional ethnic separatism is happening in parallel with the one coming from Dodik. Namely, the issue of amending the Constitution and the Election Law is being raised again, but the only option that Covic's HDZ agrees with is the ethnically motivated one, which promotes the creation of new pure ethnic (Croat) spaces, deprivation of active and passive suffrage for a number of BiH citizens.<sup>2</sup> Under the guise of 'endangerment of Croat people', the HDZ, with the wholehearted help of EU member Croatia<sup>3</sup>, is actually trying to pursue a policy of reviving the joint criminal enterprise of Herceg-Bosna in a very fragile momentum for BiH. The effects of destabilization of the state of BiH is not limited - Serbia and Croatia supported this political separatism, encouraging the destabilization of BiH from outside, including the EU level to which Croatia has open access. Results are devastating – compromising the security of the country, calling up for a new war and not seeing a clear stand against it from the international community. Within this, Russia is also an ally supporting the politics of Serbia and Republic of Srpska, thus expanding its influence on the neuralgic point in the middle of Europe.

In these circumstances, the role of the international community in BiH is highly questionable. Negotiations on reforms, overcoming the political crisis, unblocking the work of state institutions are conducted with representatives of ethnic (constitutive) groups, and very rarely with politically elected representatives and institutions. Negotiations, if they take place, are behind closed doors, with elected representatives and without the participation of civil society, citizens and possibly experts. Reactions and actions that undermine the stability of the state and announce the war meet with mild or no reactions from the OHR and the [EUD](#). It seems that there is still support for EU integration processes, but is there an understanding that integration is threatened by the fact that at least two separatist processes have been actively trying to be implemented in BiH for

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<sup>2</sup> Requests and proposals coming from HDZ, promote establishment of ethnic majority electoral units and further internal division of BiH into ethnic enclaves. Also the idea of restricting the right to vote on the basis of ethnicity encourages new discrimination, which we have not had so far. There is obvious need to counter any further fragmentation and discrimination based on ethno-territorial principles („legitimate representation“ – ‘ethnic voting’).

<sup>3</sup> Croatia, through the HDZ, promotes this idea under the cover of 'federalism' and 'civil state', which differs a lot from universally accepted meaning of these principles for EU members. There is constant misuse (or reinterpretation) of terms civic, federalization, discrimination and legitimate representation of nations in Croatia's and HDZ BiH reform principles, requests and discourse. Foreign policy of countries that have a declarative commitment to the European Union is not in line with EU policies – Croatia primarily, and that has to be recognised and stopped.

months? Any silence, openness to 'discuss' peace means in fact putting on the table the security of this state and its citizens.

Summing up the last 30 years, geopolitically and in the EU context, BiH has developed into a high-risk territory, a state of very unstable peace that the Dayton Accords have long outgrown, institutional and political deviations from civil rights, dysfunctional institutions incapable of resisting ethnic manipulation, and ultimately a highly sensitive area through which the interests of neighboring states are refracted (almost as if we have not left the 90s). Exactly like that, BiH, along with other countries in the Western Balkans, is an ideal territory for blackmailing and 'overflowing' the conflict that Russia is currently waging on the territory of Ukraine. Therefore, it is not surprising, but it should be very frightening, to put BiH as the first potential conflict that directly arises from Russia's foreign policy of destabilizing the EU and West. Not because there is a certain interest in BiH, but because BiH has for a long time been on the margins of the EU's interests, and with all its internal weaknesses, it makes a clear goal of opening a new high risk for Europe. At the same time, this region of Southeast Europe is home to some of Putin's most prominent supporters. Rallies in support of Russia and Putin were held in BiH (Republic of Srpska), Montenegro and Serbia in the first days of March. This further heightens the fear of the population, but also sends a message about how close the Russian war actually is to the Western Balkans.

It should be reminded that BiH is not a member of NATO precisely because of the policies that divide this country<sup>4</sup>. The same policies have significantly slowed its path to the EU, making the country a perfect potential hotbed of conflict. This paradigm must change immediately since it became clear, both in the case of Russia and Ukraine and Western Balkans, appeasement politics have not succeeded in any way. In BiH, appeasement politics applied far too long – and seem to be still the approach of choice.

