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The EU AND INTERETHNIC PEACE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: HOW CAN ONGOING GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS INFLUENCE THEM?

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The geopolitical changes of the last years could not but influence the Western Balkans, a region, where the interests of local and global powers tangle in the most complex manner. In the 2000s and 2010s, the initiative of the region's integration into the EU and in Western structures in general seemed to be mainstream, and certain progress was indeed made in this direction. However, now, roughly a quarter of a century after such plans were announced, the accession of even the most "advanced" of these countries (in terms of their compliance with the European requirements), such as Montenegro and Albania, remains uncertain (Vukasović 2025). The perspectives of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and of Kosovo (which is not recognized by all states) are even more obscure.

Initially, the whole process of integration of the Western Balkans into the EU was regarded as a tool to: 1) upgrade the economy that was severely damaged by the conflicts of the 1990s; 2) stabilize the region politically, partly by obliging the countries to resolve their differences as a prerequisite to the accession to the EU, and partly by making some territorial disputes irrelevant within the common European space; 3) stabilize the region socially and economically, as higher living standards and mutual economic interests would make any internal conflicts less probable. For the European countries themselves, this meant that: a) the highly turbulent region in close proximity to them would become stable; b) the countries of the region would coordinate their policy with Brussels, while the influence of other powers, such as Russia or China, would be structurally limited.

However, after the enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013 the EU became less prone to accept new members. Later, with the sharp rise of geopolitical tensions in the late 2010s and especially after 2022, the situation with a potential membership became even more complicated. Given the economic and political challenges that the EU is facing, the "European perspectives" of the region appear extremely vague. On the one hand, the EU countries themselves are more focused on Ukraine, on security issues and internal problems and seem not to be ready to allocate their resources to potential new country members. On the other hand, it is highly debatable, to what extent the local elites of the Western Balkans are ready to change the status quo. Also, some governments, primarily Serbian, but also to an extent Montenegrin, as well as the leadership of the Serbian entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, appear to

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be unwilling to get bound by the multiple commitments to the EU, while they can benefit from cooperation with other international actors and while the accession to the EU seems to be losing popular support (Regional Cooperation Council 2024).

Against this background, the question arises, how can these changes influence the regional stability and interethnic peace in the Balkans? On the one hand, there are a number of worrying factors that can eventually undermine fragile peace in the region.

1. The durable autocratization in almost all the above-mentioned countries (see, for example, V-Dem Institute 2025, p. 21). Of course, this trend itself, although negative for citizens, does not mean that a country would necessarily become hostile towards its neighbors (or towards another constituent entity, in case of Bosnia). However, combined with the other factors, it can multiply their negative effects.
2. The persistent ethno-nationalism (Petsinis 2025) in most of the countries of the region. Almost 30 years after the wars, many differences between the ethnic groups remain unresolved with all ethnic groups feeling threatened by their neighbours. Also, many Serbs regard the intervention of the West in the conflicts of the 1990s as purely anti-Serbian acts and thus have a deep mistrust towards the West and the Western institutions (Keil and Stahl 2023).
3. The fact that the security system in Bosnia and in Kosovo was not designed as a self-sustained one. To a great extent, it is maintained by external pressure, also mostly from the western countries. If the external factor disappears, the internal institutions could appear too weak to resist the rise of radicalism.
4. The shifts in the system of international relations that again made a direct military threat an option for achieving a country's political goals.

On the other hand, despite all the above-mentioned, at the moment, political and economic influence of the EU appears to still be quite significant in all the countries of the region, including Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Brussels may lack a consistent strategy towards the Western Balkans, but it will definitely try to prevent any escalation in the region, because it cannot afford to have another military conflict near the EU borders. Despite the negative trends, Brussels still has strong leverage to influence the local elites of the Western Balkans.

At the same time, other international actors, and first of all China, that is steadily increasing its presence in Serbia and in Republika Srpska (Serbian entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina) would hardly be interested in instability in the region. Beijing regards Serbia as a part of its Belt and Road Initiative, as "a springboard" to the European market and an attractive destination of investments (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2025). For that reason, the Chinese government would most likely put in a lot of effort, so as to prevent any long-term destabilization involving Belgrade.

Based on these considerations, we could make several conclusions. Despite the regular formal statements, the European perspective appears to be entirely vague for Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and for Kosovo, and somewhat less distanced, but still indefinite for Montenegro and Albania. Thus, European integration is losing its effectiveness as an instrument to stabilize the region. Given the persistent ethno-nationalism, democratic backsliding, lack of effective mechanisms of self-regulation and turbulent international atmosphere, the situation raises serious concerns. Here, a positive factor could be the interest of global players, and especially

of the EU, that still maintains a lot of influence over the region, and China, in the long-term stability in the Western Balkans.

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