### Expectations towards Germany and EU

- Unified and clear position of the EU and its members on any separatist initiatives within BiH, including threats of war or attacks on the state order. This refers to both internal initiatives within BiH and the interference of neighboring countries (primarily [Croatia as an EU member](#), and Serbia).
- The EU should take a clear position in condemning Milorad Dodik's disruption of BiH's stability, including imposing sanctions on those responsible for creating and implementing this policy. Germany, as it has shown so far, needs to insist on demands for a complete and secure BiH, also imposing sanctions on those who call for war, secession and glorification of war crimes and criminals.
- The High Representative in BiH should be aware of the harmfulness of HDZ's insistence on the ethnic model of the Election Law, and prevent further destabilization and ethnic discrimination in BiH. Further recommendations should include to strengthen High

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<sup>4</sup> BiH has made it a strategic goal to join NATO and the EU, but Bosnian Serbs, led by Serb member of the presidency and Putin ally Milorad Dodik, object to joining the US-led military alliance. Dusanka Majkic, one of the Serb representatives in Bosnia's House of Peoples and a member of Dodik's nationalist SNSD party, reiterated on Twitter recently Russia's message: "A reminder: Moscow said in March 2021 that it would react if Bosnia and Herzegovina takes steps towards joining NATO. Don't say later that you didn't know".

Representative's position, but also robust EUFOR (with German contribution), German foreign policy, in this regard, should have a clear stance on whether it wants to support BiH based on democratic and civic principles or deepen existing divisions by satisfying the nationalist pretensions promoted by the HDZ. Constitutional and electoral reform are a crucial moment for positioning democratic instead of ethnic principles in BiH.

### Recommendations from the group

- The international community should support B&H in the EU integration process by insisting that attacks on BiH as an integral state cease and requiring the genuine implementation of EU accession commitments.
- It is important for the international community to recognize the threat of secession and destabilization of BiH and to condemn such acts. The inviolability of international borders in the Western Balkans, as well as meddling in BiH domestic political affairs by Serbia and Croatia, should be clearly addressed.
- Reiterating a mere commitment to the EU must cease to be a slogan and turn into serious reforms. The EU, as well as OHR, need to show more determination and the inclusion of 'red lines' must have serious consequences.
- Implementation of the ECHR rulings, i.e. the elimination of discrimination in the electoral process, should be separated from all other political issues related to constitutional reform, and the international community should insist on the depoliticisation of the process by excluding the risk that the constitution will continue to contain discriminatory provisions, while political parties continue to focus on party (ethnic) interests.

## Montenegro

In the past two years, Montenegro has been in turmoil. The country, for a long time perceived by Western partners as a stable and even regional frontrunner in the EU accession process, has gone through a turbulent period of internal changes imprinted by deep polarization of society, but also with the regression in the accession process.

The parliamentary elections in August 2020 sent the decades-long government of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), with its partners, into opposition. However, the new parliamentary majority, composed of three coalition<sup>5</sup> failed to bring the needed qualitative changes or to be persuasive in establishing principles of good governance. Namely, they spent most of the time in confrontations over the division of positions and influence. It was partially expected as these three coalitions were rather different both in programmes and approaches, whereas their only connecting tissue in the election campaign was the declared wish to replace the DPS. Hence, once the elections were finished, and that aim accomplished, the whole sea of their differences and personal animosities prevailed.

The new Government was sort of the experiment, led by Zdravko Krivokapić, a university professor without prior political experience but with the endorsement of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC). He pushed the concept of the “expert” Government of 12 ministers, excluding representatives of all three coalitions, apart from the deputy PM from URA. Besides, Democrats got the post of the President of the Parliament. In that manner, the Democratic Front, close to Serbian President Vučić and Russia, was left without high positions. This Government was agreed under the auspices of the SOC, which extensively started to get reimbursed for the support provided during the election campaign. Demonstrating their helplessness in front of the SOC, new decision-makers were both weakening their authority and institutions, introducing unprecedented clericalisms in Montenegro.

Time has shown that the “expert ministers” were short in expertise to manage respective portfolios but skillful in populism, and the entire approach diverted basic rules with devastating effects on the institutional setup, including the wave of political party employments instead of the merit-based system with many other accompanying bad practices of previous authorities. The new Government also excluded parties of national minorities emphasizing cadres blessed by the SOC, which in a multicultural society such as the Montenegrin, proved to have multiple negative effects, including the peak of the political and social tensions during the enthronement of the Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral in Cetinje, on 5 September 2021. It is important to note that SOC is also seen as a powerful medium through which Vučić is trying to exercise influence on social and political developments in Montenegro.

Events in Cetinje generated considerable regional and international attention to Montenegro, marking the begging of the fall of the Government of Krivokapić, to whom on 4 February 2022 a vote of no confidence was formally voted in the Parliament of Montenegro. Also, on 7 February

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<sup>5</sup> *For the Future of Montenegro* led by the Democratic Front, *Peace is Our Nation* led by Democrats, and *Black on White* led by Civic Movement URA

the President of the Parliament was dismissed. The protests organized primarily by Democrats, due to these dismissals, did not generate significant support from citizens.

The cohabitation of the new Government and the President of the state, Milo Đukanović, the DPS leader, was challenging and rather unsuccessful, which reflected also on public interest.

On the other hand, Đukanović failed to reform his party, hence significantly limiting its coalition capacity and influence. However, DPS and its partners managed to hold on to Montenegro's political scene better than similar party structures in other countries that in transition lost key institutional layers of power overnight. This is primarily due to the ineffectiveness of the new Government, which in the eyes of the majority of citizens legitimized itself as conservative, clerical, revanchist, amateur, as well as the one without the ability to pursue a reform course.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, Montenegro is about to get the so-called minority Government, which would be led by Dritan Abazović, the current Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the URA. However, that Government will only make sense if it has an unquestionable pro-European orientation, including a clear position towards Ukraine war and some value issues, such as Srebrenica genocide, resilience towards all malign external actors, inclusive character, and realistically set goals that can be measured within a short time, as it is planned to last one year.

Hence, until the early parliamentary elections (foreseen for spring 2023), the focus should be on unblocking the judiciary system, where some of the key appointments are pending in the Parliament of Montenegro, as it is expected that there will be an adequate majority for that. Furthermore, the Government and new majority should be working on overcoming divisions within polarized society and moving from the roundabout the accession negotiation process, which includes also promotion of less politicized and more professional state administration.

## Expectation towards Germany and EU

Germany and the EU have been actively following up with the developments in the country consistently reminding, both previous and current authorities, that benchmarks set within chapters 23 and 24 in the accession negotiation process should be duly fulfilled. This was an important support to the stakeholders in Montenegro advocating for an effective rule of law and civic state. Furthermore, this was often stimulating other international actors to take a more proactive approach pursuing democratic consolidation of the country and it should be continued as the strict but fair approach is the most beneficial for Montenegro on a long run.

- It is especially important that Germany and the EU back all initiatives for establishing a wider and inclusive social and political dialogue to overcome the current toxic atmosphere and dangerous polarization, as well as to strengthen institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> Research MNE Pulse, Centre for Civic Education (CCE) and DAMAR agency, November 2021, <https://cgo-cce.org/2021/11/29/vlada-bez-reformskog-kapaciteta-i-inkluzivnosti/>

- Finally, the EU and Germany should continue to raise the issue of endemic corruption and the need for functional systematic response and raise awareness for its adequate positioning.

### Recommendations from the group

- After 30 years of dominance of one political party, several election cycles are needed to balance the political scene in a quality manner and to build political capacity in service of public interest. Researches are indicating that the dominant majority of citizens want to be part of the EU and that they live what could be marked as a set of European values, as well as alienation of Montenegrin decision-makers from citizens. Hence, progressive civic forces working on issues related to the political culture should be supported.
- Montenegrin politicians are not visionaries but peddlers, and hence, the international community should be sensitive and responsive to deviations from those values and standards that are the foundation of sustainable progress.
- Ergo, international support is crucial in further processes, especially in backing progressive forces to mainstream civic values that are to the great extent weakened, as well as resilience to the regional or wider hegemonic projects and interference in Montenegro, represented via different mediums linked to Serbian president Vučić and Russian authorities.

## Serbia and Kosovo

Kosovo has been demonstrating a more active attitude in the Brussels facilitated Dialogue in the last three months. Internally, the new Government is trying to push a rather wide reform agenda aimed at de-capturing institutions, cutting links between former elites and control of the justice system as well as introducing safeguards that are aimed at saving public money and creating an efficient public sector. From a foreign policy point of view, Kosovo has been seeking accession to NATO, EU and many other organizations. The strong pro Ukrainian stance of the government was illustrative of its insistence to allow Kosovo joins NATO as soon as possible. The same approach has been maintained in regards to membership to Council of Europe where, as of lately, Kosovo has much wider chances to accede considering Russia's suspension from the organization. Kosovo has completely aligned with the west over the Ukraine question and associated sanctions against Russia. It has further revealed its anti-Russian position by maintaining that Vučić's rejection to pose sanctions against Russia might imply his tendency to produce conflicts in the Balkans.

If Serbia opts for Russia after the elections, it will lead to even stronger attempts to destabilize the neighboring countries. Russia's biggest blackmailing potential in relations with Serbia are: support for the UN regarding Kosovo, low gas prices (at least until the Serbian elections) and military-security cooperation. Above all, public opinion, as well as opposition, intellectual, cultural, religious and military elites are predominantly pro-Russian.

The pro-Russian front in Serbia is broad in government, political parties, media, security structures, cultural institutions and universities. The rapprochement between the extreme pro-Russian right and the ruling parties has intensified in the last two years. Most actors and pressure groups that influence Serbia's political space, including university circles, the media and nationalists in power and the opposition, are very dissatisfied with Serbia's voting decision in the UN General Assembly.

Years of Russian propaganda spread by the pro-government media have achieved a mobilizing effect. Serbia is the only European country where a large number of citizens gather at pro-Russian rallies. One of them gathered about 2000 people. Regardless of EU demands, Serbia strongly opposes sanctions against Russia. The number of flights Belgrade-Moscow was first increased to 15 per week, with additional flights to St. Petersburg. Due to pressure from the West, President Vučić, announced that from March 21, the number of flights on the Belgrade-Moscow route will be returned to the regular number (8 per week). Belgrade Airport is still a hub for Russian flights.

"Serbian world", which has been appearing as a notion since 2013, is only a recycled term for "Greater Serbia" and should be understood as a serious and elaborated political project aimed at uniting "Serbian countries" and consequently destabilizing the region. It is a project that has not been reduced to connecting Serbs in the region in the field of culture, as it is often perceived in the international community. The "Russian World" and the "Serbian World" are two similarly irredentist projects: the former focuses on the return of Russia as a global power, and the latter on the unification of Serbian territories. The financing of Serbian municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, or Serbian cultural institutions in Montenegro is in the function of

instrumentalizing Serbs in the region and gaining Belgrade's influence on the policies of neighboring countries. The goals of the "Serbian World" were explicitly defined by the Minister of Police (formerly Defense), Aleksandar Vulin, when he said that "the task of his generation of politicians" is to continue the fight for "uniting all Serbs into a single state and political community", which must be carried out peacefully. This is supported by a number of government strategic documents, including: "National Security Strategy", "Charter on Serbian Cultural Space", "Strategy on preserving and strengthening relations between the home country and the diaspora and home country and Serbs in the region", "Culture Development Strategy".

The glorification of war criminals and the denial of genocide are in the function of the relativization of Belgrade's responsibility for the war of the 1990s.

Serbia does not show interest in resolving the Kosovo issue. Official Belgrade has been obstructing the dialogue and implementation of the Brussels agreements in order to postpone a comprehensive political solution for Kosovo. The Serbian government continues to maintain its presence in Kosovo through parallel institutions and other activities for which it earmarked 96 million euros from the budget for 2022. One such example is President Vučić's meeting with mayors, MPs, president of Mitrovica Basic Court and policy commanders for northern Kosovo in March 2022 in Belgrade. Vučić 'ordered' Kosovo high officials on how to approach Kosovo's institutions and basically commanded their action for the next post-Serbian elections period. Maintaining parallel structures is contrary to the 2013 Brussels agreement. The biggest security risks are parallel security and judicial structures. Although formally integrated into the Kosovo system, they are still loyal to Belgrade. The Government of Serbia also finances municipalities headed by mayors who run municipalities according to both the Serbian and Kosovo systems. The Administrative Districts of Serbia, which operate on the territory of a certain area, have also been retained. Education and health institutions are completely outside of the Kosovo system.

The parallel infrastructure in northern Kosovo was built after the withdrawal of Serb army and police from Kosovo in order to keep the North under Serbian control.

The partition of Kosovo is currently being pushed off the dialogue agenda. In addition, with the establishment of Kurti's government, Serbia lost Kosovo's partner for border changes. However, the danger of such a scenario has not completely disappeared, due to the strong ties between Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and Albanian prime minister Edi Rama, who both have an interest in the partition of Kosovo. Northern Kosovo is still perceived as part of the "Serbian world".

The Serbian government has been instrumentalizing Kosovo Serbs misusing the issue of the Community of Serb Municipalities to maintain the *status quo*. Official Belgrade has not shown any interest in implementing Kosovo laws concerning the position of Serbs, such as the law on language. On the other hand, structural discrimination against Albanians in southern Serbia continues. In order to reduce the number of Albanians living in the south as much as possible, the state is conducting the process of so-called "Passivation of residence of Albanians" working abroad, either in Western Europe or in Kosovo. This "passivation" also targets citizens who permanently reside at their addresses. This leads to individuals losing their status of being a citizen of Serbia and, accordingly, all civil rights – the rights to vote, property, health insurance, pension, employment, etc.

Serbia has a very negative view towards initiatives for accelerated Atlantic integration of Kosovo. Pro-government media interpret such initiatives as a plan to destabilize Serbia. The verdict of the Hague Tribunal to the political and military leadership of Serbia for war crimes in Kosovo has not been upheld in Serbia, and crimes against Kosovo Albanians are being silenced and denied. Defaming Kosovo Albanians in the media is also in the function of realization of Serbia's aspirations in Kosovo.

The US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposed sanctions on a controversial Serbian businessman from Kosovo Zvonko Veselinović for being “one of Kosovo’s most notorious corrupt figures”. Veselinović operates successfully in Serbia, where he bought a state-owned company that builds and maintains roads in Sandžak. Veselinović’s “organized crime group is engaged in a large-scale bribery scheme with Kosovar and Serbian security officials who facilitate the group’s illicit trafficking of goods, money, narcotics, and weapons between Kosovo and Serbia”.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, after Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti refused to authorize Serbian elections in Kosovo’s territory, the Quint reacted by noting that it was Kosovo who played an unconstructive role in negotiations. Kurti replied by noting that he was never addressed as a Government to ask for permission to organize those elections, therefore he claimed that one cannot deem that someone rejected something when not even asked for it. Kurti’s move has met Vučić arguing that this will be invalidation of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, signifying an even stronger rhetoric on his part. On this background, Kosovo’s delegation met in Brussels with EUSR Lajčak demonstrating their willingness to continue the Dialogue. One will have to expect a radicalizing perspective by Vučić in the months to come as a reaction against Kurti’s decision to disallow Serbian elections in Kosovo’s territory.

## Expectations towards Germany and EU

- Consider supporting a dialogue that triggers the question of Kosovo’s fast membership to NATO and Council of Europe;
- Consider supporting Kosovo’s government interaction with non-recognizers in the EU so that a more realistic European perspective is open for the country;
- Keep pressuring the Commission to be more active, open and reliable in its enlargement policy based on substantive merits including alignment of all candidate states’ foreign and security policy with NATO & CFSP on Ukrainian crisis;
- Continue supporting a Kosovo Serbia Dialogue that is aimed at closing the conflict by canceling all channels that are used by Russia and China to destabilize the Western Balkans region.
- Set red lines in relation to the Government of Serbia, which means requiring from the Serbian authorities to clearly condemn Milorad Dodik's separatist policy and stop providing him with support that prolongs his survival.
- To prevent (punish) the glorification of war criminals and the denial of genocide by showing concrete examples such as the removal of Ratko Mladic's mural; to uphold ICTY verdicts;

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<sup>7</sup> OFAC, press release, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0519>

## Recommendations from the group

- EU & Germany should continue supporting the Kosovo Serbia Dialogue based on clear principles of democracy and liberal values of international order;
- The EU & Germany should make it clear to Vučić that non-alignment with the west over Ukraine issue and sanctions against Russia will implicate Serbia's path towards the EU in substantive and procedural terms;
- The EU & Germany should emphasize the importance of the obligation stemming from the SAA for convergence of the foreign and security policy with that of the EU; hence, Russia and China should be earmarked as a potential threat for the security architecture of the Western Balkans, its people and the democratic objectives in these countries.
- Convince Serbia to accept Kosovo as an equal partner in dialogue and to accept the principle of reciprocity.
- Germany can have a significant role in convincing the remaining five EU countries to recognize Kosovo.

## Albania and North Macedonia

The Albanian political majority has been very critical towards the EU for its “lack of vision” when it comes to EU integration. In the meantime the key reforms, especially the justice reform is proceeding. The mandate of the vetting commissions was extended by bipartisan consent which enabled constitutional changes once again. The process of vetting of judges and prosecutors is expected to wrap up at the end of 2024.<sup>8</sup>

During a visit to the US, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama told journalists that he shall seek the decoupling of Albania from North Macedonia if the first intergovernmental conference (IGC) does not happen within the French presidency.<sup>9</sup> This is the first time that decoupling has been endorsed as a forward strategy for integration.

Rama alongside Serbian president Vučić has been very enthusiastic in promoting the Open Balkans (OB) initiative, which remains very controversial and hasn't managed to convince the other WB6 to join. Furthermore the onset of the Russian invasion in Ukraine and Serbia's position on the sanctions has intensified internal opposition towards OB with many experts and diplomats alike calling for its discontinuation.

The major political parties in North Macedonia and the big majority of the citizens are still supporting the idea for EU integration, however the EU accession and the image of the EU are facing serious problems as the credibility of the EU is diminishing. The long-awaited start of the accession talks (North Macedonia has been a candidate country since 2005) has had a negative effect on the EU integration process. The Bulgarian veto had a strong negative impact on EU perspectives and the image of the EU as a credible political actor in the region.<sup>10</sup> The stagnation in the EU process has been a good opportunity for the Russian interests in the region and their proxies. The current war in Ukraine has strong potential to further diminish the image of the EU and encourage the illiberal and authoritarian tendencies and politicians.

Concerning the reforms, the new government pledged itself to proceed with the reforms in the context of EU integration - rule of law, energy, economy. However, the progress of the reforms is very much related to the progress in EU integration and the solution of the bilateral problem with Bulgaria. Namely, local experts and former members of the Zaev government are warning the EU and the ruling parties that the solution of the bilateral problem with Bulgaria should not lead to incorporation of the Bulgarian demands into the negotiation framework for North Macedonia. They argue that in that case, the EU integration process will depend on fulfilling Bulgarian demands rather than fulfilling the EC criteria.

The new Government remains dedicated to the Open Balkan idea, however there is no visible promotion of the idea and explanation for its positive and negative effects for the Macedonian citizens. No major political party is opposing this idea. The only political party opposing integrative policies including NATO and EU integration is Levica who has sympathies

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<sup>8</sup> “Constitutional mandate for vetting extended” <https://kallxo.com/lajm/shqipëri-zgjatet-mandati-kushtetues-i-vettingut/>

<sup>9</sup> “Rama: we shall not wait forever” <https://top-channel.tv/2022/02/16/konferenca-e-pare-nderqeveritare-rama-nese-nuk-mbahet-pas-presidences-franceze-nuk-do-presim-ne-pafundesit/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5\\_Analysis-of-public-opinion-on-North-Macedonias-accession-to-the-European-Union-2014-2021ENG-1-1.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5_Analysis-of-public-opinion-on-North-Macedonias-accession-to-the-European-Union-2014-2021ENG-1-1.pdf)  
[https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5\\_From-a-poster-to-a-foster-child-2021-public-opinion-analysis-on-North-Macedonias-EU-accession-processENG-2.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/A5_From-a-poster-to-a-foster-child-2021-public-opinion-analysis-on-North-Macedonias-EU-accession-processENG-2.pdf)

for Russia and China. It is an anti-establishment political party that declares itself as leftist, but with strong nationalistic and antidemocratic rhetoric.

### Expectations from Germany and EU

- Germany is seen as a force pro enlargement in the region and the expectations are high, although many are waiting to see the new government's stance in practice.
- In the light of the war in Ukraine, the perspective of the Western Balkans has come to the forefront again as a key milestone for EU's assertiveness in the global arena. The integration process is in immediate need of revitalization. **The accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia, whose green light has been granted, must be operationalized through holding the first IGC-s with both countries within 2022.** Germany can and should ramp up pressure on Bulgaria to resolve the bilateral issue without impeding the process of negotiations at this stage.
- The new German government has now a mandate and a possibility to exert more pressure on all the countries to follow through on their commitments on the field of green energy, protection of environment and action on climate change. The local expertise and level of awareness remain low and are in need of a boost that Germany and especially *the Greens* can be instrumental in providing.

### Recommendations from the group

- EU should:
  - Set a date for the first IGC-s for Albania and North Macedonia.
  - Strengthen the role of civil society in increasing the inclusiveness, transparency and impact of integration reforms.
  - Continue to be a strong voice in articulating the geopolitical importance of the WB and their European perspective and advocating for the latter.
  - Explore and analyze ways to increase concrete awareness, expertise and capacities in the region regarding a greater future: including ehre ways to incorporate WB in the EU Green agenda.